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Malika Rahal, *Ali Boumendjel (1919-1957). Une affaire française. Une histoire algérienne*. Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2010. 248 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. 27€ (pb). ISBN 978-2-251-90005-6.

Review by Jennifer Johnson Onyedum, Lehman College/CUNY.

In the 24-25 March 1957 edition of *L'Écho d'Alger*, an article reported that Ali Boumendjel had committed suicide by jumping to his death from a six-story balcony. Boumendjel, an Algerian lawyer described by French officials as a militant FLN nationalist, had been arrested on 9 February 1957 at the height of the Battle of Algiers. During this period, as historians such as Raphaëlle Branche, Sylvie Thénault, and Pierre Vidal-Naquet have shown, civil liberties and judicial practices were suspended, a state of emergency reigned, and military authority prevailed in Algeria.[1] Though the official reports claimed Boumendjel's death was a suicide, his family, colleagues, and political affiliates suspected foul play at the hands of the French military. It took more than forty years for the Boumendjel family to receive closure regarding the details of Ali's disputed end.

Rahal's bold new book explores the life and death of Ali Boumendjel and shows how one man can shed new light on the Algerian war for national liberation and the current memory of these tumultuous years in France and Algeria. In 2001, General Aussaresses' controversial memoir confirmed that Boumendjel had been killed by the French military, rather than having committed suicide, as had been reported previously in the French press in 1957.[2] This revelation, along with Louissette Ighilahriz's 1999 account of her rape and torture, reignited public debate in France and Algeria about the war and the *Affaire Boumendjel* was thrust back into the spotlight.

For Rahal, the story of Ali Boumendjel lies firmly at the intersection of Algerian nationalist history and French history and challenges conventional categories of hero and martyr. She conducts a micro-history and, through extensive interviews with Boumendjel family members and exploration of private archives, reconstructs the life of a political activist that defies categorization. Her analysis supplements the work of historian Mohammed Harbi, who was among the first to question neat and restrictive depictions of Algerian nationalists, and demonstrates a more nuanced example of what it meant to participate in the war.[3] *Ali Boumendjel (1919-1957)*, among the first in a new series on biography by Les Belles Lettres and based on Rahal's dissertation, follows in the footsteps of French historian, Benjamin Stora, whose 1982 biography on Messali Hadj prompted inquiries into Algerian political activists that were notably absent from Algerian nationalist accounts.[4] Certain omissions, such as the exclusion of Hadj from the list of revolutionary heroes, were remarkable considering the extent to which nationalists commemorated the war. However, the elision of the contribution of the Mouvement National Algérien (MNA), the Union Démocratique du Manifeste Algérien (UDMA), and Ferhat Abbas to the war effort was intentional because these political visionaries and the activities of their respective organizations challenged the dominant FLN narrative.

Rahal's work has two main goals. First, she argues that following the life of Ali Boumendjel after 1 November 1954 will contribute to a more thorough understanding of the process by which the FLN incorporated their rivals and, in doing so, challenge the very definition of what it means to be a hero in Algeria (pp. 25-27). Rahal contends that the figure of Boumendjel has been overlooked precisely because of his professional pedigree and his centrist political views, which do not fit comfortably into the

carefully constructed nationalist version of events and, more specifically, disrupt the conventional views of the Algerian people. Second, she aims to show how Boumendjel's death stirred French domestic public opinion and served as a catalyst for scrutiny of the abuse of power by the French military (pp. 13-14). Ultimately, Rahal is more successful at the former.

One of the most compelling aspects of Rahal's research is the apparent limitless access she had to the Boumendjel family. She relies heavily on their memories, recollections, and personal archives, which undoubtedly contributed to a richer study. Rahal explains that she was introduced to Ali Boumendjel's second son, Sami, in 2002 and that soon after, she met his widow, Malika Boumendjel. The Boumendjel family, especially Sami, are presented as gatekeepers to Ali's memory and we learn that they had been looking for a scholar to pick up his legacy. But it could not be just any scholar; the family wanted to ensure that Ali's legacy would be properly guarded and preserved (pp. 29-31). Rahal spent countless hours interviewing the family, socializing with them, and developing true friendships. And while Rahal is painstakingly aware of the need to balance and verify the family's account with independent sources, throughout the book, particularly in the introduction where she details her relationship with the present-day Boumendjel family, the reader is left to question whether establishing a separate version of Boumendjel's life was possible in these conditions.

