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Jennifer Johnson, *The Battle for Algeria: Sovereignty, Health Care, and Humanitarianism*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016. xiii + 270 pp. Illustrations, figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$75.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9780812247718; (eb). ISBN 9780812292008.

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In late April 2015, the Islamic State posted a slickly produced online video announcing the creation of a Health Services division based in Raqqa, Syria, with a logo copied directly from the British National Health Services. The advertisement featured cascading images of state-of-the-art medical facilities, including pediatric units and physical therapy offices. As music played, a jihadist Australian doctor spoke to the camera urging physicians around the world to join the cause. He insisted upon both the supposed humanitarian values of the Islamic State and its cutting-edge efficiency in caring for civilians. “It’s a good system that they’re running here,” he announced. “Everything lived up to my expectations completely.”[1]

The appearance of this earnest advertisement in the midst of the Syrian Civil War struck some observers as strange indeed: in a context of such extreme violence, why would the Islamic State bother with upbeat propaganda about ultramodern neonatal care? In fact, as Jennifer Johnson vividly shows readers of *The Battle for Algeria*, since 1945 strategic claims about who is “positioned to better care for the...people’s health and welfare” have been integral to even the most brutal conflicts (p. 3). Her focused study of the Algerian War (1954–1962) helps illuminate the importance of healthcare and humanitarian aid—or at least assertions about the ability to provide such services—in one particularly significant modern struggle for territorial sovereignty. While Johnson’s largest arguments are not always entirely borne out by her evidence, her book offers valuable historical insights into the ways that aspirants to statehood have articulated their claims on both the local level and the international stage through discourses of bodily care.

The Battle for Algeria is constructed as an explanation for the “unlikely triumph” of the Front de Libération Nationale (FLN) in its bid for Algerian independence despite the inferiority of its armed forces to those of the French state. “The fight between the two sides,” Johnson writes, “was not simply a military affair” (pp. 2-3), and the nationalists ultimately won because they “were more successful in using notions of welfare and rights to their advantage” (p. 6). By projecting their ability to care for the populace both inward (to Algeria’s inhabitants) and outward (to foreign governments and international organizations), she argues, the FLN leadership took on the authority of a “proto-state” (p. 3) and thereby helped to establish sovereignty over the country. According to *The Battle for Algeria*, strategic deployment of a discourse of rights borrowed from landmark postwar documents such as the 1949 Geneva Conventions was key to the Algerian nationalists’ success. Indeed, Johnson maintains that it was this “additional arsenal of rhetorical weapons” that in the end “enabl[ed] them to (re)take their country” (p. 193).

The book is organized into two halves that reflect Johnson’s dual interest in the local and global components of the struggle for sovereignty over Algeria. After a preliminary first chapter on the long-

term development of Algerian nationalism and the changed international climate after 1945, Johnson moves into a consideration of healthcare during the war. Chapter two focuses on French efforts at “medical pacification.” These were undertaken by the *Sections Administratives Spécialisées* (SAS), specialized military teams charged with establishing contact between the French administration and the rural Algerian population, maintaining order in the countryside, and gathering intelligence. Johnson highlights the activities of those members who provided medical services to a considerable number of Algerian civilians over the course of the conflict. She makes clear that their “gentle weapons” ultimately served France’s military goals and that their activities were exploited for propaganda purposes but convincingly documents the fact that many Algerians nonetheless accepted this vital aid (p. 49).

Rather less convincing is her subsequent argument that the FLN responded to the French state’s efforts by “implementing nearly identical medical programs in Algeria” (p. 47). Chapter three makes the case that the “nationalists built an organized and vibrant health-services division,” thereby sending “a clear message to the people and the French administration that [they] were capable of building and running public welfare institutions” (pp. 63–64). Johnson is careful to admit that the FLN’s health-services division was, “at its core” geared toward the care of fighters rather than civilians (p. 77), but nevertheless insists that it “targeted diverse groups within Algeria” (p. 64) and was intended by FLN leaders to prove that the nationalists, no less than the French, “could assume responsibility for the people’s care” (p. 64). The chapter builds an intriguing portrait of the health-services division as it evolved over the course of the war, in particular after the 1956 Student Strike helped push young medical students to join its ranks. However, it ultimately provides incomplete evidence for the claim that the division was really geared toward delivering substantial, sustained care to non-combatants, or for the argument that its work was “an extremely important dimension of the FLN’s overall strategy to legitimize itself to the local population and strengthen domestic support” (p. 92). More important to the leadership, it would appear, was the prerogative of treating sick and wounded *maquisards* so that they could rejoin the armed struggle. This is an aspect of the conflict well worthy of study in its own right, and Johnson ably illuminates it. But the history she relates fits uncomfortably within her framing of the division as an Algerian counterpart to the French SAS.

