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Alain Ruscio, *Les communistes et l'Algérie : Des origines à la guerre d'indépendance, 1920-1962*. Paris : La Découverte, 2019. 633 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. 28.00 € (pb). ISBN 9782348036484; 18.99 € (eb.). ISBN 9782348042478.

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Despite the countless volumes on the Parti communiste français (PCF) founded in December 1920, few have addressed its stance on the Algerian war of independence (1954–62) led by the Front de Libération Nationale (FLN), or its relationship with the tiny Parti communiste algérien (PCA) it helped launch in October 1936. The 1970s saw a flurry of research on the PCA, but scholarly interest declined thereafter.^[1] However, the past decade has seen renewed attention to left-wing movements in Algeria.^[2] Alain Ruscio's lively study of communism in France and Algeria, based on detailed archival research and numerous interviews, is a very welcome addition to this literature.

As in other countries, the end of the Cold War and the opening of the Communist International (Comintern) Archives sparked renewed interest in communism in France and Algeria. This newly accessible empirical material stimulated diverse research questions and fresh approaches to communist history. Until then, most analyses of communism used a center-periphery framework in which the Soviet center dominated its national sections on the communist periphery. This international structure is still historically important, but it has been challenged, both by scholars focusing on communism from below and those presenting nuanced perspectives of center-periphery relations that show how communists contested and adapted Comintern policies that clashed with national and local conditions. Research on communism no longer concentrates primarily on party politics and ideological conflicts. It also explores how communism was shaped by and reshaped social relations and ways of living, penetrating intellectual, cultural and sporting life. Moreover, recent research has shown how the dynamics between metropolises and their colonies influenced communist movements in colonized areas. *Les communistes et l'Algérie* accents these metropole-colony dynamics, rather than center-periphery relations with Moscow.

Ruscio's decision to write this book was sparked by a public commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of the 17 October 1961 police massacre of Algerian anti-war demonstrators in Paris; like other Algerian massacres—notably the May 1945 slaughter of Algerians in and around Sétif—the number of deaths is still contested. The commemoration deteriorated into an argument between those castigating the PCF for its silence during Algeria's war of independence and those stressing that the PCF had demonstrated against the war when no others had. Recognizing the

PCF's still controversial history, Ruscio decided to examine the communist family on both sides of the Mediterranean. The narrative indeed flows back and forth across the sea, but it is weighted towards the French side, with fourteen of the twenty-two chapters covering the PCF. Because of its in-depth focus on French communism, the discussion sometimes loses sight of Algeria.

Framed at either end by a consideration of French perceptions, the book opens with a discussion of French public opinion on colonialism. Ruscio argues that the long history of racism against Arabo-Berber peoples in France meant that the PCF's calls for working-class internationalism generally fell on deaf ears when it came to North Africans.

Ruscio follows an established chronology, although the Comintern and its successor, the postwar Communist Information Bureau (Cominform) appear infrequently. He argues that the 1921 formation of the Comité d'études coloniales and its 1924 reorganization as the Commission coloniale centrale—both at the Comintern's insistence—helped promote the importance of anti-colonialism. The PCF helped to organize North African workers in France and, in 1926, to launch the Étoile nord-africaine.

Algeria presented a greater challenge. Although the PCF was both anti-clerical and anti-religious, it was only after the Second World War that French communist intellectuals took religion seriously, as Ruscio perceptively points out. In the 1920s, he contends, the PCF felt that Islam was too imbedded in Algerian society to fight. Thus, it hoped to Arabize the Party in Algeria rather than press Algerians to lose their religion. But recruitment of Algerians proved difficult, and communists faced severe repression, especially during the Rif war in which France intervened in 1924-25, and in the run up to the 1930 centenary of the French conquest of Algiers. Nonetheless, the PCF was the first political party in Algeria to call for independence, putting it at odds with the French state and leading to an exodus of European members.

In the mid-1930s, Ruscio notes, the PCF's anti-colonial stance briefly overlapped with its support for the popular front against fascism. However, for the PCF the fight against fascism was paramount, and it subordinated the colonial question, seen as "la partie," to the needs of France, "le tout" (p. 83). PCF general secretary Maurice Thorez argued that Algeria was a nation in formation, composed through the mixing of twenty races, from the Numids to the Berbers, Arabs, Jews and French. While the PCF supported the right to self-determination, Thorez explained, this right did not mandate separation—the right to divorce did not necessitate divorce. With refreshing frankness, Ruscio sees this as a significant break with Lenin's interpretation of the right of nations to self-determination. The PCF's new stance left the call for independence to Algerian nationalists, notably Messali Hadj and his supporters.

