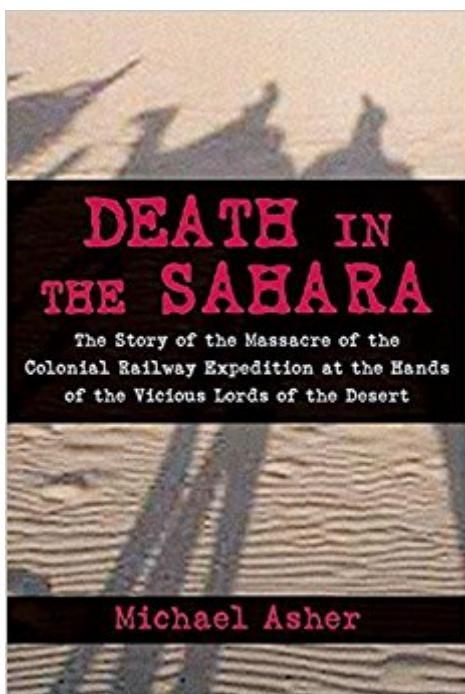


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Death In The Sahara: The Lords Of The Desert And The Timbuktu Railway Expedition Massacre



Synopsis

Under-armed in hostile territory, and foolishly employing the enemy as guides, the one hundred explorers were ambushed and stranded without camels or supplies in the deserts of southern Algeria. Many were killed outright, and for four months the survivors were menaced by the Tuareg, the "lords of the desert," robbed, starved, and tricked into eating poisoned fruit. To escape, the men hid in the wastelands of the Sahara with little hope of finding food or water. Finally forced to eat each other, only a dozen men lived to tell their tale. The story of their one-thousand-mile journey is one of the most astonishing narratives of survival ever recorded.

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Customer Reviews

In 1880, the French government sent 100 men into the unexplored Sahara to scout the path for a possible railway from the coast. Here, Asher depicts a grim saga of treachery, endurance and slaughter along the way. In the desert, the expedition ran afoul of Tuareg tribes, warlike nomads who had resisted outsiders for a thousand years. Betrayed and attacked, the surviving soldiers made a grueling four-month trek back to the coast; only a dozen survived, some by eating their companions. As a veteran explorer of the Sahara, Asher offers intense descriptions of desert customs and landscapes, so much so that at times the actual narrative of the expedition fades in comparison. No Frenchman survived to write his memoirs (only Arab soldiers attached to the expedition), and the lack of primary source material makes Asher's task unenviable. Far too many times, he attempts to enliven the story by explaining what the soldiers thought and felt, even as they are being killed. Despite these shortcomings, his telling remains a fascinating saga of a brutal desert

world suspended somewhere between the medieval and the modern. (May) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

Michael Asher is an SAS veteran, desert explorer, and a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature. He lives in Morocco. Dean King is the author of numerous books, including the national bestseller *Skeletons on the Zahara: A True Story of Survival*.

An obscure event at the end of the 18th century and the end of colonialism, this fascinating account of a failed French expedition into the unexplored region of the Sahel is gripping and well written. Research is meticulous, and the narrative reads as a novel. You will be transfixed.

Author Asher has written an excellent book on an expedition by the French in 1880 to cross the Sahara from Algiers to Timbuctoo and determine the feasibility of building a railroad following their route to open up the sub-Saharan to French expansion. The book is very well written and even exciting. I would have given it five stars if it would have had even one map illustrating the route taken by the expedition (actually more than one was needed), since I was unable to devine the route using several currently available National Geographic maps of Algeria and the Sahara Desert. What frustration! -- and it could have been easily alleviated by the author. Other criticisms would include the necessity of a discussion of the French arms at the time and why they were so superior to what the Tuareg possessed, and a map showing the various tribal areas. At any rate, the fecklessness of the promoters of the expedition as well as the poor decisions by its leadership made for a daunting read. The wishful thinking of France's politicians and bureaucrats when putting other people's lives at risk showed democracy at its worst and should be noted by the modern reader and compared to similar actions in current times. The expedition was sent out with inadequate force to defend itself in order not to alarm a potentially hostile population -- when all along that population was dedicated to exterminating everyone on the expedition. The evildoers in this story were the Tuaregs, several desert tribes who hated Christians (they were Muslims) and did not want to allow unbelievers entry into their lands. They consistently lied, stole, misled, and murdered to achieve their aims, instilling fear in other Arab tribes in order to control them. In Paris, however, they were viewed as romantic. The hardships experienced by the expedition were many and the author does an excellent job depicting the scenes. When the party penetrated into the Hoggar Mountains after being assured by the Tuaregs and their Tuareg guides that the Tuaregs were peaceful, the Tuaregs