The fourth chapter—perhaps the strongest in the book—bridges the local and global by providing a fascinating treatment of the FLN’s 1957 founding of the Algerian Red Crescent (Croissant-Rouge Algérien, or CRA) and recounting this body’s efforts to “use humanitarian ideals, principles, and rhetoric to expand support for the nationalist cause” (p. 100). In effect, the CRA functioned both to highlight French atrocities to international audiences and, conversely, to portray the FLN as an organization committed to norms of humane warfare. Of particular interest is Johnson’s research on the CRA’s relief campaign on behalf of some 200,000 Algerian refugees displaced by fighting into neighboring Morocco and Tunisia. As she documents, millions of dollars’ worth of aid for these men, women, and children poured in over the final years of the war—primarily from Arab allies, but also from Italy, Portugal, Japan, Canada, Chile, the Vatican, UNICEF, and so on. Though it is “unclear” whether the donations ever actually reached their intended recipients (p. 122), the issue is superfluous to Johnson’s argument: she is less interested in the reality behind the nationalists’ professed concern for refugees than in the importance they ascribed to the humanitarian realm as they sought to triumph over the French in a global public-relations battle.

Johnson remains focused on humanitarianism in her fifth chapter, which deals with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). This chapter seeks to establish that the war of decolonization in Algeria marked a “pivotal moment in ICRC history” (p. 155), forcing the Committee to confront unprecedented challenges that “prompted it to further amend Red Cross policies, transforming the organization in the process” (p. 128). Johnson provides an engrossing narration of the ICRC’s involvement in the Algerian War, which has been little addressed in English-language scholarship.^[2] This involvement centered upon a series of investigatory missions targeting French prisons, civilian detention facilities, and military-run internment camps. Red Cross findings were confidential, but—in a dramatic

episode that Johnson analyzes with the help of ICRC archives—its seventh report was leaked to *Le Monde* and published in early 1960. *The Battle for Algeria* helpfully explicates the constraints under which the Geneva-based humanitarian organization sought to carry out its mandate in the context of a conflict that France refused to recognize as international in scope. It does not, however, provide readers with sufficient evidence that “the lessons delegates learned in Algeria served as a catalyst for change” in the ICRC’s policies regarding future “internal conflicts” (p. 156). Further discussion of 1960s-era Red Cross missions or of the drafting process for the 1977 protocols to the Geneva Conventions would have been necessary to defend the point.

In her final chapter, Johnson returns her attention to the FLN, now examined in light of its efforts to consolidate recognition at the United Nations. Here she moves into territory well studied by previous scholars including Matthew Connelly, whose important 2002 book *A Diplomatic Revolution* was focused precisely on “new strategies and tactics with which peoples lacking the means of exercising control over a claimed territory could proclaim their independence and even obtain aid to make their claims effective.”[3] Johnson aims to set her interpretation apart from his by emphasizing, first, the FLN’s rhetorical deployment of the language of the UN Charter, and, second, its diplomatic efforts vis-à-vis fellow Third World actors. Though the chapter does contain revelatory glimpses into Algerian relations with interlocutors such as Pakistan and Burma, its conclusions about the nationalists’ diplomatic shrewdness in exploiting the UN’s structures and principles for anticolonialist purposes do not, in fact, differ a great deal from Connelly’s findings. Rather than simply asserting that her account is more attentive to Algerian “voices” than his (pp. 3 and 9), Johnson might instead have articulated precisely how her focus on health and humanitarianism allows for a revision or nuancing of his chief arguments.

