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Article (Unspecified)

Gordon, Daniel A (2000) World reactions to the 1961 Paris Pogrom. University of Sussex Journal of Contemporary History (1). pp. 1-6.

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# World Reactions to the 1961 Paris Pogrom<sup>1</sup>

Daniel A. Gordon

On 17 October 1961 a peaceful protest of Algerians in Paris, against a night-time curfew which applied only to them, was organised by the *Fédération de France* of the *Front de Libération National* (FLN), near the end of its guerrilla war against the French authorities in Algeria (1954-1962). The march was brutally repressed by the police, with somewhere in the region of 200 fatalities. Long a taboo subject in France, these events have recently been the subject of public controversy, notably during the 1997-98 trial of Maurice Papon, the Paris prefect of police in 1961, for crimes carried out during the Second World War; and in Papon's unsuccessful 1999 libel action against the author of a prominent book on the 1961 massacre, Jean-Luc Einaudi.<sup>2</sup> This article aims to investigate the neglected subject of international responses to the 1961 massacre.

The existing books on 17 October set it only in a Franco-Algerian context, apart from to note that Moroccans and Tunisians were also victims of police repression.<sup>3</sup> But there are several reasons why a wider international dimension should be considered. Firstly, because instances were reported of the police lashing out at anyone with dark skin, their victims included many non-Algerians.<sup>4</sup> It might be expected that those thus affected would bring concern about the repression to their countries of origin. Secondly, the war in general attracted much international attention and comment. The FLN gave a high priority to obtaining support from world opinion.<sup>5</sup> Thirdly, the massacre was on a scale large enough, and in a place accessible enough, for one to expect a high degree of international outrage; it must be asked to what extent this existed. Fourthly, due to censorship, things could be said more directly outside than inside France. Pierre Vidal-Naquet's book on the use of torture by the French state in the Algerian war, including an account of 17 October, was published in English and Italian in 1963, and not in France until 1972.<sup>6</sup> Fifthly, it needs to be seen in the context of wider concerns about decolonisation and racial violence.

Finally and crucially, a specific aim of the demonstration was to influence international opinion. The FLN mouthpiece *El Moudjahid* described the demonstration's aim as 'pour attirer l'attention de l'opinion publique française et **internationale**'. The choice of central Paris as a venue was partly conditioned by this target. As Ali Haroun, an organiser of the demonstration, later put it, 'Pourquoi sur les grands boulevards? Parce que les Parisiens, les **étrangers**, les journalistes, seraient là'.<sup>8</sup> This was particularly relevant, since Algeria was scheduled to come before the UN's decolonisation committee in November.<sup>9</sup> It was a consideration not only for the leaders. Idir Belkacem, an 18 year-old worker in the suburb of Nanterre, recounted setting out to demonstrate in his best suit and tie, convinced that it would pass off peacefully, safe in the knowledge that there would be passers-by and **tourists** to witness any trouble<sup>10</sup> [My emphasis].

When, the FLN sarcastically asked, would a yellow star be instituted to distinguish Algerians from Italians, Spaniards and South American tourists?<sup>11</sup> The responses of non-Algerian immigrants indicate the extent to which there was perceived to be a hierarchy amongst immigrants. It is worth stressing how, from the police point of view, the category of Algerian (technically *Français Musulman d'Algérie*) was in practice defined by physical appearance, rather than by formal citizenship. Numerous instances were reported on identity checks of people having their papers ripped up in front of them or even shot as they reached for them.<sup>12</sup> Yet for many immigrants, the opposite was true: the precise definitions used by

the French state to define citizens and non-citizens were perceived as a shield against the state by non-citizens. For instance, when police came onto a bus and arrested all those with dark curly hair, Spaniards and Italians protested, 'Attention, je ne suis pas algérien!'<sup>13</sup>

Even amongst North Africans, some Moroccans and Tunisians mistakenly assumed themselves to be exempt from police violence. Moroccans in the Nanterre shanty-town where many Algerians lived took care to write 'Marocain' on their door to ward off the police.<sup>14</sup> In a letter to the Tunisian weekly *Afrique-Action*, Maâmar Sayah, a Tunisian living in Paris, stated that when the police charged on 17 October, 'il a fallu que je déclare que j'étais étranger pour ne pas avoir la figure en sang'.<sup>15</sup> This remark is most revealing of the way that the repression was seen to be directed internally towards those still French subjects; by virtue of being a citizen of an independent state, Sayah felt immune. It is a strange kind of racism in which, it is thought, to be foreign is to escape from it.