The book is divided into four chapters, the first and last of which are arguably the most useful to historians of nationalism and wars of independence. Chapter one provides a comprehensive explanation of the central role of martyrdom in the Algerian nationalist literature, which proposes that the population, en masse, fought to liberate the country from colonial rule. As a result of this emphasis on the collective, individual actors are rarely singled out from the achievements of the amorphous FLN. It is this chapter that most successfully contextualizes Boumendjel's broader relevance in Algerian history.

Chapters two and three examine Boumendjel family history and the history of Algerian political parties in the late 1940s and early 1950s. A detailed family genealogy situates Ali within a longstanding tradition of political progressivism. Although on occasion the wealth of biographical information is difficult to follow, the author makes a concerted effort to remind her reader who is who. Ali came from a family of teachers and intellectuals. Even his sisters were teachers or were married to teachers. Rahal wants to show that the family was mobile and educated. However, her point about rapid generational transformation could have been more succinct and incorporated direct analysis of Ali Boumendjel's life.

The same level of detail continues when Rahal highlights the unconventional nature of Ali's and his wife, Malika's, courtship in chapter three (pp. 90-115). Balancing personal history with political history proved difficult in this section. Only after a long discussion of their relationship does the author tackle Ali's political education and competing Algerian political platforms. The well-explicated political history of the UDMA and the Parti du peuple algérien (PPA) and their respective agendas and leadership is crucial to understanding the dominant, national narrative that emerges in independent Algeria. That the FLN was unknown, even nonexistent, prior to 1954 would appear impossible when reading nationalist literature which goes to great lengths to portray the political parties of the PPA, the MTLD, and even the Étoile Nord Africain (ENA) as a connected national movement from the mid-1920s. But according to Rahal, the 1 November 1954 attacks marked the FLN's emergence onto the political scene (p. 156). Rahal's political discussion, while extremely useful for scholars of revolutionary history, sometimes loses sight of Ali Boumendjel.

Chapter three is divided into three sections: the courtship between Ali and Malika; the political platforms of the UDMA and PPA that focus on Ali's older brother Ahmed; and the final section that reintroduces Ali. It is in section three that Rahal's analysis takes off and connects with the larger objectives of her project. Making use of an extensive set of interviews with influential writers, lawyers, and revolutionaries, Rahal shows the convergence of Ali's political views with the start of the war. Despite being a member of the UDMA, an organization often referred to as centralist, Henri Alleg

recalls Ali Boumendjel being “to the left of the UDMA” (p. 145), implying that his links to communist networks and his participation in the Universal Movement of Peace positioned him outside of the mainstream UDMA agenda. When asked for his view of why Ali did not join the PPA, Mohammed Yazid, a friend from his school days in Blida and future GPRA representative replied that, for Ali, the UDMA was “essentially a family affair” (p. 145).

The story continues to build as Rahal explores how and why Ali joined the FLN. Ali had been a long-time supporter of pursuing change through legal channels and opposed violence, as shown through his voluminous collection of articles published in *Égalité*, subsequently renamed *La République algérienne*. What could have been the appeal of joining forces with the revolutionary FLN? The primary explanation Rahal provides is a personal one. In January 1955, Abbane Ramdane, a friend from Boumendjel’s student days in Blida, was released from prison and returned to Algiers. Their friendship and political relationship is intriguing because Ramdane, who became the political leader of Algiers and played a critical role in putting together the Soummam Congress in August 1956, is said to have been killed by the FLN military wing, but since independence has been rehabilitated as a martyr and hero. Therefore, the Boumendjel family could have a stake in portraying a close relationship between the two men and their accounts should be interpreted with a degree of skepticism (p. 174). Due to the secretive nature of the FLN, it is difficult to corroborate the relationship first-hand, but Rahal provides sufficient evidence from second-hand accounts to suggest the two men were close.

