

Garance Le Caisne, translated by David Watson. *Operation Caesar: At the Heart of the Syrian Death Machine*. Cambridge: Polity Press. Hardback: \$64.95. Paperback: \$19.95. ISBN 978-1509528158.

Operation Caesar details the Syrian government's involvement in mass killings and detainments of civilians in horrible conditions. The book was originally published in 2015 in French, before being translated in 2018 for English audiences by David Watson for Polity Press. The author, Garance Le Caisne, currently works as an independent journalist who is known for covering the Arab Spring and travelling to Syria. Her work feels, in both tone and style, like a long-form journalism piece.

Much of the book follows Caesar, who betrayed the Syrian government to pass photos to the resistance movement. Each chapter has a primary topic, and other citizen's stories intertwine with Caesar's main thread to show, in a loosely chronological fashion, the horrific detainments and killings from different perspectives. A list at the beginning of the book catalogues the many Syrian individuals who "bear witness" to the atrocities described in the book. (p. xvii-xx). These stories are complemented by Le Caisne's narration.

Before the Syrian Civil War, Caesar, whose real identity has never been revealed due to fears of retaliation, was a normal citizen of Syria who worked in the military photography agency. His job involved taking photographs of soldiers who died in a range of ways—from car crashes to fires to suicide. The system of photographically cataloguing bodies was undertaken in accord with a strict order and process imposed by the government. After the first outbreaks of violence, Caesar found himself photographing bodies of people who were not members of the military, all labeled with a mysterious numbering system instead of names. The same meticulous organizational system continued, and Caesar noted, "A state doubts the fidelity of its minions likes to keep lists to avoid any mishaps. In the apparatus of the Syrian regime, no one trusts anyone" (19).

No matter how maimed the corpses, the coroner's reports always stated that the individual died of some natural cause, such as cardiac arrest. Caesar grew uncomfortable with his new role of hiding the regime's violence against civilians. In a time when Syrians could be detained for simply speaking ill of the president, he took a risk and visited his trusted, long-time friend Sami, to whom he confided the atrocities that he was systematically memorializing, and Sami encouraged him to collect evidence against the government instead of quitting. Caesar agreed, and made copies of the photographs onto thumb drives. He ultimately copied over 50,000 photos in two years, before the resistance helped him evacuate the country. The photos depicted three main groups: detainees, soldiers of the regime, and free civilians, and in all, there were photos of over 6,000 detainees, about 1,000 dead soldiers, and about 4,000 dead civilians. This documentation gave the resistance evidence of the tragedies that occurred under the president's regime to eventually take to the international community.

Le Caisne then follows the progress of the Caesar file around the world. The photos were validated by several sources, including the American Federal Bureau of Investigation and independent law firms. The photos were also released to the international community in ways that were more accessible, via platforms such as Facebook. Many of the photos and information have since been compiled in a report by the Human Rights Watch, which is available online.¹

¹ *If the Dead Could Speak: Mass Deaths and Torture in Syria's Detention Facility*, HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH (Dec. 16, 2015), <https://www.hrw.org/report/2015/12/16/if-dead-could-speak/mass-deaths-and-torture-syrias-detention-facilities> (warning: graphic content, scroll and click "launch gallery" to view photographs).

Despite all of this, the reaction amongst the international community to the photos was distinctly underwhelming. This moment of deflation comes after eight chapters describing death, torture, and devastation, and the reader is compelled to feel disappointment and sorrow on behalf of Caesar's unappreciated heroism. After Caesar risked everything, the International Criminal Court did not pursue charges, and diplomats and politicians showed concerned interest but took no action. Caesar even went and spoke to the American Congress about the photographs, providing intimate details about what they showed. Some Senators, like Senator John McCain, took a passionate interest, but President Obama refused to meet with Caesar. Other than putting the photographs on rotation in the National Holocaust Museum, no further action was taken in the US.

