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Raphaëlle Branche, *L'Embascade de Palestro: Algérie 1956* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2010). 256 pp. 19.40€ (pb). ISBN-10: 2200353855.

Review by Joshua Cole, University of Michigan

The publication of Raphaëlle Branche's excellent microhistory of an ambush by Algerian nationalists of a French military unit in May 1956 is a good opportunity to take stock of the way that the imperial turn in French history of the last two decades has returned repeatedly to the history of a few emblematic events. The recent history of colonialism and decolonization in Algeria has been particularly rich in such examples, including Neil MacMasters's and Jim House's book on the murder of Algerian protesters during the demonstration in Paris of 17 October 1961,[1] Alain Dewerpe's riveting account of the police violence in Paris at the Charonne metro station on 8 February 1962,[2] and Jean-Pierre Peyroulou's book on the repression in Guelma that followed Algerian demonstrations in Sétif on 8 May 1945.[3] Even books that do not define themselves as histories of an "event" such as Ben Brower's *A Desert Named Peace* or Neil MacMasters' *Burning the Veil* often place a key event at the center of their accounts, using the narrative to anchor the analysis and provide it with a ready referent and source of examples. Brower devotes the central chapters of *A Desert Named Peace* to an incident at Djelfa in 1861 during the conquest of the Sahara, while MacMasters's book uses a ceremonial unveiling of Algerian women by rebel members of the French military in 1958 as a set piece to introduce his study of the ways that women and their clothing became a central battleground for both the French and Algerians during the war years.[4] Beyond their inherent drama, these events serve as a kind of refracting lens for understanding the complexities of colonial history, revealing both the obvious lines of conflict as well as the more surprising and complicated or even contradictory positions that emerged from these fundamental struggles for sovereignty and identity.

Branche's book on the 1956 ambush near Palestro differs from these previous books in one important respect. The incident in question, though devastating for the individuals and families of the soldiers killed, was in no way exceptional, but rather depressingly banal, almost a *fait divers*, albeit one that quickly seared itself into public consciousness in France as a result of a set of converging political circumstances that seemed to lend it greater significance after it occurred. The relevant facts are summarized easily enough: On 18 May 1956, a unit of French conscripts who had recently arrived in Algeria were on a routine patrol outside the village of Djerrah, which lay near the road that connected Algiers to Constantine in the east. As they passed on foot through a steep ravine, they were ambushed by a group of FLN militants led by a charismatic local leader of the Algerian nationalists known as Ali Khodja, himself a recent deserter from the French army. Seventeen of the French soldiers were killed, either in the initial encounter with the FLN or afterwards, perhaps by local villagers who apparently tried to move some of the bodies to avoid the retribution that they knew would follow such an attack. As the bodies were searched and moved, they were also mutilated in various ways, horrifying the French search party that came upon them later in the day. Four French soldiers were taken prisoner by the FLN during the ambush. One of the prisoners was later rescued; another was accidentally killed in the rescue operation. The bodies of the two others were never found. After

the discovery of the sole survivor, the event became frontline news in France, a turning point in public awareness there of the developing war in Algeria.

Branche's meticulous account situates the ambush and its site both in the context of its immediate political conjuncture and in the longer history of French colonialism in the region. She explores the development of FLN activity in the area around the colonial settlement of Palestro where the village of Djerrah was located. In areas like these, the FLN decided early on that ambushes were a necessary part of their long-term strategy, and they were a relatively frequent occurrence here and elsewhere in Algeria. Most obviously, they allowed the small clandestine groups operating in the *maquis* to furnish themselves with small arms and ammunition as they prepared for what they hoped would be a broader confrontation with the French military in the future. The ambushes served a localized political goal as well. They were aimed at convincing the neighboring populations of Algerians that the FLN had the territory well in hand. In the early stages of the war a village that had yet to commit itself fully to the nationalist cause could be tipped into the FLN camp by staging an ambush nearby. A successful attack could create confidence in the efficacy of the nationalist forces, even as it provoked a violent and thus discrediting response from the French.

