

Book Review: Global NATO and the Catastrophic Failure in Libya

by Blog Admin

July 22, 2013

Horace Campbell investigates the political and economic crises of the early twenty-first century through the prism of NATO's intervention in Libya. He traces the origins of the conflict, situates it in the broader context of the Arab Spring uprisings, and explains the expanded role of a post-Cold War NATO. This military organization is the instrument through which the capitalist class of North America and Europe seeks to impose its political will on the rest of the world, however warped by the increasingly outmoded neoliberal form of capitalism, Campbell argues. Reviewed by *Inez von Weitershausen*.

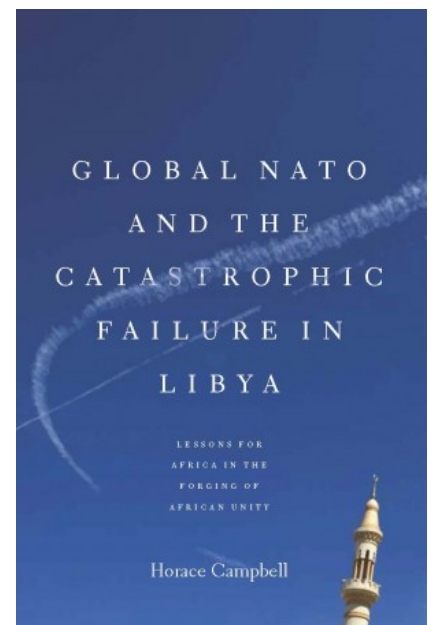
Global NATO and the Catastrophic Failure in Libya. Horace Campbell. Monthly Review Press. March 2013.

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In Western media, academia, and public discourse, the 2011 NATO intervention in Libya has been predominantly analyzed in the context of its presumed military success, with [some commentators](#) even suggesting that it was in fact a “model intervention”. Daily battles across Libya between hundreds of militias, many civilian casualties, and not least the [killing of the U.S. ambassador to Libya](#) on 11 September 2012, have all been overshadowed by the “successful events” of regime change, the holding of elections, and the fact that – at least officially – no Western ground troops were deployed.

It is not only this image of a successful intervention which is challenged by [Horace Campbell](#) in his account of the events in Libya in 2011. Writing in the context of anti-imperialism, Pan-Africanism, Pan-Arabism and the peace-movement, the author dedicates his book to analyzing the “failure of NATO in an economic crisis” (p.27) by intervening into the Libyan civil war. In particular he takes issue with UN Security Council Resolution 1973 as the legal basis for NATO’s “Operation Unified Protector”, and questions the former’s content as well as the way it came about.

More precisely, the book understands the intervention as a “new power grab in Africa” (p.19) by the West and as a chance to operationalize the idea of “Global NATO”, i.e. the globalization of the alliance in terms of functions and membership. According to this interpretation of a strive towards a “military management of the international system” (p.43), Western powers abused the Security Council in support for their fight for oil and resources of the African continent, and overstepped the UN mandate to protect civilians in order to ensure regime change. While European powers, in particular France, the United Kingdom and Italy are criticized for pursuing quasi-colonial interests, while worrying about the securitization of their borders against immigrants, the United States’ response is explained as being driven by a “tripartite alliance” (p.22) of mutually dependent representatives from politics, industries, and the financial sector. Decision-makers from these three areas are explicitly held responsible for the “aggression against the people of Libya” (p.122) which Campbell also understands as a “psychological warfare against the people of the West” (p.140), conducted in a joint effort by the media and military.



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Across 21 chapters, the author identifies what he considers to have been the real economic and political motivations for the Libya intervention, covered by a humanitarian façade under the “Responsibility to Protect” doctrine. He identifies long-standing historical ties, interest constellations and how institutions such as the ICC and the UN were abused while others, such as the AU, were deliberately marginalized.

With its focus mainly on Western powers, the book gives comparatively little attention to the regional context, even though some Arab countries are identified to have been “compromised by their relationship with the International Exchange” (p.141). In light of the author’s impressive knowledge of (not only) African history and politics, it would have been interesting to see him expand more on the domestic political situation within Libya during and after the intervention, as well as on the way the uprisings were perceived in the Arab world and on the African continent as a whole. While he points, for instance, to the diplomatic efforts undertaken by the Africa Union to negotiate a peaceful settlement, the focus of the chapter is once again on the West, whose “policy makers argued that, as Gaddafi’s brain child, the AU could not be a neutral force” (p.135). While this is a legitimate choice given the purpose of the book, the author’s clear commitment to Africa could have allowed for a greater inclusion of African accounts of the intervention. Such examples are given in the open letter, signed by 200 African intellectuals, which announced that “those who have brought a deadly rain of bombs to Libya today should not delude themselves to believe that the apparent silence of the millions of Africans means that Africa approves of the campaign of death, destruction and domination” (p.139), and in the afterword by renowned African scholar Ali Mazrui who outlines questions which “will dominate the discussion on Pan-Africanism and Pan-Arabism for decades” (p.272). Seeing Campbell expand more on African perceptions would have made a further interesting contribution and have given a voice to African people which he would like to see as “relevant players in an equitable system of international relations” (p.276).

Given Campbell’s passionate call for African unity and the large amount of sources and facts he draws upon, it seems rather unnecessary to leave aside arguments which might allow for a different interpretation of the intervention and the events leading up to it. It is, for instance, unfortunate that the author indirectly monopolizes the understanding of “Arab” by suggesting that those parts of the Libyan populace with “cultural and ideological affinities to Western Europe (...) called themselves Arab but were ideologically subservient to the Western ideas of the market” (p.27). The ideological constraints and one-sidedness which render Western accounts of the intervention insufficient also limit this interpretation when it fails to recognize the growing diversity in opinion on the Arab world today – and which was, it has been argued, a catalyst for the uprisings.

It remains up to the individual reader to agree with Campbell’s account of the failure of the NATO intervention. However, the author must be congratulated for providing an informative counter-narrative to the dominant Western perspective, not only for an audience keen on learning about or drawing *Lessons for Africa in the forging of African Unity* (subtitle). Rather, the book can contribute to establishing a more comprehensive picture of the developments leading to UN resolution 1973 and the intervention itself, and to understanding how those were interpreted by parts of the African intellectual elite.

Inez von Weitershausen is a PhD student and member of staff at the LSE’s International Relations Department. Her doctoral research concentrates on European foreign policy with a special focus on crisis response and the Southern Neighborhood. She holds degrees from Bucerius Law School Hamburg and University of Bonn, Germany. [Read more reviews by Inez.](#)