

BOOK REVIEW

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Algérie 1962: Une histoire populaire, by Malika Rahal, Paris, La Découverte, 2022, 496 pp., €25 (softcover), ISBN 978-2-348-07303-8.

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While this book was in gestation, the mass uprising of the *hirak cha'bi* (popular movement), beginning in February 2019, added new luster to the astonishing year of Algerian independence. On her first page the author cites demonstrators chanting *kima soixante-deux* (like 1962) as they peaceably marched in spontaneous and disciplined solidarity, displaying banners of 'un seul héros, le peuple', an iconic slogan of the Algerian revolution.

Malika Rahal, an accomplished historian of twentieth century Algeria at the CNRS in Paris, wishes to recover the year in its full complexity by assembling the recollections of ordinary people, 'Europeans' as well as 'Muslims', as the French settlers and indigenous inhabitants were labeled during the colonial era – leading, incidentally, to outlandish *Chrétiens musulmans* to depict a small number of Kabyle converts. Her history from below is intended to shed more light on some of the events and problems that the standard histories tended to ignore or exaggerate. She relied on an ever-growing trove of memoirs and testimonies – a total of 127, including this reviewer¹ – as well as official archives, including those of the US State Department as well as other French and Algerian archives. William J. Porter, the American consul who became ambassador by the end of the year, was an especially astute outside observer.

Three critical sets of events divide the year into four parts. The cease fire agreement of 19 March ended the war and began a transition period leading to the referendum, formal transfer of power, and Algerian independence 1–5 July, followed by the crisis of the FLN in the summer and the formal inauguration of the People's Democratic Republic of Algeria 20–25 September. But rather than proceeding in chronological order through the four parts, Rahal prefers to organize her subaltern narratives into four themes: violence, body/bodies (*corps*), spaces, and time. These allow her to focus upon events that rarely surface in conventional accounts. She wishes to escape the 'déploration of 1962' (13), that is, repeating how 'mal partie' Algeria was after a summer of discord and virtual civil war that broke out just as independence was being achieved. She also tries to recapture the effervescence of the era, how the 'people dance sa liberté' with Jacques Berque (17).

Each of the four focal points raises a series of questions that become chapters of her book. Starting with 'violence', there were rumours about Muslims literally bleeding Europeans dry, the subject of an entire chapter leading into another about the anxieties of the French settlers and atrocities of their paramilitary Organisation de l'Armée Secrète (OAS) as independence approached, followed by 'effervescence', enthusiastic crowds sometimes turning violent. Amid the transitions from March to October the state lacked a monopoly of legitimate violence, and the weakness of all forms of authority promoted all sorts of violence (61). The author devotes a carefully documented

chapter to the revenge killings of 'collaborators', notably the harkis and other Algerians who served the colonial authorities.

Here Rahal takes aim at revisionist historians such as Guy Pervillé, who had criticized the French government for abandoning the harkis, these 'victims of independence'.² She also noted earlier, in discussions of the unsubstantiated rumours about the theft of European blood, that he had insisted on evidence that no crimes had been committed (32). As for the 'black legend' about Algerian victims, the numbers got inflated, from 10,000 reported at the time by Jean Lacouture, a highly respected French journalist, to 100,000 or more (64). She makes a careful inventory, supplemented by accounts of many of the alleged victims. The various categories of supplementary military forces totaled 110,000–120,000 at the beginning of 1962, but many deserted, some to the maquis joining other '*marsiens*' after the 19 March ceasefire. Only 26,000 harkis then remained, of whom 5,000 opted for full protection and integration into the French army (67). The author tames partisan exaggerations of violence by enlisting a wide variety of perspectives without hiding ugly details.

To be sure, there were horrific cases, for instance of an Algerian official who had always proclaimed his loyalty to France being buried up to his head doused in honey, attracting bees to torture him to death over a period of five hours (70). But there were also many cases of trials and acquittals, also of imprisonments to protect potential victims from angry crowds. Algerian military authorities usually tried to prevent vigilante justice with whatever powers they could summon. Most of the harkis either emigrated to France, returned to their local communities, or made a new life elsewhere in Algeria.

The Algerian authorities also tried to keep the peace in Oran, the subject of a separate chapter analyzing what lay behind the all too real 'massacre of 5 July', in which 25 Europeans were killed, 40 wounded, and others missing. The author did field work of sorts in 2018, tracing the shooting angles of OAS snipers earlier in the year from favoured high-rises (90). In this 'city of terror', in William Porter's words (88), a Muslim pensioner could not safely walk to the central St. Charles Post Office to collect his stipend. But the massacre after independence could be better understood by recalling an earlier event before the ceasefire. The OAS set off two massive car bombs on the edge of a Muslim quarter in the late afternoon of 28 February, timed to kill as many people as possible (officially 23, plus 32 wounded) before they rushed home to break their fast during the holy month of Ramadan.

The FLN called on the people not to respond to provocations intended to disrupt the peace negotiations between the French and Algerian governments, but the Europeans lived in fear of reprisals with forthcoming independence. When it came, the OAS again fired upon the joyous Algerian crowds, but this time the Algerian and residual French authorities were unable to contain the popular rage. The day's death toll included some 76 Algerians along with 25 Europeans and hundreds wounded. Some of the Algerians were victims of OAS shooting, but many were among the collaborators discussed earlier. Rahal argues that subsequent accounts stoked settler fears by ignoring the full context of the event, 28 February as well as 5 July: 'Le disjoindre de ce qui a précédé relève du déni, sinon de la malhonnêteté' (102).

