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H-France Review Vol. 20 (November 2020), No. 201

Joshua Cole, *Lethal Provocation: The Constantine Murders and the Politics of French Algeria*. Ithaca N.Y. and London: Cornell University Press, 2019. vii + 317 pp. Maps, figures, appendix, notes, and index. \$37.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9781501739415; \$18.99 U.S. (eb). ISBN 9781501739446.

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In August 1934 in Constantine, Algeria, twenty-eight people were brutally murdered over a period of several days during a series of large riots. Who the murderers and victims were, and the circumstances in which the violence took place, are the questions at the heart of *Lethal Provocation*. Twenty-five of the victims were Jewish, three were Muslim, and the murderers happened to be Muslim. Joshua Cole's main argument is that the religious categories that played a key role in the violence were shaped by French laws and institutions; violence occurred for political reasons—because Jews and Muslims sought equity on par with European settlers and thus challenged the power structures that defined French Algeria. For Cole, the story of the tragic violence is a French one as much as an Algerian, Muslim, or Jewish one, despite efforts by French authorities to cast the event as “Algerian” instead of “French.” *Lethal Provocation* is filled with compelling evidence to demonstrate conclusively that the conflicts between Muslims and Jews were not atavistic in nature but sparked by conditions specific to the city, time period, actions of individuals, and ethno-religious hierarchies that defined the French colonial system. In this way, Cole's conclusions are in line with scholarship that dismantles any notion of inherent and immutable tension between Jews and Muslims. [1]

The first study solely devoted to exploring one of the worst cases of anti-Jewish violence to take place on French soil, *Lethal Provocation* is in the vein of monographs that explore the broader social and political context of high-profile murders. [2] Like these other works, the narrative of *Lethal Provocation* is driven by mystery. Cole is the first scholar to argue that one person can be tied to most of the murders, which suggests that a coordinated plot existed within a chaotic riot. Cole's discovery of new archival documents allows him to weave together evidence and locate it within the broader historical backdrop of French Algeria to argue that Mohamed El Maadi, an officer in the French army, played a key role in murdering numerous Jewish people and their families. El Maadi was not motivated by religious fanaticism but by a strident political desire to embolden French nationalist sentiment and strengthen France's control of Algeria. He was a fascist participant in the February 6, 1934 riots in Paris, member of the terrorist Cagoule in the late-1930s, and a Vichy collaborator/Nazi supporter in the 1940s. El Maadi's antisemitism was squarely in the tradition of extreme French nationalism and fascism that was defined by anti-Jewish sentiment (p. 6).

*Lethal Provocation* is organized chronologically and divided into four parts. It begins broadly, with the first half analyzing the ways in which the process of French colonization “recast relations between Muslims, Jews, and ‘Europeans’ in Algeria” (p. 4). The second half focuses on the lead-up to the August violence, the days in which the murders took place (including horrors that took place on August 5), and the aftermath in which French authorities sought to create a distinct narrative of the violence. Overall, Cole’s account relies on extensive archival research and is written in an accessible manner that would appeal to a broad audience, from undergraduate students to experts in the fields of French history and colonial history.

Part one, comprised of three chapters, examines how the French conquest of Constantine in 1837 shaped the city’s history and its status as a Mediterranean nexus in the movement of people and goods. Constantine’s colonization paralleled the rest of Algeria even if it had fewer European settlers than cities like Oran (by 1931, Constantine’s population of 99,595 was 52 percent “Native”, 12 percent “Isrealite”, and 36 percent “European”). Of critical importance was how the French created the categories of “native,” “Jewish,” and “European” to change many aspects of life for the city’s inhabitants, from transforming its urban spaces for the benefit of settlers to forcibly transferring rural property from Algerians to Europeans. Changes to Algeria’s legal structure started the categorization process, beginning with an 1834 ordonnance that labeled the multilingual and heterogenous populations of Algeria as “*indigènes*,” collapsing diverse groups of people into one “native” category. From then on, French authorities constantly distinguished between European settlers and the older “native” population, granting the former special privileges and leaving the latter as second-class subjects. The 1865 law was equally important because it allowed male Algerian Muslims and Jews to become French citizens but only if they ceded their personal status and followed the French civil code, which amounted to apostasy. A critical alteration to the 1865 law occurred in 1870 with the Crémieux Decree, which granted Jews—but not Muslims—French citizenship by removing the personal status requirement for Jewish people.

While the effects of these laws and regulations are well known to historians of France, Cole’s originality is to use them to show the historical roots of the August 1934 violence and to demonstrate that the violence was not inevitable. From 1870, Algerian Jews could access education and professional opportunities that the state denied to Muslims. Many Jewish communities subsequently embraced French republicanism thereafter. As citizens they were subject to the French Civil Code; while as nationals, Muslims were subject to the highly discriminatory *Code de l’indigénat* (1881). These laws and codes shifted the status of different groups and had a racializing effect, as settlers, for example, not only distinguished themselves from Muslims and Jews, but began to see difference in racialized terms. Such differences led to a spike in anti-Jewish violence by settlers in the late nineteenth-century during the Dreyfus Affair; many believed that Jews threatened their supremacy in Algerian politics and society. At the same time, conflicts between Jews and Muslims remained at low levels even if politicians in Constantine sought to provoke anti-Jewish animus among Muslims populations for their own political gain.

