

BOOK REVIEW

La guerre d'Algérie vue par les Algériens: 1. Le temps des armes (des origines à la bataille d'Alger), by Renaud de Rochebrune and Benjamin Stora, preface by Mohammed Harbi, Paris, Éditions Denoël, 2016 (new edition), 448 pp., €23.50 (paperback), ISBN 978-2-207-13629-4

La guerre d'Algérie vue par les Algériens: 2. Le temps de la politique (de la bataille d'Alger à l'indépendance), by Renaud de Rochebrune and Benjamin Stora, preface by Mohammed Harbi, Paris, Éditions Denoël, 2016, 448 pp., €23.50 (paperback), ISBN 978-2-207-11192-5

The two volume work under review is a masterly effort by two French anti-colonialist historians to write about Algeria's struggle for independence as if they were special correspondents reporting on the war more than half a century ago and enjoying access behind the scenes to the principal Algerian protagonists. They had access to the numerous memoirs released by Algerians after the breakup of the one-party system in 1988: at least 132 for the first edition of volume 1, published in 2011, and with a further outpouring since (1: 15). No longer hegemonic after 1988, the Front de Libération Nationale (FLN) also surrendered control over the Algerian historical narrative, a major political lever that the authors proceed to analyze in their engaging – and politically engaged – historiography alongside their chronicle of events. History is still political dynamite in Algeria. More than a half century after independence, roles in the revolution still define a pecking order of power and privileges of its sons, daughters, and grandchildren – and which is ever more contested by those who are displaced or excluded from this.

The authors divide the Algerian war into ten critical events, five of which are discussed in each volume. These are: (1) the Oran post office robbery of 5 April 1949; (2) the outbreak of the revolution on 1 November 1954; (3) the revolution's second wind of mass insurrection across the Nord-Constantinois on 20 August 1955; (4) the Soummam Congress of 20 August 1956; (5) the Battle of Algiers, from June 1956 to October 1957; (6) the 'Shakespearean murder' of Ramdane Abane (1920–1957) on 27 December 1957; (7) the proclamation of the Gouvernement Provisoire de la République Algérienne (GPRA) – the first president of which was Ferhat Abbas (1899–1985) – on 19 September 1958; (8) the 'hundred-day meeting' of the ten colonels of the Armée de Libération Nationale (ALN) between July 1959 and January 1960; (9) the mass demonstrations in favour of the FLN in Algiers and other Algerian cities on 10–13 December 1960, and in Paris on 17 October 1961; and (10) Algerian independence on 5 July 1962 and the violent consolidation of power by Ahmed Ben Bella (1918–2012) in early September. The authors intended in each chapter to flesh out the event and then backtrack to events and processes leading up to it, a procedure better suited

for some of the earlier chapters focused on a particular event than for lengthy battles, meetings, or summers of discord. The first chapter enables the authors to run a succinct account of French Algeria from 1830 to 1949, and a concluding chapter sums up the uses and abuses of the history of the revolution from 1962 to 2016.

Readers may wonder why the history of a war that went from 1954 to 1962 should begin with the heist of a post office in 1949. This event conveniently focuses attention on the Organisation Spéciale (OS), founded in 1947 as a secret paramilitary arm of the Mouvement pour le Triomphe des Libertés Démocratiques (MTLD), the radical nationalist party led by Messali Hadj (1898–1974). The OS consisted of some 1,000 activists (1: 75) and was the major incubator of the FLN. By zeroing in on its armed robbery five years before the outbreak of the revolution, the authors also alert the reader to early abuses of history by its leaders. Ben Bella grabbed credit for the clever operation – making it look like the work of French gangsters – that was more due to Hocine Aït Ahmed (1926–2015), who, at age 22, was the OS' chief of staff at the time of the heist (1: 23) and who, unlike Ben Bella, played an active role disguised as a European, with fake moustache, glasses, beret and all, and procuring the black Citroën getaway car. Ben Bella became the supposed leader later that year, when the French accidentally discovered some of those responsible for the crime and arrested many OS members. Aït Ahmed had meanwhile been removed from the OS for not displaying sufficient enthusiasm in denouncing the 'Berber-materialist' leaders who were purged in April 1949 from the MTLD's federation in France. A few months later the MTLD dispatched him out of harm's way to the party's Cairo office.

