

My Fourth Time, We Drowned: Seeking Refuge on the World's Deadliest Migration Route, by Sally Hayden, London, 4th Estate, 2022, xvi+480 pp., £14,99 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-00-844558-4.

One epigraph opening *My Fourth Time, We Drowned* reflects upon the damage caused by those who witness atrocities but choose to ignore them. The author is the anti-Nazi political activist, Sophie Scholl. This could be seen as an elusive reference for a book on human rights violations in migratory journeys from Africa to Europe. Nevertheless, it connects with the central argument advanced in the “Prologue” (1): Europe is undeniably ethically culpable for the violent repelling of refugees. Further on, Sally Hayden elaborates how European Union (EU) goes on the opposite spectrum of its founding values, “(...) listed as human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and human rights” (184), by funding the coastguard of unstable Libya to patrol the Mediterranean Sea and intercept migrants’ boats.

Accurately detailed, the piece of investigative journalism explains how the EU funding of the Libyan coastguard is a stratagem to circumvent international law, which states that people cannot be returned to countries where their lives are at risk. Once their journey begins, migrants from different parts of Africa become human cargo in the hands of smugglers. As described in the first six chapters, many people could only make their way through the sea after paying ransoms obtained under torture. More shocking, Hayden reveals how the amounts are usually collected via crowdfunding campaigns on social media, where images of torture are openly available. When they are finally put in precarious boats through the deadliest migratory route, only a few could reach Europe. More commonly, they drown or are caught by Libyan coast guards who are hardly distinguishable from smugglers. Then, people are sent to official migrant centres where torture, enslavement, rape, and murder keep quotidian.

Even for an award-winning journalist with published work on migratory issues, the realization of the full dimension of the situation in Libya was astonishing. When the first migrants approached her via a Facebook message in 2018, Hayden thought that they were “(...) the isolated victims of an accidental oversight” (6). With precarious access to the internet, hundreds of people were trapped in a migrant centre in the middle of an inter-militia war. As initiated to investigate, Hayden would learn that roughly six thousand people were indefinitely imprisoned in more than twenty centres throughout Libya.

The book opens with a “Timeline of Important Events and Relevant Statistics” (xiii) to orientate the reader through the narrative. Hayden wisely combines the timeline with the statistics, connecting the signature of The Memorandum of Understanding between Italy and Libya in 2017 and the decrease in sea arrivals later. That year, the EU pledged a huge sum of money to train and equip the Libyan coastguard and in 2019 declared ended the migration crisis, while the deaths in the Mediterranean were still above one thousand. The EU ceased rescue patrols, though continues to employ technologies such as drones to spot migrants’ boats and inform Libyan guards. Hence, undeniably working in coordination with authorities of a state dominated by militias.

Unexpectedly though, the recollection of sparse statements reveals that the inhumane acts committed in those centres have been publicly known. As the former EU commissioner for migration, Dimitris Avramopoulos, defined them in 2019: “a disgrace for the whole world” (190). Thus, the reader tends to endorse Hayden’s self-questioning of why such a story is not massively covered. In contrast with the recent huge presence of Ukrainian refugees in the news, the lack of appropriate coverage of the situation in Libya seems incomprehensible. But the author subtly indicates the easiness to overlook a situation far away within the scope of the racialized security regime that characterises EU policies on migration. As the Eritrean journalist and activist, Meron Stefanos, bluntly says: “We are black people (...) The world doesn’t care” (38).

Hayden cites excerpts of European politicians profiting from the kind of support of the United Nations (UN) to circumvent media scrutiny. The then-Italian minister Marco Minniti, for instance, mentioned regular UN visits to the centres to justify the Memorandum signed one year earlier. Reflecting an old problem, aid organizations prefer to not adopt a firm stance in the hope of keeping operating in Libya. Although being vocally against a situation boosted by Europe, would mean confronting their major funders. Hayden is especially critical of the Refugee Agency (UNHCR) and the International Organization for Migration (OIM), exposing the paradox of high investment in communication campaigns focused on those donors, while most detainees are not even registered.

In that context, digital technologies become vital tools to survive migratory journeys. As a migrant perfectly summarize – “This SIM Card is our Life” (8) – when UN agencies fail to protect migrants and the media does not cover the situation appropriately, a cell phone shared by hundreds of people, the scarce access to the internet,

and social media accounts provide the only viable mean of communication with the outside world.

The book also discusses discursive choices as an important site of political struggle, referring to UNHCR's anomalous characterization of people caught in the sea as "rescued", while OIM uses the word "returned". But it is regarding the system of asylum that those struggles are deeply explored. As Hayden explains, while many people in Libya undeniably fit the definition of "refugee", others face the impossibility of seeking sanctuary according to international law. Exposing her discomfort with a law of asylum that does not recognize people from formerly colonized, and currently devastated, countries as "refugees", the author shares the thoughts of Joseph, from Sierra Leone, about "(...) returning to Libya to make another attempt at reaching Europe" (177).

Hayden's reporting has been referenced in human rights reports, legal challenges, and in a submission to the International Criminal Court accusing EU officials of crimes against humanity. The overarching documentation of the consequences of European migration policies presented in this book appeals to researchers, jurists, humanitarian practitioners, journalists, and all those interested in fully grasping the picture of the violent containment of migratory flows.

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