In May of 1956, the villagers of Djerrah were already committed supporters of the FLN, but Branche emphasizes that they also had their own motivations and a sphere of autonomy that was not completely under the control of the nationalist organization. Their role in the ambush was to comb quickly through the possessions of the defeated troops to salvage anything that had been missed by the combatants in their haste to move back into hiding, and it was in this latter stage of the ambush that the mutilations occurred. From the standpoint of the FLN such mutilations served no useful purpose, and Branche notes evidence that the militants discouraged the practice as counter productive. In searching for a historical explanation of the mutilations—obviously a sensitive subject—Branche looks to a different time scale, relating the ambush to the story of conquest, resistance, and repression in the region in the nineteenth century. According to Branche, the villagers from Djerrah were motivated by a keen awareness of the devastating price that their forebears had paid following the insurrection of 1871. During this uprising, the last and greatest expression of mass revolt against French rule in the nineteenth century, forty-six of the approximately 100 colonial settlers in nearby Palestro were killed in an attack by local rebels, and the survivors were taken prisoner, their safety guaranteed by a local tribal leader.

During the violent repression that followed, the French made no distinction between those who had participated in the attacks and those who sought a middle ground. The tribal leader who had protected the imprisoned settlers was among those executed by the military. Meanwhile, in the years following the attack of 1871, the new settlers of Palestro were given free rein to punish the local populations by sequestering their land, driving villagers into a permanent and humiliating cycle of impoverishment and economic dependence that was experienced above all as a dishonoring injustice. For the villagers who came upon the bodies of the French soldiers after the ambush of 1956, writes Branche, an attack on the physical remains had an almost ritual quality, a violent assertion of autonomy against men who symbolized the implacable force that the villagers of Djerrah held responsible for their subjugation.

From the point of view of the French government and military, the ambush came at particularly sensitive moment. Branche points out that the victims of the attack were among the first of a large contingent of conscripts who had recently arrived in Algeria. By May of 1956 the FLN's revolt had been going on for eighteen months, and the army felt that many more troops were necessary to "pacify" the areas where the nationalist organization was active. The newly arrived troops were unfamiliar with the terrain, often poorly equipped and undertrained. Meanwhile,

the wider French public was belatedly realizing the extent of the on-going crisis in Algeria, and sporadic protests against the use of conscripts in Algeria had already begun. This larger context set the stage for the flurry of press attention that—after the fact—made the ambush into an event with broader consequences for the crystallization of public opinion about the war. Although the drama of the initial attack brought some press attention, it was the sensational rescue of the sole survivor some days later that made the ambush at Palestro into a *cause célèbre*, and Branche's book carefully explores the way that the personalized stories of the victims were juxtaposed with descriptions of the "savage" enemy they faced in the Algerian countryside. He also documents the ways in which the newly arrived Governor General, Robert Lacoste, used public outrage over the attack to push for a more repressive and aggressive campaign against the FLN in the countryside. The first publicly announced executions of FLN prisoners by the military took place in June 1956, only a few weeks after the ambush.

An attentive reader of this book will learn a great deal about the complicated local textures of politics and violence in the Algerian countryside during the war years. It is filled with perceptive commentary, and it is particularly useful to think of this book alongside other kinds of sources that offer a localized perspective, such as the memoirs of Mouloud Feraoun or the autobiography of Louissette Ighilariz.<sup>[5]</sup> Whereas a memoir offers readers the highly individualized view of an actor-participant, histories such as this one give a more dispersed account from multiple perspectives that is nevertheless anchored in the specificities of a particular site, a site whose history can be seen across spans that extend beyond the scope of any individual life. In debates about the contributions of microhistory to historical knowledge in general, there has been a certain tendency to assume that "micro" means individual: think of the debates, for example, surrounding Carlo Ginsburg's *Menocchio* or Natalie Davis's *Bertrande de Rols and Martin Guerre*. Branche's unpacking of the ambush at Palestro shows that this need not be the case, and the otherwise modest book is a tour de force of historical reconstruction in miniature.