Weaving through Caesar's narrative are the stories of other Syrians who were affected by detainment, torture, or death. Since he worked for the regime before escaping the country, he had no first-hand experience of life and death in the prisons, except for what was represented in his photographs. Le Caisne fills this gap in Caesar's knowledge of what might have happened to the people he photographed before they died by including the stories and voices of several different men, and one woman, who were detained in various places by the regime. These stories of regular Syrians impacted by violence show the scope of the tragedy—descriptions of small cells packed with hundreds of bodies, keeping young children entertained during detention, and the cockroach infested flooring all give a reader mental pictures that are not easy to shake. For example, one man became a sort of helper, called a soukrah, for the prison guards in order to survive, doing their bidding and helping to eliminate the dead bodies. This man stated: "I had forgotten my brothers' advice... 'When you're locked up you have to forget about the outside world', they would say. 'Otherwise you're lost. You have to think only about the place you're in, look at the walls, count the number of tiles, concentrate on what you're eating. If you let the outside world into your cell, you will die...'" (36). In another testimony, a woman who was detained and separated from her husband eventually saw his corpse amongst the thousands of photos posted on Facebook. While detained, during which time she shared a cell with a three-year-old child, she was subjected to routine interviews before being traded for soldiers held by the insurgents. In regards to her experience, she said: "We are responsible for what happens today...To be silent and let the dictators speak for us is to give them a blank cheque" (83).

Overall, Le Caisne's ability to meld the true stories of her subjects with factual information about the Syrian crisis makes for a compelling text that is consistently gripping, and difficult to put down. The element that is most riveting about the book is true stories that the citizens tell in their own words, rather than in the detached language of a typical news article or report. However, the book is not without its issues; it lacks a good description of background information, and the writing style at times suffers from clunky syntax.

One of the most compelling and unique aspects of *Operation Caesar* is the direct quotes from the author's interviews with Caesar. Le Caisne is one of the only people to have access to Caesar and her interviews with him are a huge contribution to both academic and layperson understanding of the Syrian crisis. (p. xxix). It is not a secret that Westerners have been apathetic to the Syrian crisis for many years.² The way that Caesar tells his story makes it impossible to remain apathetic. Caesar's simple way of speaking gives the story an authentic, chilling reality for the reader, complemented by Le Caisne's occasional restrained but insightful narration. Caesar's description of his time living in Syria is both harrowing and beautiful; his simple words often

² There are many examples in the media of the apathy of countries towards the Syrian crisis. Jonathan Freedland, *The Slaughter in Syria Should Outrage Us. Instead We Just Shrug*, THE GUARDIAN (Feb. 21, 2018, 7:28), <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/feb/21/slaughter-syria-trump-brexit-atrocity>.

provide the reader with vivid mental images and understanding that even the best news reporting on the Syrian crisis has been unable to do so far. For example, Caesar describes his photographs by questioning the impact of their existence. His humble and frustrated contemplation makes it difficult not to empathize with his situation as the ignored lynchpin of bringing to light the atrocities of the Syrian regime. He says:

Am I a hero? Is there something special about me that I went to the office of the president of the United States and met Senator McCain? I'm just like any other Syrian. What is important is the cause I defend. I left Syria to advance the Syrian cause. We still haven't yet gathered the fruits we have sown. After all the dangers we faced, I still don't know if that harvest will come. We have worked hard in the hope of this harvest. So that the regime and all those responsible are brought before justice. That will be the harvest. (150).

Le Caisne's use of interviews like this one allows for a sense of closeness and intimacy that normal nonfiction works, and even many fictional works, lack. However, Le Caisne displays her own skill as a writer despite the heavy use of others' words. The author often employs a cutting bit of analysis, or a beautiful turn of phrase, but she mostly allows the people whose stories she tells to speak for themselves, which in turn allows the reader to listen more closely. When she does use her own words, it often is to emphasize certain themes, in order to have a stronger emotional impact. For example, she repeatedly emphasizes the mysterious numbering system and the systematic precision of the corpse photographing. This theme is echoed throughout the book in many chapters and is seen in the title with the choice of the words "Death Machine."