Nevertheless, some solidarity from fellow North Africans was inevitable given recent history. In addition to the GPRA's location in Tunis, the war had involved two specific instances of French violence against Tunisia that left a legacy of bitterness. In February 1958 the French airforce had attacked a Tunisian village supposed to be harbouring FLN rebels.<sup>16</sup> Fresh in Tunisians' minds was the Bizerta incident of summer 1961, when a Tunisian attempt to occupy the naval base there, leased to France, was met with a massive French assault, in which 700 Tunisians and 24 Frenchmen died in three days, prompting widespread international condemnation.<sup>17</sup> However, some Tunisian workers in Paris asked why their government, unlike the Moroccan one, was not speaking up about repression to which they were subjected.<sup>18</sup>

In the newly independent ex-French colonies in West Africa, reporting of the demonstration divided on clearly political lines. Newspapers in Ivory Coast, Senegal and Niger gave little prominence to the story and presented the official version,<sup>19</sup> failing to report subsequent accounts of atrocities. By contrast, the official newspaper in Guinea covered the story from the FLN point of view.<sup>20</sup> The difference can easily be explained with reference to the history of decolonisation in the region. Guinea alone had in 1958 refused to go along with de Gaulle's plan for reorganisation of the colonies into a 'French Community' and declared independence under a Marxist regime. The other countries had been granted independence in 1960 with strong neo-colonial ties to France under Francophile elites.<sup>21</sup> Hence their newspapers considered the visit of President Senghor of Senegal to Paris an event worthy of more coverage than the massacre.<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, the detainees' hunger strike, which followed in November, received plenty of coverage,<sup>23</sup> perhaps because it presented France in an merely unfavourable rather than appalling light.

In the Muslim world, the actions of the French authorities naturally came in for condemnation, although there was a tendency to subsume the massacre under the general heading of French crimes in Algeria. In Cairo, a rally organised by the Secretariat of the Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Organisation, to mark the seventh anniversary of the Algerian uprising, included a denunciation of 'savage actions perpetrated by the French authorities against the Algerian civilians in France and Algeria'.<sup>24</sup> The Pakistan Times carried angry editorials on the Bizerta atrocities<sup>25</sup> and on the deportations of Algerian prisoners from Paris to internment camps in Algeria, in the aftermath of 17 October,<sup>26</sup> but not, interestingly, on the killings themselves. Pakistan introduced a United Nations resolution demanding political status for the Algerian prisoners in France, but which did not mention the demonstrations. It was supported mainly by Soviet bloc and Third World states, while the main Western powers abstained.<sup>27</sup>

The massacre indeed received much attention in what was then known as the Third World. In India, the weekly magazine *Link* concluded that the 20% of truth in the

'Republican Policemen' tract, implied by police union protestations that it was 80% false, 'is sufficient to condemn the conduct of the Paris police in the eyes of the civilised world'.<sup>28</sup> In Ghana, initial reports bucked the trend by clearly stating that 'Club-swinging French police charged and opened fire on peaceful Algerian demonstrators'.<sup>29</sup> A student protest against the repression of the demonstration took place there at the French embassy in Accra.<sup>30</sup> Hence K.S. Karol judged that, given the blatant western double standards exposed by the lack of formal condemnation of the massacre, 'the West as a whole will ultimately have to pay the price for the Paris Pogrom'.<sup>31</sup>

This comment made sense given the context. The massacre occurred at a time of international concern about racial conflict: take the Sharpeville massacre in South Africa in 1960, the civil rights movement in the USA or the debate in late 1961 about immigration controls in Britain, after the 1958 riots in Notting Hill and Nottingham. In the previous two months there had been major riots against Asians in Middlesbrough<sup>32</sup> and against Italians and Spaniards in the Dutch region of Twente. It was at the height of decolonisation and a time of great optimism in anti-imperialist milieux, symbolised by the publication of Fanon's *The Wretched Of The Earth*.<sup>34</sup>

Moreover, many of the hopes of interested outsiders for Third World socialist revolution centred on Algeria. The British left-winger Fenner Brockway, reporting on a meeting of the Mediterranean and Middle East Campaign against Colonialism, stated that