Communist backtracking on independence hit the newly-formed PCA very hard. Algerians attracted by communism's earlier pro-independence stance lost interest as both the PCF and PCA called for a strong union of France and Algeria to fight fascism. The PCA's acceptance of the PCF stance signaled that it was too weak to contest it successfully. Ruscio argues that the communists' oscillations on independence indicated that they had tactics but no strategy. More precisely, however, their shifting stance signaled that both parties were following the Comintern. On the day that war in Europe ended, the Sétif massacre overturned Algerian politics. The PCF and PCA both claimed that fascist agitators provoked the massacre. For Ruscio, this indicates that communists woefully underestimated the strength of nationalist demands born of

repression, reflecting the catastrophic impact of the popular front policy that alienated Algerian nationalists.

The PCF's role in the anti-fascist resistance enabled it to reach a high point in post-war French politics, but its fortunes declined in the emergent Cold War environment, Ruscio explains. It clung to the nation-in-information thesis and opposed Algerian independence, calling instead for a French Union that maintained the colonial relationship. Despite this, Ruscio adds, the years from 1947 to 1954 constituted the PCF's greatest period of anti-colonial activity since the decade between 1925 and 1935. In addition to its opposition to France's war in Indochina, which resulted in a state crackdown, the PCF expanded its coverage of Algerian politics.

The year 1956 was pivotal for French communists, Ruscio argues. The PCF had hoped to overcome its isolation in French politics by forming an alliance with the Socialist Party. Instead, the Socialists won the January 1956 general election with a center-left alliance. Two weeks later, feeling the pressure of the Algerian war, the PCF declared that Algeria was no longer a nation in formation but a nation in fact and called for negotiations with the FLN. Yet in March, hoping to influence the Socialists in favor of détente with the Soviets, the PCF supported the government's call for special powers to do everything necessary to maintain law and order in Algeria at the expense of civil liberties. "Le parti communiste n'a pas voulu sacrifier le tout à la partie," explained Thorez—the whole this time being peaceful coexistence, and the part, the Algerian guerrilla struggle (pp. 350-53). The PCF had opposed the use of special powers for military repression. Predictably, however, the war intensified, the PCA suffered and Algerian support for the FLN swelled. Increasingly critical of the Socialists, the PCF finally voted against the government in October 1956.

However, Ruscio contends, the PCF never recovered from its support for special powers, which led to increasing internal dissent and to declining credibility with the anti-colonialist left. Communist lawyers won important legal victories but faced state repression. Individual communists engaged in direct action, but discreetly. From 1957 to 1962, the PCF became ever more isolated on the French left, seen in its failure to take the lead in the well-known cases of imprisoned PCA members Henri Alleg and Maurice Audin—particularly surprising because of its earlier defense of French communist activists Henri Martin and Raymonde Dien, symbols of French protest against the war in Indochina. By the time of the Alleg and Audin cases, Ruscio contends that anti-colonial intellectuals wanted to be free of PCF tutelage and distanced themselves from its leadership. By 1960, the French left was split between socialists, communists and anti-colonialists who supported the FLN, notably Francis Jeanson and the suitcase carriers. But the PCF remained firmly attached to its traditional methods of protest, bypassing illegality to avoid being banned. Nonetheless, its members became targets of the paramilitary Organisation Armée Secrète.

In contrast to the PCF's peak following the war, Ruscio argues that the PCA's war-time support for unity with France left it marginalized from the rapidly developing nationalist movement, impeding its ability to develop as a dominant force. However, over the next few years the PCA campaigned against colonial repression and strove to form an Algerian Front with nationalist parties. But in October 1951 it succumbed to the PCF's pressure to participate in the departmental elections that nationalists were boycotting, signaling to nationalists that it was not truly an Algerian party. Nonetheless, over the next two years the PCA became more consistently pro-independence. Ruscio sees the growth in Algerian membership as both the cause and

consequence of the PCA's pro-independence stance.[3] The growth in Algerian membership enabled the PCA to confront racism and facilitated its internal political evolution, Ruscio argues. Why should an Algerian not fluent in French attend Party meetings primarily in French, he asks? An apt question, but the PCA had begun promoting multilingualism in the late 1940s with an Arabic-language monthly, Arabic open-air gatherings and the use of Arabic at congresses, meetings and party schools. It implemented bilingualism in mixed-language groups, although in urban areas French remained dominant, if no longer privileged.[4]