Operation Caesar also does an exceptional job with visual depictions of some of the things it describes. Even the best writer could not accurately convey the horror of looking at a few carefully selected color photographs of Caesar's in the book's center insert. The appendix also contains scans of documents used by the Syrian regime, such as a form used by the military photography department, an order of arrest, and an interment order, all making the individual stories within the text feel more real and concrete.

The book does have some content, grammatical, and structural issues. One major issue is the lack of good explanations of background information on the Syrian crisis, which in turn makes the target audience unclear. Generally, Westerners know very little about the details of the Syrian Civil War. Even the most basic information, such as when it started, why it started, and who is fighting, is not common knowledge for the general populace. The book does not illuminate many of these topics (and when it does so, explanations come much later in the book or are brushed over), which might make this book more inaccessible for a Western audience. Because of this, it is difficult to discern exactly who the book's audience is—the general public may enjoy it, but academics, historians, anthropologists, or journalists also could be target audiences. Polity, the publisher, focuses on works regarding the social sciences and humanities, but they also publish textbooks and books of interest to the general public, making it difficult to know who this book was meant for.³

Taking a closer look at the text itself, the book is littered with sentence fragments. Sometimes, these feel as if they are supposed to provide a punch to end a paragraph, or emphasize a specific phrase in a direct quote, but instead these fragments often fall short by just making the reader feel as if they are missing a few words. It is possible that these fragments held more power in the original French, but they feel awkward and stilted in the English version. *Operation Caesar*

³ POLITY, <http://politybooks.com/about/> (last visited Oct. 22, 2018).

also has more typographical errors and grammatical issues than usually seen in a published work. Especially since this book deals with a sensitive and controversial topic that is already prone to criticism and skeptics, issues like incorrect words, repeated ideas, and grammatical errors undercut the importance of the author's interviews and the documentation of Caesar's story. For example, the second chapter is called "Profession Corpse Photographer" instead of presumably "Professional Corpse Photographer," and little issues like this occasionally make reading the work stilted. In another potential oversight, the quotes used to advertise *Operation Caesar* were not based on the book itself—they are either taken from published works on the Caesar photos generally or come from an article that Le Caisne wrote herself.⁴

Structurally, jumping from character to character within chapters creates confusion about whose story Le Caisne is telling, particularly when she returns to an earlier individual with few reminders of the person's situation. This back-and-forth also makes it difficult to know when a particular individual will return again or when their story is over. This issue is mitigated by the list of individuals that appears at the beginning of the book, but it can be of little help when trying to remember the details of some of the individuals, since tragically many of the stories of imprisonment, detainment, and torture are relatively similar.

Overall, *Operation Caesar* paints an unprecedented picture of life and death in war-torn Syria. Though there are some minor drawbacks to the book, the stories of the Syrian people are insightful and provide a window into Syria unlike traditional news media. The bravery and heroism of Caesar has been overlooked for many years, and this book provides an accessible way for Westerners to learn about some aspects of the Syrian crisis through a narrative that makes it impossible to remain apathetic.

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⁴ Josh Rogin, *Syrian Defector Who Documented Assad's Atrocities Returning to Washington*, THE WASHINGTON POST (March 17, 2017), https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/josh-rogin/wp/2017/03/17/syrian-defector-who-documented-assads-atrocities-returning-to-washington/?utm_term=.35f5371ee672; Garance le Caisne, *They were torturing to kill': Inside Syria's Death Machine*, THE GUARDIAN (Oct. 1, 2015, 1:00), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/oct/01/they-were-torturing-to-kill-inside-syrias-death-machine-caesar>; Ben Hubbard & David D. Kirkpatrick, *Photo Archive Is Said to Show Widespread Torture in Syria*, NEW YORK TIMES (Jan. 21, 2014), <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/22/world/middleeast/photo-archive-is-said-to-show-widespread-torture-in-syria.html>.