*I was surprised to find the degree of confidence about Algeria. The decision was even taken to hold next year's annual conference there!*<sup>35</sup>

Conversely, for Francophone anti-imperialists, concern about the massacre was situated within a wider desire to liquidate the remnants of colonialism. The cover of the issue of *Afrique-Action* reporting the 17 October demonstration featured a photograph of Portuguese soldiers carrying the head of a decapitated Angolan,<sup>36</sup> an image which also appeared in the French anti-war journal *Vérité-Liberté*.<sup>37</sup>

As for Britain, reporting was only mildly critical of the French authorities. A leading article in the Times denounced both 'communities' ('French' and 'Muslim') for using violence, reserving criticism of the government to attacking the deportations on pragmatic rather than moral grounds: less Algerian workers in France meant less money sent home to families in Algeria, which meant more poverty and hence more unrest there.<sup>38</sup> The Sunday Reynolds News did so in stronger terms, describing the thousands of arrests on 17 October as a 'BLUNDER' and a 'DISGRACE TO FRANCE', while focusing on this aspect rather than the killings.<sup>39</sup> As a Guardian correspondent then in Paris puts it,

*The British papers reported the October slaughter mechanically in terms of an Algerian demonstration that had turned into a riot, put down, perhaps a bit too brutally, by the police.*<sup>40</sup>

It fitted into a climate of concern about low-level political disturbance; on the very night of 17 October, British members of parliament were debating allegations of police beating, kicking and throwing into fountains of anti-nuclear demonstrators in Trafalgar Square a month earlier.<sup>41</sup> Debate thus focused on relatively minor issues like poor conditions at the Vincennes detention centre,<sup>42</sup> rather than the massacre itself. Subsequent reports of atrocities were reported, sometimes with a degree of outrage, but as allegation, whereas groundless official stories of the demonstrators opening fire had been reported as fact.<sup>43</sup> A typical verdict was that the police were 'guilty of gross brutality', but 'Perhaps...not guilty of murder'.<sup>44</sup>

Still, in what the French would call the 'Anglo-Saxon' countries, even those press reports most hostile to the Algerian demonstrators depicted the police in a somewhat sinister

light. The *Spectator*, while partially believing official stories about the FLN being responsible for the deaths, nevertheless noted the ominous circumstances of Papon's appointment as prefect of police in 1958: a crowd of 4000 policemen shouting antisemitic slogans.<sup>45</sup> *Time*, which described the Algerians as a 'mob', a 'rabble' and 'swarming', also described the police in menacing terms: 'police, flailing night sticks and heavily weighted capes, clashed headlong with the mob'.<sup>46</sup> *Time's* disdain for the Algerians is perhaps surprising, given that by this stage in the war the magazine, close to official circles, was recognising the legitimacy of Algerian nationalism and describing the nationalist leaders as upholding American ideals of democracy.<sup>47</sup> It would thus appear to be motivated by an elitist contempt for the masses appearing on the streets, as opposed to the acceptable leaders.

The *New Republic* did eventually denounce, on 27 November, the 'cold-blooded brutality of the police' as 'worse than the comparable treatment of Jews in Paris under Nazi rule', and borrowed the metaphor of plague from Camus.<sup>48</sup> But the American response was generally poor. The *New York Times*, flying in the face of all evidence to the contrary, stated that 'Paris is remarkably free of racism'.<sup>49</sup> As more than one contemporary pointed out, if the massacre had taken place in the Soviet Union or Eastern Europe, it would have attracted far more widespread coverage and condemnation.<sup>50</sup> This seems to act as confirmation of Noam Chomsky's thesis that the US media tend to play down atrocities committed by a friendly state because they do not serve the propaganda interests of state and business.<sup>51</sup> Was it pure coincidence that the issue of *Time* insinuating that the deported Algerians were being transported in luxury by Air France ('wine with meals') also carried an advertisement for Air France flights to the USA, perhaps aimed at French businessmen?<sup>52</sup>

It might be expected that a struggle over segregation, complete with lynchings, would have had particular resonance in the USA. But few comparisons appear to have been made with the race situation in the South. Perhaps this was because the non-violence of the Algerian demonstrators was not reported, thus obscuring an obvious similarity with Civil Rights marchers. Or possibly it was simply too close to home; *Time* preferred a South African comparison.<sup>53</sup> However in France, René Dazy said of 17 October, 'C'est l'intrusion de Jacksonville ou de Little Rock en plein Paris'.<sup>54</sup> Looking back in his memoirs, Papon picked another example of mass mobilisation, by comparing the FLN's tactics unfavourably to Gandhi's.<sup>55</sup>

The presence of the Algerian demonstrators, and their support for the FLN, in addition to the brutalities carried out against them, thus found its way into newspapers around the world. The coverage received was, however, modest. Moreover, its impact varied according to ideological considerations. It also brought a response from other immigrants in France that revealed something of their attitudes to each other and authority.