Part two, containing four chapters, focuses on the interwar period and the significant social and political changes that took place, some of which were rooted in opportunities provided by the Jonnart Law (1919). Creating a new category of “electors,” the complex law allowed approximately 425,000 “natives” (43 percent of the adult male population) the right to vote in local elections. In addition, it stated that electors would not be subject to the *Code de l’indigénat*,

and in some cases, allowed electors to run for local office. Originally, Jonnart had wanted to grant citizenship to Algerian veterans who had fought in World War I. While many Muslims were frustrated with yet another French denial of their full citizenship, and settlers were alarmed at the increased “rights” for Muslims, the law sparked an increase in Muslim political organizing and calls for equal status. Additionally, the rise of communism and concomitant rise of far-right groups—in Constantine the Croix de feu was the most important—served to further political division and embolden the already strident anti-Republican political beliefs of far-right settlers. The key Muslim political association was the Federation of Election Muslims of Constantine (FEMC), led by perhaps the most important interwar Muslim political leader, Mohamed Salah Bendjelloul. The FEMC was joined by a religiously motivated Association of Algerian Muslim Ulama (AAMU), founded in Constantine by Abd al-Hamid Ben Badis in 1931.

The complexity of this political landscape leads Cole to extend Kevin Passmore’s concept of a “dual fracture” in interwar politics from metropolitan France to Algeria. In Constantine, not only was there a split between left and right, but fractures existed within both sides, which led to political realignments depending on particular situations.<sup>[3]</sup> One example of the “dual fracture,” is the relationship between Constantine’s long-time mayor, Emile Morinaud, and the city’s Jewish community (pp. 75-76). Morinaud began his career in the late nineteenth century believing that Jews threatened settler dominance of Algerian politics and society. He knew that he could mobilize antisemitic sentiment for his own political benefit. However, his approach shifted in the early 1900s as the antisemitism sparked by the Dreyfus Affair waned and he found it politically expedient to ally with Jewish leaders in order to harness their support. Jewish leaders saw benefits in backing the mayor as well. For instance, the head of the Jewish Consistory of Constantine in the 1930s, Henri Lellouche, at times supported Morinaud because he believed that the mayor took the interests of the Jewish community into consideration. Morinaud, in turn, feared the rise a new post-Jonnart cohort of Muslim politicians in the municipal council, which spurred him to ally with the council’s Jewish members to solidify his grip on the mayor’s office. Thus, new groups, shifting alliances, and calls for reform led to increases in political provocations in the early 1930s, particularly in 1933. Police noted that far right elements of the European population were organizing increasing anti-Jewish activity, and that for the first time, some Muslims joined them because they believed that fascists would shatter a European-Jewish Republic (p. 101).

Part three, notably titled “A Riot in France,” explores in detail the political violence that took place on August 3, 4, and 5, 1934, as well as how the belated police and military crackdown on August 6 finally ended the carnage. The challenge of reconstructing a chaotic series of events using archival sources is especially clear in this section because the documents (mostly police and governmental reports) are filled with rumors and conflicting accounts. Cole’s narrative recognizes the ambiguities in the documentation, demonstrating that the lack of clarity also characterized how people themselves experienced the days of August 3-6.

The cycle of provocation that had plagued Constantine since 1933 peaked on August 3, 1934 when rumors spread that a Jewish man had insulted Muslims at a mosque who were preparing themselves for prayer. In response, around two thousand men armed with various weapons gathered at a public square in front of the mosque. They planned to march through the Jewish quarter, although the police blocked the marchers before they could do so. The day ended with injuries to both Muslims and Jews, including a young Muslim man who was shot and would later die. Both populations believed that they were victims who merely responded to provocations by

the other side, which played a key role in the escalation that took place over the following days. French authorities ordered all public spaces closed on August 4, as meetings between Jewish and Muslim notables took place, presumably in an attempt to avert an impending crisis. Lellouche and the Grand Rabbi of Constantine both asked the Jewish population to remain calm and not respond to provocations. Bendjelloul and Ben Badis spoke together in the evening, also asking for calm while remarking that Jews profited from being citizens and had provoked Muslims.

Jewish and Muslim leaders called for peace, although they underestimated the ability (and will) of authorities to maintain order. On the morning of August 5, a crowd gathered to hear Bendjelloul speak when rumors spread that the FEMC leader had been assassinated. Cole suggests that active provocateurs--possibly led by El Maadi, whose unit (the Third Zouaves) was called to Constantine early on August 4--were likely behind the rumors, as they sought to escalate tensions and provoke more unrest (p. 207). Furious at Bendjelloul's supposed death, marchers made their way to the European section of the city, which contained many Jewish-owned businesses and residences. While Bendjelloul himself was at a public square and attempted to save several of the businesses from damage and looting, conditions deteriorated as leaders, police, and the military lost control of the streets. Many Jewish businesses were attacked, burned, and pillaged.

