Gordon, John W. ***The Other Desert War: British Special Forces in North Africa, 1940-1943***. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1987. $39.95, 241pp, bibliography, index, maps, photographs.

Reading ***The Other Desert War*** makes one wonder how long it will take to decolonize African history.

The subject of this unfortunate book is North Africa, or rather, North Africa as a theater of operations during World War II. The author, a professor of history at a military college in South Carolina, focuses on what he calls, with unintended irony, the "other" desert war--small hit-and-run operations carried out by highly-trained soldiers of the British Army far into the interior of the Sahara desert. Most of the book is taken up with the stories of the various operations of these "special forces," but the author also describes in detail the origin of these units and their place within the army's hierarchy of command. Though most of these units were disbanded after the war, Dr. Gordon believes that these soldiers played a critically important role in defeating the Axis forces. He urges the American military to study the history of these units as a model for use in future wars.

For the professional military historian, this book makes an interesting and important contribution to the study of military strategy. For the Africanist, however, or for anyone concerned with the history of the "other," his approach is highly problematic. Like so many historians before him, Dr. Gordon has written a history of Europeans in Africa without mentioning the people who live there. No mention is made of the numerous Africans who fought for the European powers, or of the Africans on whose land the campaigns were fought; neither does he mention the effect of the war on the subsequent struggles for independence. Here and there we find the occasional reference to Africans as "untrustworthy guides" or "treacherous spies," but in the main the author writes about North Africa as if it were an uninhabited desert, an empty barren land where generals draw their plans in pure and virtuous design.

It is a powerful image, but entirely false. As Dr. Gordon himself points out, some of the largest desert operations of the special forces took place in the towns and cities of coastal North Africa, places such as Tobruk, Benghazi, and Tripoli. In such heavily populated areas, soldiers of the special forces constantly came into contact with local inhabitants. Even in the remotest parts of the desert, the special forces were on guard against meeting local people who might expose their position to the enemy. Dr. Gordon mentions such incidents as he recounts the stories of the special operations, but he passes over them without considering how they might affect his image of Africa.

This is not merely a moral failure. By ignoring the presence of Africans, Dr. Gordon fails to perceive the strategic significance of the "other desert war." He completely misses the connection between the specific actions of the special forces in North Africa and the war as a whole. For example, is it not worthy of our interest to ask why the British committed so much manpower and material to North Africa at a time when Norway was being invaded?

Let us not forget why the war was fought in the first place. Although actual combat in Africa was limited to North Africa and Ethiopia, the war itself was at least in part a struggle for the possession of the whole of the continent. For the Italians, World War II represented the conquest of new colonies and the dream of a second Roman Empire; for the French, the preservation of their settlements in Algeria; and for the British, the preservation of their control over Egypt, the Suez Canal, and, by extension, all of their overseas possessions. North Africa was, therefore, not merely a convenient staging ground for a struggle between European powers, but was itself the object of that very struggle.

The war also marked a watershed in the transition from formal European colonialism to informal American imperialism. As we know from numerous studies, the war stimulated the growth of nationalism all across the Third World, while weakening the ability of the colonialists to maintain their control. Thus they achieved decolonization but not independence, for these new nations found themselves bound together by financial institutions dominated by the rising power of the United States. Behind these structures has been, as always, the threat of force. Since World War II, the U.S. government has sponsored numerous military operations, both covert and overt, against various movements perceived as hostile. To carry out these operations, the government has created a wide variety of specialized military units, such as the Green Berets or the Rapid Deployment Force, that at least superficially resemble the British special forces of World War II.

It is hard to say how much influence the development of the special forces during World War II had on the strategies and tactics of contemporary counter-insurgency warfare. Dr. Gordon mentions in passing some evidence that suggests such an influence. For example, he reveals that a disproportionately high percentage of the special forces soldiers came from British settler colonies such as New Zealand, Kenya and South Africa, and that at least one high-level officer went on after the war to take a commanding role in the British counter-insurgency campaign in Malaysia in the 1950's. Unfortunately he does not analyze this connection in a comprehensive way, nor does he give any concrete indication of a direct transfer between British and American military establishments.

Nevertheless, in the opinion of this reviewer it would be wrong to see the "other desert war" as an isolated phenomenon, as the author presents it. It should be seen instead in its historical context, as a training ground for new military tactics in the ongoing struggle by the various Western powers to control their spheres of influence in the dependent regions of the world, one link in a chain that stretches from "pacifying the natives" under British rule to the doctrines of "low intensity warfare" in the age of Reagan. Firstly, although it is true that during World War II the Europeans concentrated on fighting each other, rather than Africans, we can see from the subsequent history of Western intervention in Africa that this was merely a temporary redirection of hostilities. Secondly, it seems quite probable that special forces--because of their small scale, experience in rough terrain, and ability to track down and destroy similarly small units in relatively undeveloped and/or uninhabited areas--would be particularly apt training grounds for military operations under colonial rule. Thirdly, we have from Dr. Gordon evidence that the British used at least some of the experience they gained in North Africa in their counter-insurgency efforts after the war, in places such as Malaysia, Kenya, and Palestine. Finally, British-American cooperation in the field of counter-insurgency warfare would not be surprising given the wide range of cooperation between these two countries in other military affairs.

The Other Desert War is not a bad book. The author genuinely cares about his subject; he has done some excellent research into primary sources; he writes with a style that is both interesting and informative, and his efforts make this book an interesting and important contribution to the study of military strategy. Unfortunately his Eurocentric bias makes him blind to the peoples of North Africa, prevents him from seeing the broader implications of the desert war, and makes him blind to the peoples on whose land it was fought. Let us take this as a reminder of how closely the various regions of the world are bound together, and how much work still remains before these connections shall be woven together in a truly global history of the world.

William Acworth