Her concluding chapter on violence touches on a sensitive theme for Algerians, the defeat of the followers of Messali Hadj, the founder of the core party that gave rise to the FLN. Here and in other topics relating to *corps* and *espaces*, Rahal made full use of the Messali Hadj archives available to her in Paris. They add little to the paroxysms of violence in 1962, however, because his party, the Mouvement National Algérien (MNA), was by then a spent force. Though Messali expressed pitiful hopes of a triumphal return to Algeria, his few militants inside the country had little following. They had to evacuate MNA's 'fief' of Clos Salembier in Algiers with French help during the transition period because their activists were outgunned, losing a member after killing four FLN provocateurs (111). Ironically, the fief became the site of Riad al Fath, a national monument and high-end shopping mall erected in the 1980s. Other militants expressed fears of being treated worse than the harkis, and some remained in prison after independence.


Rahal's second focal point, *corps*, really centres on political processes, the breakdown and regeneration of authority. 'Corps' in French may be singular or plural, referring to a collective entity or to disparate bodies. Her first chapter, 'Vivre entre soi', plays on this duality and notes Ali Haroun's observation about the inability of the fifty Algerian leaders, many of whom did not know one another, assembled at Tripoli in June to come to any agreement. Her central chapter, 'le corps collectif', discusses various collective efforts to 'faire corps' in the fields of health and education, big challenges such as finding teachers for the coming school year. Her discussion of associational life, mainly sporting clubs, unfortunately had no mention of the failed congress of the Union Générale des Étudiants Musulmans Algériens (UGEMA), held in September while Boumediene's army was overwhelming wilaya 4 and entering Algiers. ~~and~~ Yet UGEMA, revolutionary Algeria's first autonomous association, was now hopelessly divided and unable to elect new officers.³

In the chapter on demobilization, however, she offers amusing vignettes of wilaya headquarters becoming touristic sites, as well as French settlers elsewhere picnicking in what had earlier been a risky zone for guerrilla ambushes. She also emphasizes the tremendous self-discipline of the FLN in the face of OAS provocations in Algiers. And with independence, 'faire corps' gets new impetus, a Journal Officiel documenting administrative decrees. She gives some illustrations dated in mid-July but does not indicate their significance. Ahmed Medeghri, for instance, was appointed prefect on 16 July, but she does not identify him as one of the Oujda group – Boumediene's inner circle – nor did she identify or identifies Hocine Ait Ahmed, a major opponent, who was appointed sub-prefect of Mecheria on 10 July. She also omits any analysis of the changes between August and September in the electoral lists to Algeria's Constituent Assembly.

The chapters on 'spaces' move from individual to various large collective movements of people: 324,000 refugees from Morocco and Tunisia, political prisoners set free from jails in Algeria and in France, the millions (at least 2,350,000) set free from the 'archipelago' of resettlement camps, 650,000 departing French settlers, and various other displaced people creating new neighborhoods and occupying deserted property including spontaneously self-managed ex settler farms as well as vacated apartments. Rahal's sources depict arduous crossings from Tunisia and Morocco across mine fields. French authorities released maps of some of these fields many years later, but they took some 7,500 victims, one young boy as late as 2019 (259). The movements of hundreds of thousands of people back to their villages, into the cities, or off to France reveal a society in major flux rather than any simple movement to the cities that social scientists might deem to be urbanization, a principal component of modernization.

Finally, there is the dimension of time, as if history could be reversed in a chapter entitled 1962-1830, illustrated the return of the Saint-Philippe Cathedrale to its original stasis as the Ketchaoua Mosque. 1962 was a time of impatience, awaiting independence, but also of unlimited expectations: 'l'Algérie devient le terrain d'une utopie en acte' (370). The year was not so much a revolution as a prolonged transition from the disintegration of a colonial order into the beginnings of a new state. In unraveling and reknitting the state with her vignettes, Rahal accomplished her purpose of exposing the living history of many of the actual people behind Algeria's popular slogan of 'Un seul héros, le peuple'.

Notes

¹ In the interview Malika Rahal conducted with me for this book, I shot  have told her that the sole, rather forlorn FLN official that Eqbal Ahmed and I met at the party headquarters in Constantine was none other than Mohamed Cherif Messadia, FLN secretary-general from 1980 to 1988. We met him on 22 July 1962, just three days before the 'coup de Constantine' that changed the leadership of Wilaya 2. ✗

² Emmanuel Alcaraz consulted extensively with Pervillé for his *Histoire de l'Algérie et de ses mémoires, des origines au Hirak* (Paris: Karthala, 2021), reviewed by myself in *The Journal of North African Studies* (published

online: 8 March 2022) <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13629387.2022.2049066>
(<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13629387.2022.2049066>). Of a liberal persuasion, Pervillé nevertheless blamed de Gaulle for betraying the harkis. ✖

3 Clement Moore Henry, "L'art d'association en Algérie," in idem, UGEMA (1955-1962): Témoignages, 2nd ed. (Algiers: Casbah Éditions, 2012), 50. Online 1st ed., 46:
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