

BOOK REVIEW

Richard Reid. *Shallow Graves. A Memoir of the Ethiopian-Eritrean War*. London: Hurst, 2020. xxxi + 226 pp. Map. Notes. £25. Paper. ISBN: 9781787383289.

Shallow Graves by Richard Reid is a compelling account of the Ethiopian-Eritrean border war from 1998-2001. Though afforded little discussion on the international stage, the conflict left between 70,000 and 100,000 dead and half a million people displaced. Fighting officially terminated with the Algiers agreement in December 2000; however a “no war, no peace” stalemate continued, dominating the Eritrean political imagination up to (and beyond) the normalization of relations in 2018. As Reid, now professor of African History at the University of Oxford, makes clear in the preface, this book “is deliberately *not* a conventional history of the war” (xix). He uses extensive interviews, painstaking academic work, and personal experience to construct a text that is part academic and part memoir, that captures how Eritrea and its history were understood and reimagined during this period.

Reid opens *Shallow Graves* with a summary of the war, introducing the key themes of violence, time, space, and memory that dominate the book. Chapter One opens amid the heady post-war patriotism following Eritrean independence in 1991, and explores how the nation was imagined prior to the border war. We then move to the immediate aftermath of the ceasefire in June 2000, as Reid journeys, horrified, through the battlefields of Adi Quala and Mendefera and to devastated frontier towns. This is followed by a discussion of Eritrea’s deeper history, and particularly the legacy of Italian colonization on Eritrea’s landscape and national identity. Chapter Four explores the “unseen and unspoken cult of personality” (104) surrounding President Isaias Afewerki, who is simultaneously a historical repository, symbol of the nation, and complex, flawed individual, and Reid charts how this perception changes over the course of the border war. Chapter Five examines the intergenerational conflict between *tegedelay* of the 1961–91 Liberation War, who hold cultural and political authority, and the disenfranchised *warsai yikaelo*, or “those that follow,” who are conscripted to fight from 1998.

Chapter Six shifts to Addis Ababa, as Reid solicits an Ethiopian perspective from senior ex-TPLF and Ethiopian army figures. Finally, we cross back over the Mereb into the “oppressive calcification” (175) of life in Eritrea in

the 2000s: the future is suspended awaiting official demarcation of the border with Ethiopia, prices rise as shortages worsen, and people live in fear of being rounded up for indefinite national service. The enormous psychological cost of generations of struggle, war, and sacrifice play out in health facilities and on the streets, as forced conscription, economic deprivation, and absolute political and cultural repression drive the country's youth to flee via Sudan.

Throughout the book, interviews and historical analyses are interspersed with Reid's personal experiences and reflections. He arrives during the late 1990s as an early-career academic at the University of Asmara, "PhD glinting like a silly bauble" (18), and is assigned to teach history to *tegadelay* before their appointment to government posts. Some of these ex-EPLF fighters go for drinks with their lecturer, beginning the firm friendships that offer him (and us, as readers) intimate insight into the lives of Eritreans during this period.

Reid links time to space, unfolding the timeline of historical events in each landscape and interviewing local actors to investigate how events of the past are understood and reconfigured in light of the ongoing war. He argues persuasively that Eritrean time and space are defined in opposition to Ethiopia, creating a presentist history tied to the country's geography and its experiences of violence and modernity during colonization and the liberation war.

Reid problematizes his perspective as a white scholar of Africa, writing in the first person to emphasize his own subjectivity. Early in the war, he comments on the situation in TV interviews as an "independent expert." However, as the University is closed amid a broader political and cultural crackdown on dissent and the border war continues, Reid despairs at the state's "cloying authoritarianism" (154) and realizes that he "ha[s] become jaded beyond repair" (152). In recognizing his participation in and affective reaction to events, Reid conveys not only his lived experience of the war, but also the interrelation between subjectivity and apparent objectivity inherent in a primary source.

Reid engages with the unique stories of an astonishing array of actors, including government ministers, many former and current fighters, and Ethiopian POWs and their Eritrean guards in a rural prison camp. He includes particularly moving interviews with inhabitants of the devastated frontier towns in the aftermath of the war, and Ethiopian-Eritreans deported from Addis Ababa to Asmara in 1998. In addition to demonstrating Reid's profound affection toward his friends and colleagues, the interviews convey a multitude of lived experiences that, in the act of telling, resist the militant anti-individualism of the state. However, with the exception of two second-hand accounts of female *tegadelay* in the first chapter, Reid's Eritrea is overwhelmingly male. Women rarely surface outside mentions of the "mothers and sisters and daughters" (73) or "mothers and wives and sisters" (114) who do much emotional heavy-lifting offstage, and this reader longed to see women portrayed with the same complexity and nuance as the book's male subjects.

Shallow Graves offers the reader unparalleled access to actors who have witnessed and shaped Eritrea's history. For those seeking context for recent developments in the region, it also provides an essential background to the 2018 Eritrean-Ethiopian peace agreement, and the current joint Ethiopian-Eritrean offensive in Tigray. This engaging, persuasive, and persistently insightful book forces us to reconsider the human impact of this brutal war afresh and suggests new ways of communicating and interrogating history.

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For additional reading on this subject, the ASR recommends:

- Connell, Dan. 2016. "Refugees, Migration, and Gated Nations: The Eritrean Experience." *African Studies Review* 59 (3): 217–25. doi:10.1017/asr.2016.90.
- Kibreab, Gaim. 1996. "Eritrean and Ethiopian Urban Refugees in Khartoum: What the Eye Refuses to See." *African Studies Review* 39 (3): 131–78. doi:10.2307/524946.
- Reid, Richard. 2014. "Writing Eritrea: History and Representation in a Bad Neighborhood." *History in Africa* 41: 83–115. doi:10.1017/hia.2014.16.