Once the Algerian war began, Ruscio argues, the French state went after the PCA because it would have been difficult to eliminate the PCF. The PCA was the first of the two communist parties to support sabotage and guerrilla struggle, as Ruscio notes, pointing to two factors to explain this: first, many PCA activists already supported the guerrillas, and secondly, the PCA acquired more knowledge of the FLN than did the PCF. Yet, as Ruscio concedes, with its long tradition of legal protest, the PCF was hostile to sabotage, even refusing to defend PCA member Fernand Iveton for planting a bomb that failed to explode, for which he was executed. Once again, international conditions provide the framework for France's decision to hunt down Algerian communists. Concerned about Soviet influence in North Africa and communist-nationalist collusion, the United States wanted the PCA eliminated.[5]

Ruscio's claim that most Muslim communists left the PCA for the FLN risks simplification. In fact, once armed struggle erupted, many Europeans quit the PCA. Under pressure from its Algerian members, its youth and its members who had fought in the Spanish civil war, the PCA moved to form armed units. In June 1955, when the central committee ratified the decision to form the *Combattants de la Libération* (CDL), a minority argued that the PCA disband and join the FLN. The majority agreed that an independent communist party was necessary. The CDL formed *maquis* in Tlemcen, Algiers and Constantine and in the Chelif river valley, where Maurice Laban led a *maquis* near Orléansville and Duperré. The PCA had hoped that Laban's *maquis* would provide leverage in its negotiations with the FLN, but the French Army smashed it. As a result, in July 1956 the CDL, numbering about 200, mostly Muslim, integrated into the FLN's army from a position of weakness. It was agreed that they would cut organic links with the PCA but could retain their communist convictions.[6] Ruscio argues that the PCA survived the war as an autonomous ally of the FLN—which no other Algerian opposition organization had done—because a small nucleus of activists escaped the detection of the state apparatus. Its survival also reflected the refusal of communists to give up their convictions.

This thoughtful and absorbing book concludes that French communists were torn between the struggle for daily needs and the need for internationalism—a false dichotomy, Ruscio suggests, because Algerians knew they could not rely on French public opinion. Ruscio contends that the rigidity of the PCF leadership—holding onto the idea of the French Union far longer than did the PCA, for example, and delaying support for Algerian independence—led to the loss of its internationalist members. This is true, but it is not solely a matter of the PCF's political culture. Its position in Europe produced a particular geopolitical perspective, which accentuated its rigid pro-Soviet outlook.

Nonetheless, despite the PCF's internal tensions, French society offered multiple forms of resistance to the French state's war in Algeria and varied support for Algeria's independence struggle—legal, intellectual, propaganda and material—that extended beyond aid for the FLN.

Whatever the PCF's limitations, Ruscio contends, it was the first French organization to denounce and protest the war and the only national force able to fight French indifference.

NOTES

[1] Emmanuel Sivan, *Communisme et Nationalisme en Algérie, 1920–1962* (Paris: Fondation Nationale des Sciences Politiques, 1976); René Gallissot, ed., *Mouvement Ouvrier, Communisme et nationalisme dans le monde arabe* (Paris: Éditions ouvrières, 1978); Jean-Louis Planche, 'Antifascisme et Anticolonialisme à Alger à l'Époque du Front Populaire et Congrès Musulman, 1935–1939' (3rd cycle thesis, Université de Paris VII, 1979); Danièle Joly, *The French Communist Party and the Algerian War* (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1991).

[2] William Sportisse, 'Entretiens avec Pierre-Jean Le Foll-Luciani', *Le Camp des Oliviers: Parcours d'un Communiste Algérien* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2012); Allison Drew, *We are no Longer in France: Communists in Colonial Algeria* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014); Claire Marynower, *L'Algérie à gauche (1900–1962): Socialistes à l'époque coloniale* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2018).

[3] I have argued, however, that both the nationalists' rigid factionalism and the PCA's willingness to address social justice and class issues were at least as important in attracting Algerians. Moreover, the international context is crucial: it was precisely the PCF's orientation to European and global Cold War politics—reflecting the Cominform's thesis of two antagonistic camps—that caused the PCF to cut back its involvement in Algeria, enabling the PCA to call more consistently for independence. Drew, *We are no Longer in France*, 162–4.

[4] Drew, *We are no Longer in France*, 156–7.

[5] Drew, *We are no Longer in France*, 183.

[6] Drew, *We are no Longer in France*, 198–206.

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