This first chapter also sheds significant light on the Kabyle problem and issues of Algerian national identity. Far from reflecting French efforts to divide the Berber-speaking Kabyles from mainstream Algerian nationalists, the Kabyle 'Berber materialists' in the MTLD were hyper-active, favouring paramilitary action over the party's legal politicking. Shortly before the 1949 crisis Lamine Debaghine (1917–2004), leader of the hardliners in the party despite being a MTLD deputy in the French National Assembly (1946–1951), had urged Aït Ahmed to join him in mobilising his fellow Kabyles to seize control of the party from its gradualist wing. The so-called Berber materialists tended to be radical nationalists but, unlike Aït Ahmed, were also Communists or fellow travellers who rejected the definition of Algerian identity as exclusively Muslim and Arab. Their struggle was for an Algerian Algeria, not an Arab-Islamic one. Many would eventually join the FLN but the identity of the Algerian *watan* (nation or homeland) remained an issue long after independence; the most widespread current definition, being 'Arab and Muslim of Berber stock', still excludes non-Muslims (including the tiny minority of Kabyles converted to Christianity in colonial times, as well as Jews like one of the authors, Benjamin Stora, who was born in Constantine). Mohammed Harbi (b.1933), who prefaced these volumes and has collaborated with Stora on other projects, had led students in 1955 who favoured a more explicitly secular definition of Algerian student identity against the mainstream guided by secular thinkers, such as Belaïd Abdesselam (b.1928) and Reda Malek (b.1931), who insisted on the Muslim marker to protect their nascent

student union from being inundated by more numerous progressive French settler and Jewish students from Algeria.

In the present study each chapter is accompanied by an annotated bibliography, including unpublished memoirs, notably those of Lakhdar Bentobbal (1923–2010), a.k.a. Colonel Si Slimane, who seems to have been a very important source. He was one of the ‘three Bs’ – the others being Belkacem Krim (1922–1970) and Abdelhafid Boussouf (1926–1980) – who had Abane strangled to death and took charge of FLN from 1957 to 1960. The murder may be more reminiscent of Dostoevsky’s Stavrogin than Macbeth, except that their collective crime, far from binding them together as the Russian once proposed, set each at odds with one another. Bentobbal, for instance, claimed to have signed an order to eliminate Abane only politically, not physically (2: 36). The authors’ access to accumulating oral as well as written histories presents new perspectives on the rivalries among the FLN leaders.

The annotated bibliographies are invaluable progress reports on the state of the Algerian history industry. Volume 2, published in 2016, seems up to date and even includes a ‘filmography’ of 53 films dealing with the war, whereas volume 1 was only slightly altered in its second edition in 2016, to update the extensive master bibliography serving the two volumes. It still nonetheless misses many of the books and articles discussed in the annotated bibliographies of volume 2. Even the war memoirs of President Chadli Bendjedid (2: 315) are missing.¹ Also not mentioned in either the master or annotated bibliographies are the memoirs of UGEMA students that have been published in recent years.² The authors could have shed more light on the relative autonomy of their student union until 1961 in support of the revolution. Another omission is the first volume of Ahmed Taleb-Ibrahimi’s memoirs, in which he discussed his wartime experiences.³ To this may be added the account of wartime FLN militant Ahmed Doum.⁴ And unfortunately Daho Djerbal’s valuable history of the French federation of the FLN, based on many oral sources – including Bentobbal’s – is only cited in one of the annotated bibliographies of volume 2 (2: 315).⁵ The wartime memoir of Zohra Drif (b.1934) likewise goes unreported, despite recent controversies discussed below.⁶ Both volumes, however, have careful indexes of a huge cast of characters, enabling the reader to reconstruct various networks.

The subtitles of volumes 1 and 2 tell the broad story of the war, the first three years being ‘the time for arms’, followed by ‘the time for politics’ and negotiations when French army generals staged a coup in Algiers on 13 May 1958, which brought Charles de Gaulle back to power. By 1957 the Algerians had demonstrated their ability to wage an effective guerrilla war but serious divisions within the FLN paralysed the GPRA within six months of its proclamation in 1958. Even the original choice of Abbas as president of the GPRA had been a compromise to prevent Krim, the one remaining original leader of the FLN who remained alive and at liberty, from taking charge. Each of the three B’s retained veto power. For instance, Boussouf, who incidentally did not set foot inside Algeria during the entire seven-and-half years of the war (1: 151), had rejected Debaghine as a possible president in 1958 and may have had one of the latter’s associates thrown out of the window of the GPRA offices in Cairo,

provoking Debaghine's confidential resignation as foreign minister on 15 March 1959 (2: 133; not reported in the chronology).

