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Review

MOSTAFA MINAWI, *The Ottoman Scramble for Africa: Empire and
Diplomacy in the Sahara and the Hijaz*

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book is an original and stimulating contribution that gives Eritrea the history of one of its foremost female protagonists.

Massimo Zaccaria, Università degli Studi di Pavia

MOSTAFA MINAWI, *The Ottoman Scramble for Africa: Empire and Diplomacy in the Sahara and the Hijaz* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016). 219 pp., 11 illus. Price: \$85.00. ISBN: 978-0-804-79514-2.

The Berlin Conference of 1884–1885 is largely regarded as the peak of aggressive Western imperialism toward Africa and the true expression of European arrogance in its belief in being the determining authority to rule over non-European regions and their inhabitants. This main political and diplomatic event has been long considered as the stage for global players like Great Britain, France, and the newborn German Empire—the role of other players being downsized or even neglected in the context. This was especially true for the Ottoman Empire, also a participant at the conference, where a narrative was shaped making the Sublime Porte’s capacity to act politically become non-existent. In general terms, the fact that the Ottoman Empire could be questioned as ‘civilized’ or ‘uncivilized’ was controversial and polarized opinions at a time in which civilization (as seen from the European perspective) became an ambiguous ideological category imposed to serve the legitimation of colonialism and the legal framework that supported it. Nonetheless, the Ottoman Empire joined the conference regarding its civilization to be at a level high enough for recognition by other ‘civilized’ states. Yet, contemporary observers and later historiography—the latter largely generated in the Western world—interpreted Ottoman policy at the Berlin Conference as driven purely by a defensive agency. The narrative was formed firstly by a long dominant Eurocentric view of international relations which, among other things, marginalized the role of non-state formations in the political arena, secondly by the teleological view of the Ottoman Empire as an empire bound in a few years for inexorable collapse bringing with it enormous consequences affecting the political map of the Middle East.

Mostafa Minawi’s book engages with this interpretation of that historical period and rewrites the presence of Ottoman Empire in the so-called ‘Scramble for Africa’. One of the major instruments for this task are the sources contained in the huge collection of local archives the author accessed in Istanbul and treated with great care and precision in his book. In

fact, such an impressive use of local sources bestows a unique character upon the research. Furthermore, the analytical considerations and in-depth references to general debates on the world history of empires also reveal the author's great capacity for navigating major historical questions. Begun as a project focusing on a single Ottoman officer, Sadik al-Mouayad Azmzade, a man with a thousand talents and an adventurous life, lived in several countries, it developed into an investigation of the larger frame of Ottoman imperialism in which Azmzade and his generation acted.

Minawi proves that the Ottoman government not only failed to protect itself in a situation where the choice was to participate in the new system of imperialist contentions, but they also became a target of European colonialism (p. 6). According to Minawi, 'Istanbul's strategies for maintaining its independence and agency in resisting European hegemony deserve much more attention than they have garnered up to now' (p. 98); finally, they were complex and farsighted, and cannot be understood merely as a reaction or expression of resistance to Western policies, for instance to European colonial expansion. For example, the Ottoman Empire followed—according to the author's thesis—a *multilevelled expansionism*, which coexisted with the negotiations, disputes, and rivalries with European powers on the one hand and the strategic partnership with the Sanusi order on the other (p. 4). In so doing, it entered the race for Africa to expand its territorial claims south into the Sahara and the Lake Chad basin. Strengthening the alliance with the Sanusi order, a spiritual movement with a strong social and political rooting in the Libyan Desert, was vital in achieving this goal. The reason for this firstly was the wide reach the order had in the region and secondly its loyalty to the order and the sultan as caliph of the Muslim world. Study of the Sanusi has largely been based on reports of diplomats and travellers of the time, frequently resulting in generalizations on the Arab populations within the Ottoman Empire. The alliance allowed the Ottomans to pursue a more aggressive diplomatic posture toward the European colonial powers, particularly after the Ottoman Empire spheres' of influence came under attack, for instance by the Mahdist State in Wadai and the Italians in Məşəwwa^c. The alliance with the Sanusi became a secret united military front. The European countries were ultimately able to impose their imperialism in terms of territorial expansion within the Ottoman sphere of influence in Africa. The Sublime Porte had insufficient means with which to make any adequate response. Istanbul's expansion plans remained unsuccessful. International law written by Europeans clearly legitimized their (European) interests.

The author measures the power relations of the imperialist period and the role of the Ottoman Empire within them through the construction of

imperial infrastructures. The late nineteenth century saw a general development of infrastructure which aimed at connecting the world through exchanges of information, movements of goods and individuals, and so on. As a result, the construction and management of telegraph lines and railways were an important symbol of power. The British Empire in particular pursued what Minawi calls an ‘informal electronic empire’ (p. 113). For example, the first telegraph line was built by the British army during the Crimean War in 1855 and by 1877 the empire was covered by a tight network of lines. However, when France and Great Britain offered, as foreign partners, to build an extension of the telegraph line, the Ottoman government rejected the plan and began a massive and complex project for building the Hiğāz telegraph line independently. This decision can only be understood if one considers the pressure European colonial powers exerted on their neighbouring African territories at the end of the nineteenth century.

The book is a most intelligent and important contribution to the understanding of empires in world history, going beyond the limits of area studies interpretations. For historians dealing with the Horn of Africa and specifically with the Ethiopian empire, it offers an investigation into how the race for Africa, which also impacted the Horn of Africa, was resisted by a neighbouring empire. Moreover, it may open up comparisons and interconnected analysis on how the two empires faced the European conquest of Africa.

Nicola Camilleri, Università degli Studi di Padova

JON ABBINK, *A Decade of Ethiopia: Politics, Economy and Society 2004–2016* (Leiden–Boston, MA: Brill, 2017). vii, 253 pp., index. Price: €19.95, \$24.00. ISBN: 978-90-04-34588-1.

Das äthiopische Entwicklungsmodell (‘too big to fail’) war lange umstritten. Was regierungsnahen Akteuren als hierarchisch beförderter Fortschritt imponierte, galt den Parteigängern einer mitunter zerstrittenen Opposition als demokratiefeindlicher Ausweis eigeninteressierter Elitenherrschaft.

Vor dem Hintergrund einer komplexen, von plakativen Selbst- und Fremdzuschreibungen dominierten Debatte unternimmt Jon Abbink den Versuch, die jüngere Entwicklung der Demokratischen Bundesrepublik Äthiopien dokumentengetreu und faktenbasiert zu analysieren. Dabei gelingt dem ehemals am Afrika-Studiezentrum Leiden und an der Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam tätigen Autor ein beeindruckend informierter Rückblick. In vierzehn Jahresberichten (2004–2016) werden die innen-, regional-