Even if Ali Boumendjel and Abbane Ramdane were close, would that friendship have been enough of a reason for the former to join the FLN and abandon his centrist principles? Ramdane was charged with bringing together various factions including the PPA, the UDMA, communists, and the educated elite (p. 173). It was also the case that Boumendjel was becoming increasingly frustrated with his party’s politics and, by the summer of 1956, he had joined the FLN. Integration into a more militant political party is a common theme in the lives of the educated elite African leaders who went on to play prominent roles in national politics in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

In the final chapter, devoted entirely to Boumendjel’s arrest and death, Rahal returns to the larger implications of his unique story. It is here that she successfully shows the complexities and contradictions of the army reports, the manipulation of the press, the desperate attempts made by Ahmed Boumendjel to write to all of his connections pleading for his brother’s release and more information, and finally, the Boumendjel affair in France. Rahal makes extensive use of Boumendjel family archives and shows not only the extensive correspondence that the family received after Ali’s death, but also the numerous letters and telegrams that Ahmed sent, to no avail, during his brother’s detention.

The Boumendjel affair erupted in France when René Capitant, a former national education minister under de Gaulle, suspended his classes and wrote to the press regarding Ali Boumendjel. Capitant claimed that the abuses Ali suffered at the hands of the French military stained France’s honor. As a result of Capitant’s public outcries for justice, Ali Boumendjel’s image in the press began to transform from that of FLN terrorist, as depicted in military reports, to that of cherished intellectual and colleague (pp. 224-229). It is in this section that Rahal makes the most substantial connections between Algerian history and a French affair. Her analysis would have been strengthened further had she consistently connected the story of Ali and his family to the larger historical themes raised in the introduction. For example, she writes that exploring Ali Boumendjel’s diverse professional and personal associations will help historians better understand how his death modified metropolitan opinion about the war, torture, and the FLN (p. 17), a large claim which receives insufficient treatment in the rest of the work. Without a doubt, Rahal shows the way in which Ali Boumendjel’s death affected various groups in both France and Algeria, but the broader historical implications could have been made more explicit, especially in chapters two and three.

Despite Rahal's struggle to balance the details of personal narrative with the wider implications of her subject's life, her book offers a valuable methodological tool to historians and is a significant contribution to better understanding the war, nationalism, and the intertwined histories of France and Algeria. Not only does a thorough investigation of an individual with a varied set of experiences help to challenge the notion of a dominant narrative, it also serves to move beyond the collective historical narrative of a given nationalist movement. The power of nationalist mythology can at times appear impossible to deconstruct because of its careful and meticulous construction. Thus biography presents fruitful possibilities for all scholars of European imperialism and African decolonization. It encourages scholars to look beyond the official narrative of these violent separations and to seek alternative perspectives that defy easy categorization. Decolonization was a complex process that is often summarized, retrospectively, too neatly. Microhistories of individuals such as Ali Boumendjel open up exciting new avenues of research that illuminate the textured reality of the end of empire.

NOTES

[1] Raphaëlle Branche, *La torture et l'armée pendant la guerre d'Algérie* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 2001); Sylvie Thénault, *Une Drôle de Justice: Les Magistrats dans la Guerre d'Algérie* (Paris: La Découverte, 2001); Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *La Torture dans la République* (Paris: Minuit, 1972); Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Les Crimes de l'armée française: Algérie 1954-62* (Paris: La Découverte & Syros, 2001).

[2] Paul Aussaresses, *Services spéciaux Algérie, 1955-1957: Mon témoignage sur la torture* (Paris: Perrin, 2001).

[3] See the three works by Mohammed Harbi: *Aux origines du FLN* (Paris: Christian Bourgois, 1975); *Le FLN, mirage et réalité* (Paris: Éditions Jeune Afrique, 1980); *Les Archives de la révolution algérienne* (Paris: Éditions Jeune Afrique, 1981).

[4] Malika Rahal, "L'Union Démocratique du Manifeste Algérien (1946-1956), Histoire d'une partie politique. L'autre nationalisme algérien," (PhD Dissertation, Institut national des langues et civilisations orientales, 2007) and Benjamin Stora, *Messali Hadj, 1898-1974* (Paris: Sycomore, 1982).

Jennifer Johnson Onyedum
Lehman College-CUNY
Jennifer.Onyedum@lehman.cuny.edu

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