attacked and killed most of the expedition including all the Europeans. Only a few Arabs, either camel drivers or French auxiliary soldiers, survived to tell the tale. So what did the French do about it? Nothing. At that point the Tuaregs decided the French were cowardly, toothless, and could be robbed or murdered at will. Sounds rather like contemporary times. However, the Tuaregs overplayed their hand and a complaint spurred a French officer in a frontier post to action. Without telling his superiors, he sent a detachment of Arab volunteers under an experienced French officer to punish the Tuaregs. This expedition was successful in routing the Tuaregs and broke their power over other Arabs by showing all the tribes that the Tuaregs were no longer to be feared. It was a momentous event for the Sahara -- the Tuareg's 1,000 year hegemony was ended. Of course the French officer who authorized the patrol was relieved of his command and retired from the Army. The French Army did not need officers who would have thrived under the German system of "mission oriented" commands. The officer who defeated the Tuaregs was relieved and transferred back to France, never again to return to Algeria. For the times, he was not politically correct. The French officer who led the first expedition into disaster was lionized and a fort in Algeria was named after him. The rest of the dead were forgotten, and the railroad was never built. The politicians in Paris went on to the Dreyfus affair and enjoyed the gay nineties. This is really an enjoyable book to read and one that puts the Muslim/Christian animus into perspective. Remember this was only 125 years ago and when Europe felt the world had become civilized. There is much to learn in this book -- buy it, read it, enjoy it, and learn from it.

Death in the Sahara is masterfully written. Asher provides details and an exciting overview of the Expedition and its challenges. I have read a great deal about the Sahara and those who have experienced its harshness, but this account becomes more personal with the lives that were lost and those who survived.

I needed a good but quick understanding of European history in the Sahara Desert and this fit the requirement perfectly. It was excellent reading too!

This is a pretty straightforward account of a disastrous expedition into the Sahara in the late 19th century. It relates some background on the expedition, the expedition itself, a massacre by natives (Tuaregs), and the trek back. The last bit is particularly interesting as the party is forced to cover some 600 miles or so on foot, is winnowed down from 50 to 4, and is forced to engage in cannibalism. On the negative side, there were several things. First, the book really drags up to the

massacre. Lots of ins and outs of people and places that I really don't care about it and that could have simply been edited out. Second, the author loves to use native, French, and obscure words - primarily without any explanation. Just opening the book randomly, I found the following on a single page: sebha, sohkrar, hassi, tirailleurs, gandourahs. If the book had provided a glossary, I could easily have bumped it up to a 4. Something similar happens with Saharan place names and with the names of the natives. All very hard to keep track of. Descriptions of the desert are another distraction. These seem to take place quite regularly, and typically involve a rather odd combination of purple prose (including many trips to the thesaurus to describe the colors of the sky or desert) and obscure native and scientific terms describing landscape features that leave me clueless. Finally, though other reviews have cited the book as a good example of larger topics such as colonial arrogance, the perils of bureaucracy (or democracy), over-weaning personal ambition, etc., it's really not there in the book. Like I said before, the book's really a pretty straightforward account of the expedition. Now, there are hints of these ideas - they're just not really developed in any great detail. In the end, a good story, but really tripped up by the prose (or a lack of a good editor).

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