This is not to suggest that Johnson, who begins her book with a brief stand-alone section on her richly varied source base, has failed to break new ground in her use of Algerian archives. Indeed, this fresh research is one of the great strengths of the project. Johnson is also to be applauded for her careful excavation of documents in France, the United States, and Switzerland, as well as for her work conducting oral interviews with seven participants in the history that she studies. Along with a handful of other recent books, *The Battle for Algeria* helps to demonstrate that using previously untapped Algerian and international sources opens up new interpretive possibilities for analyzing France’s bloodiest process of decolonization.[4]

Given the novelty and depth of her archival work, however, it is perplexing that at times Johnson chooses to stress argumentative points that her documents do *not* substantiate, related to the relative “success” of French and FLN tactics. In particular, the official sources upon which she primarily relies offer little insight into the hopes and fears of the general Algerian populace. Therefore her assertions about the effectiveness of medical initiatives as tools for establishing internal sovereignty remain questionable. For instance, SAS programs may well have gone “a long way toward pacifying the population and disincentivizing Algerians from joining the FLN,” but a different kind of project would have been necessary to defend the point (p. 40). Similarly, Johnson grounds her claims about the nationalists’ capacity to mold international opinion on debatable assumptions about what motivated various actors in her story. Just as rural Algerians’ use of desperately required SAS medical services does not necessarily signify that their view of “the colonial state” had been “transformed” for the better (p. 41), various countries’ positions of support for the FLN at the UN and donations to the Red Crescent do not unequivocally demonstrate that their leaders had come to “perceiv[e] the Algerians fighting for liberation as humanitarians capable of running a modern nation-state” (p. 2). Other factors might amply account for their actions.

While it does not lionize the FLN, *The Battle for Algeria* does emphasize the Front leaders’ “political acumen” (pp. 14 and 191) and their “laser-sharp deployment of recently reconceived terms, ideas, and concepts” (p. 11). Overall, Johnson suggests, the success of the Algerian campaign for independence “showed the tangible power of discourse” to turn “political aspirations for sovereignty” into “reality” (p.

199). According to her brief conclusion, the FLN, “outnumbered and militarily outmaneuvered, bypassed the traditional means of waging war and adopted a comprehensive strategy that relied upon appropriating universal discourses that had been redefined after 1945” (p. 199). In fact, the nationalists made no such stark choice: their strategy was violent and discursive at once, in ways that cannot be easily disentangled. The Algerian War was, after all, a war—a long and terrible one—and the FLN, even at its most “outmaneuvered,” never stopped fighting it. *The Battle for Algeria* performs a valuable service in demonstrating the Front leaders’ rhetorical fluency with the language of key post-1945 instruments of international law, and Johnson’s decision to keep the bloodiness of the conflict “in the background” is understandable given the amount of ground she has to cover (p. 3). But we still need accounts that address the complex, dynamic *relationship* between acts of bodily violence and discourses of bodily care (and vice versa) in insurgent actors’ bids for sovereignty. In the meantime, Johnson’s careful research and her welcome new attention to healthcare and humanitarianism in the Algerian War promises to shift the scholarly conversation in thought-provoking directions. Her book should be of great interest to scholars of France, North Africa, humanitarian work, and decolonization.

NOTES

[1] Bridie Jabour, “Australian Doctor Appears in Isis Video Urging Others to Join him in Syria” *The Guardian*, Apr. 16, 2015. <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2015/apr/26/australian-doctor-stars-in-isis-video-urging-others-to-join-him-in-syria>, accessed August 15, 2017.

[2] In French, see especially Raphaëlle Branche, “Entre droit humanitaire et intérêts politiques: les missions algériennes du CICR,” *Revue historique* 301.1 (1999): 101-125.

[3] Matthew Connelly, *A Diplomatic Revolution: Algeria’s Fight for Independence and the Origins of the Post-Cold War Era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 280.

[4] For instance, see Jeffrey James Byrne, *Mecca of Revolution: Algeria, Decolonization, and the Third World Order* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016); Darcie Fontaine, *Decolonizing Christianity: Religion and the End of Empire in France and Algeria* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

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