It was during this time at the height of the riot, between 11:00 a.m. and 1:00 p.m., that most of the murders occurred, all on streets in close proximity to one another. The location and timing of the killings suggest that a small group of men likely committed the violence; it is doubtful that the killings were a spontaneous response to rumors. The most gruesome murders took place at two apartments and one business where attackers killed family members who attempted to hide from the nearby riots. Most of the sixteen victims had their throats slit, including four children under ten years of age. Witnesses placed El Maadi at the scene of one of the apartments. Of the twenty-five Jewish people killed, twenty were murdered in close proximity in the same manner. For these reasons, the police originally believed that a "gang of throat slitters" was responsible for the killings. By 4:00 pm, soldiers and police reestablished order, aided by a shift in orders that allowed security services to carry live cartridges, which up to that point had been forbidden. At the end of the day, more than 200 Jewish-owned businesses had been damaged and looted as fires burned until the next day. While Jewish leaders insisted that the violence was a premeditated plot, a major government report from October 1934 placed blame primarily on Muslims and to a lesser extent on Jews. Cole explains: "Rather than acknowledging that the atmosphere of tension between *Israélites* and *indigènes* might have had something to do with the political arrangements made by the colonial regime, the report preferred references to an atavistic antisemitism on the part of the Muslim population inflamed by the Jews' apparent ability to manipulate the colonial order for their benefit" (p. 161).

Part four, "Making the Riot Algerian," analyzes how French authorities took control of the investigation, sidelining local authorities (who believed in a plot), in order to frame the riots in a way that would absolve "France" of any responsibility. As the Jewish community lived in terror and sought to bring the perpetrators to justice, Muslims found themselves blamed en masse for violence that French authorities claimed was representative of a barbaric past that existed before the French arrived in Algeria. The Croix de feu benefitted from the violence, as its antisemitism and calls for an authoritarian government gained credence among the settler community. For them, the violence was the inevitable result of a Republic that was controlled by Jews and too willing to acquiesce to Muslim demands for reform.

Even though local police focused on specific people and motives for the murders (rather than blaming the violence on a population's religious fanaticism), the investigation experienced missteps such as leaks and confessions coerced through torture that allowed metropolitan French officials and the Governor-General's office to take control of it. After this shift in investigatory oversight, Constantine police treated each murder site as a separate investigation, created distinct suspect lists for each location, and made new arrests. Their previous belief that the murders were coordinated and part of a provocation/counter-provocation cycle did not come up at the trials that took place in 1935 and 1936. El Maadi, who was at the most notorious crime scene, and whose unit was present at some of the key moments of provocation, was never tried for his role. Instead, documentation that included proof of El Maadi's participation was removed from official reports and witnesses that might have testified about the role of the Third Zouaves were never called at trial. Moreover, El Maadi's involvement in far right political violence continued, as he was involved in assassinations in France in 1937 as a part of the Cagoule. During this investigation, Parisian Police referred to him as an agitator at the Constantine "pogrom;" it was seemingly common knowledge that El Maadi played a critical role in the violence. In 1943, El Maadi published a manifesto calling for a Eurafican fascist alliance whereby the French would assert their dominance by eradicating any Jewish influence. The "pogroms" of Constantine, El Maadi wrote, were carried out with cries of "Vive la France." For El Maadi, and many French fascists like him, antisemitism was inextricably intertwined with French nationalism.

The conclusions of *Lethal Provocation* are, in some ways, just the beginning of understanding the tragic violence of August 1934 and its broader context. Cole ends the book by asking if El Maadi played a critical role in the provocations and murders, and French officials subsequently covered up his role in them, who was El Maadi working for? The opportunistic Constantine mayor who shifted alliances when it suited him? Other powerful figures in Constantine's political and economic establishment who sought to bolster French power? While El Maadi always acted as part of a network, only the discovery of new archival evidence will allow historians to answer these essential questions. In the meantime, *Lethal Provocation* has done admirable detective work in shedding light on the brutal realities of the politics of the French colonial order and one of the most important outbreaks of anti-Jewish violence in French history.

#### NOTES:

[1] See, for example, Ethan Katz, *The Burdens of Brotherhood: Jews and Muslims from North Africa to France* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015).

[2] Aaron Freundsuh, *The Courtesan and the Gigolo: The Murders in the Rue Montaigne and the Dark Side of Empire in Nineteenth-Century Paris* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017); Sarah Maza, *Violette Nozière: A Story of Murder in 1930s Paris* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011); Gayle K. Brunelle and Annette Finley-Croswhite, *Murder in the Metro: Laetitia Toureaux and the Cagoule in 1930s France* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2010).

[3] Kevin Passmore, *The Right in France from the Third Republic to Vichy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

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ISSN 1553-9172