As the war wound down, ever greater cracks appeared in what, from the outside, had looked to be a monolithic national front. From the inside these volumes present many of its tiny splinters based on local origins and isolated by clandestine rules and further fragmented by disagreements between imprisoned leaders, surviving leaders inside Algeria, and those in Tunisia and Morocco. As one chapter indicated, it took at least one hundred days of meetings of colonels in Tunis in 1959 to agree on expanding the Conseil National de la Révolution Algérienne (CNRA) to renovate the GPRA. They even had scheduling problems, as Bentobbal was a night owl usually unavailable until late afternoon, while Abbas had to be at home by 9 pm. (2: 145). Eventually the latter's continued leadership, a compromise proposed by Saad Dahlab (1918–2000), served to mask disagreements both among the 3 B's and between them and the operational colonels from inside Algeria (who had insisted on their priority over the three external leaders).

Blocked by the Morice and Challe lines from crossing into Algeria, the internal guerrilla commands were reduced to bare survival, while Boussouf's erstwhile assistant on the Moroccan front, Houari Boumediene (1932–1978), consolidated the military power of the Revolution's external forces. The original dictates of Abane's Soummam Congress – which accorded primacy of the political over the military and the internal over external leadership – were reversed, even as, by 1960, the time for arms had long since given way to the time for politics. Bentobbal nicely sums up the final years of military stalemate: 'Concentrated on the frontiers, most of the ALN troops fell into a sort of lazy torpor, giving free rein to internal conflicts'.⁷ Boumediene would eventually bring the ALN under the control of his Oujda Group, which included his personal secretary, Abdelaziz Bouteflika (b.1937). Boumediene meanwhile gained experience as the judge of a military tribunal that sentenced several conspirators to death and possibly, the authors suggest (2: 167), gave him lessons for conducting a more successful coup against the GPRA in 1961 (not to mention that of 19 June 1965, when he overthrew Ben Bella).

The authors also critically report the profiles of leading figures assembled by Egyptian intelligence chief Fathi Al Dib, including the nonsensical notions that Bentobbal had murdered his boss after they organised the insurrections of August 1955 and was 'detested by all the inhabitants of the [Constantine] wilaya' (2: 63), where he had operated. It seems that Nasser's intelligence hand for Algeria knew little of its internal politics. Tensions between the GPRA and the Egyptians, angry at not having been asked permission to proclaim Algeria's Provisional Government in 1958, may help explain the GPRA's move to Tunis in 1959.

The second volume also includes a section on a subject that the authors deemed had not been accorded sufficient attention in standard histories, which is the various French uses of napalm during the war, especially during the vicious aerial as well as land campaign launched by General Maurice Challe in 1959, resulting also in well over two million Algerians – a quarter of the Muslim

population – being rounded up into internment camps (a model subsequently employed by the Americans in Vietnam). Challe would subsequently be imprisoned and stripped of his rank for his failed putsch with three other French generals in April 1961 against de Gaulle. As for the Algerians, probably some 400,000 lost their lives in the struggle for independence, the authors so estimate (2: 274) – though they do not offer a source for this figure – which is well below Algerian claims of a million or million-and-a-half martyrs.

Of equal interest to their complex historical narrative is the authors' analysis, via the conclusion, of the uses to which the historical narrative has been put since 1962. They suggest (2: 276) that the real history of the war began after independence, as successive factions seized power and promoted their legitimacy by selectively recalling their historic roles. During Boumediene's years in power, Arabization programmes in primary and secondary schools required new textbooks, which facilitated selective amnesia and emphasised Algeria's Islamic and Arabic identity. His external military forces 'enter, in force, in Algerian history' (2: 279) at the expense of the internal guerrillas. Official histories downplayed even the historic mass uprising of August 1955 and the decisive demonstrations in Algeria's cities in December 1960, in response to a visit by President de Gaulle.

The official history of the time also downplayed the revolution's veritable paymaster, which was the FLN's *Fédération de France*, a.k.a. the '7th wilaya' (2: 279). Algerians learned more about their history in France, where Mohammed Harbi took up residence in exile in 1973 and published a number of books and archives, but his works were unavailable in Algeria until the 1990s. He, too, naturally had his axes to grind, as a Marxist who had gravitated to an important advisory position on Ben Bella's staff after 1962, with the Boumediene regime imprisoning him for five years and then keeping him under house arrest until he managed to flee the country.