The question remains, however, as to how historians should think about the particular kinds of knowledge that seem to arise from the close study of events such as this one. "Events" as such are by definition unique occurrences, and by Branche's own admission, the ambush at Palestro became significant in a broader sense only later, for contingent political reasons that transcended the specific occurrence. Should we assume therefore that microhistories such as Branche's—no matter how deft the evocation of broader contexts and after-the-fact constructions of meaning—are in some important sense *sui generis*? Can they tell us anything about the broader structures that were at work in this conflict? The answer, of course, is yes. Accounts such as this one show vividly the local and immediate dimensions of historical developments—the spread of Algerian nationalism in the countryside, the seemingly inevitable failure of the French military strategy—that would seem more abstract when dealt with at a more macro level. At the same time, however, one might argue that events such as these serve an essentially illustrative function, adding depth and color to a story—the FLN's victory in the war for Algerian dependence—whose more general outlines are already familiar. It remains to be seen if one might imagine a different kind of *histoire événementelle* for the history of French colonialism, one that is less reliant on traumatic moments of cathartic violence. One need not be an apologist for colonialism to suggest that this necessary attention to moments of violence is not the complete story, and that there might be other equally instructive events to examine that might help to understand the complicated nature of social and political life in the colonial situation.

In this instance—as in the other works cited above—the choice of the event seems largely determined by the amplitude of its after-effects in France. Branche has chosen this event because of the extent to which it looms large in French memories of the war. Indeed, the relative lack of

commemoration in Algeria provides her with a counterpoint that reinforces her argument about the constructed nature of French memory. Her clear hope is that by thoroughly exploring its contingencies and complications, she can counteract a tendency to appropriate simplified or reductive evocations of such traumatic events in the contemporary “*guerre des mémoires*” that appear so frequently in public debates in France about the colonial past. The goal, then, is to root the narrative firmly in the past and to refuse interpretations that are open to being appropriated by those with an axe to grind in debates about the present. Given the highly politicized context for debates about the colonial past in contemporary France, Branche’s goal is both admirable and necessary, but the present nevertheless intrudes on the study in inescapable ways, precisely because the subject of this book was chosen with these contemporary debates in mind.

Branche herself does not use the term “microhistory,” and she refrains from making a broader theoretical point about the history of colonialism and recent examples of *l’histoire événementelle*. She is nevertheless clearly aware of the vexing issues that narratives of such events pose for historians. Most interestingly, in a move that struck this reader as both surprising and successful, she postpones a detailed narrative of the events of May 16, 1956 until the end of the book, when all the groundwork has already been laid concerning the political context in both Algeria and France, the history of French settlement in the region, the relationship of the FLN leadership to the local villages, the origins of the conscripts in the ill-fated unit, and the activities of Ali-Khodja’s *maquis* group. The cumulative effect of this delayed story is to highlight the singular tragedy of the event, which brought two groups of young men in their early twenties together at the same place in the ravine on that day, with such fatal consequences.

#### NOTES

[1] Jim House and Neil MacMaster, *Paris 1961: Algerians, State Terror, and Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

[2] Alain Dewerpe, *Charonne 8 février 1962: Anthropologie historique d’un massacre d’Etat* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 2006).

[3] Jean-Pierre Peyroulou, *Guelma, 1945: Une subversion française dans l’Algérie coloniale* (Paris: La Découverte, 2009).

[4] Benjamin Brower, *A Desert Named Peace: The Violence of France’s Empire in the Sahara, 1844-1902* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009); Neil MacMaster, *Burning the Veil: The Algerian War and the ‘Emancipation’ of Women, 1954-1962* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009).

[5] Mouloud Feraoun, *1955-1962: Reflections on the French-Algerian War*, ed., James D. Le Sueur (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000); Louise Ighilahriz, *Algérienne* (Paris: Fayard/Calmann-Lévy, 2001).

Joshua Cole  
University of Michigan  
[joshcole@umich.edu](mailto:joshcole@umich.edu)

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