With Algeria's opening since 1988 to new sets of histories and memoirs, the battle continues to rage. The latest development concerns palace politics. With President Bouteflika virtually inaccessible to all but carefully selected members of his family and immediate entourage (including his chief of staff and probable political minder, Ahmed Ouyahia),⁸ some of those excluded have publicly protested, including former Vice President of the Algerian parliament's upper house, Zohra Drif, leading in turn to waves of historical recrimination. In this reviewer's opinion, supposedly compromising materials that turned up in the local press discredit the historians who gathered them from a French psychological warfare file – without any critical appreciation of their context – and not Zohra Drif, who claims the letters were forged.⁹ She expanded on her protest in 2016 against the state's silence in the wake of French accusations that she was a terrorist rather than a patriot fighting a just war for the liberation of her country. The war over its history continues to this very day of writing, fifty-five years after Algeria's independence.¹⁰

Notes

1. Bendjedid, Chadli, with Abdelaziz Boubakir. 2012. *Mémoires. Tome 1: Les contours d'une vie, 1929–1979*. Algiers: Casbah Éditions. Reviewed by Clement M. Henry in *The Journal of North African Studies* 22, no. 3 (June 2017), 494–498.
2. E.g. Henry, Clement M. *L'UGEMA, Union générale des étudiants musulmans algériens, 1955–1962: témoignages*. 2012 (2nd ed.). Algiers: Casbah Éditions. Reviewed by Robert Mortimer in *The Journal of North African Studies* 20, no. 3 (June 2015), 490–491.
3. Taleb Ibrahim, Ahmed. 2006. *Mémoires d'un Algérien. Tome 1: Rêves et épreuves (1932–1965)*. Algiers: Casbah Éditions.
4. Doum, Ahmed. 2013. *De la Casbah à la prison de Fresnes 1945–1962*. Preface by Ahmed Taleb Ibrahim. Algiers: Casbah Éditions.
5. Djerbal, Daho. 2012. *L'Organisation spéciale de la Fédération de France du FLN: Histoire de la lutte armée du FLN en France (1956–1962)*. Algiers: Chihab Éditions. Reviewed by Hartmut Elsenhans in *The Journal of North African Studies* 18, no. 3 (June 2013), 515–519.
6. Drif, Zohra. 2014. *Mémoires d'une combattante de l'ALN: Zone Autonome d'Alger*. Algiers: Chihab Éditions. Reviewed by Nedjib Sidi Moussa in *The Journal of North African Studies* 22, no. 3 (June 2017), 481–484.
7. From Lakhdar Bentobbal's unpublished memoirs, cited in Djerbal, *L'Organisation spéciale de la Fédération de France du FLN*, 65. Translation of quote by the reviewer.
8. Mohammed Hachemaoui, "Changement institutionnel vs durabilité autoritaire," *Cahiers d'études africaines*, no. 220 (2015), 672. Also see Hachemaoui, "Qui gouverne (réellement) l'Algérie?," *Politique africaine*, no. 142 (June 2016), 169–190.
9. Compare Drif, *Mémoires d'une combattante de l'ALN*, 563–564, with Mohammed Harbi and Gilbert Meynier, *Le FLN: Documents et Histoire, 1954–1962* (Paris: Fayard, 2004), 140–141. Concerning the source of Drif's supposedly incriminating letters to a fellow mujahidine, see Fayçal Métaoui, "La reculade tactique de Yacéf Saâdi," *El Watan* (27 January 2014) <https://www.presse-dz.com/revue-de-presse/la-reculade-tactique-de-yacef-saadi>. For a discussion of more recent polemics, see Algeria-Watch, "Algérie, 2016: révélations sur le rôle de Yacéf Saâdi, héros de la 'bataille d'Alger' de 1957," *Algeria-Watch* (12 April 2016) http://www.algeria-watch.org/fr/aw/revelations_role_yacef_saadi.htm.
10. "Passions et polémiques," *El Watan* (5 July 2017) http://elwatan.com/actualite/passions-et-polemiques-05-07-2017-348471_109.php. For Drif's most recent protest, see Salima Tlemçani, "Coup de gueule de Zohra Drif contre le silence de l'Etat et du FLN," *El Watan* (26 September 2016) http://www.algeria-watch.de/fr/article/hist/1954-1962/coup_de_gueule.htm.

Clement M. Henry
 University of Texas at Austin, Emeritus, USA
 chenry1509@gmail.com

© 2017 Clement M. Henry
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13629387.2017.1358512>