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1. This is a slightly revised version of Chapter 5 of my 1998 Sussex MA dissertation, *The Paris Pogrom 1961*. I am grateful to the Graduate Research Centre in the Humanities for funding a research trip to Paris, to my cousin Christianne Saxonoff for her hospitality during my stay there, and to my supervisor Rod Kedward, as well as to my father and my wife Mary.

2. For detailed investigations of the events of October 1961, see M. Levine, *Les ratonnades d'octobre: un meurtre collectif à Paris en 1961* (Paris, Ramsay, 1985); Actualité de l'Emigration (ed.), *17 Octobre 1961: Memoire d'une communauté* (Paris, Amicale des Algeriens en Europe, 1987); J-L. Einaudi, *La bataille de Paris 17 octobre 1961* (Paris, Seuil, 1991); A. Tristan, *Le silence du fleuve: ce crime que nous n'avons toujours pas nommé* (Paris, Au nom de la mémoire, 1991); J-P. Brunet, *Police contre FLN. Le drame d'octobre 1961* (Paris, 1999).

3. A rare exception is a passing comment in A. Haroun, *La septième wilaya: La guerre du FLN en France 1954-1962* (Paris, 1986), pp. 376-377.

4. For example, an Iranian student, reported in *Bibliothèque de Documentation Internationale Contemporaine*, Université Paris-X, Nanterre (BDIC), 4 DELTA 156 RES: *Dossier sur les manifestations*, no. 6: 'Secours Populaire Français', p. 5.
5. K.Mameri, *Les Nations Unies face à la "question algérienne" (1954-1962)* (Algiers, 1969), pp. 19-25.
6. P.Vidal-Naquet, *Face à la raison d'État: Un historien dans la guerre d'Algérie* (Paris, 1989), p. 256.
7. *El Moudjahid*, 1 Nov 1961, p. 4.
8. Levine, *Les ratonnades d'octobre*, p. 83
9. Tristan, *Le silence du fleuve*, pp. 38-39.
10. Einaudi, *La bataille de Paris*, p. 115.
11. BDIC, 4 DELTA 143 RES: *Dossier Algérie. FLN. Tracts à l'usage métropolitain (1959-1961)*, 'Appel au peuple français'.
12. BDIC, 4 DELTA 143 RES: *Dossier Algérie. FLN. Tracts à l'usage métropolitain (1959-1961)*, 'Déclaration du FLN'.
13. Einaudi, *La bataille de Paris*, p. 113.
14. Levine, *Les ratonnades d'octobre*, p. 102.
15. *Afrique-Action*, 14-20 Nov 1961, p. 2.
16. R.Holland, *European Decolonization 1918-1981: An Introductory Survey* (Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1985), p. 170.
17. A.Horne, *A Savage War of Peace: Algeria 1954-1962* (London, 1996), pp. 474-475.
18. *Afrique-Action*, 25-31 Oct 1961, p. 15.
19. *Abidjan Matin*, 19 Oct 1961, p.1; *Dakar-Matin*, 19 Oct 1961, pp. 1, 6; *Le Temps du Niger*, 19 Oct 1961, p. 5.
20. *Agence Guinéenne de Presse. Bulletin Quotidien*, 19 Oct 1961, p. 1; 20 Oct 1961, pp. 11-12; 21 Oct 1961, pp. 10-11; 23 Oct 1961, pp. 10-11; 24 Oct 1961, p. 16; 28 Oct 1961, p. 9.
21. Holland, *European Decolonisation*, pp. 160-162.
22. *Dakar-Matin*, 24 Oct 1961, p.1; *Le Temps du Niger*, 24 Oct 1961, p. 1.
23. For example, *Dakar-Matin*, 15 Nov 1961, p. 1; *Le Temps du Niger*, 9 Nov 1961, p. 7.
24. *Evening News* (Accra), 3 Nov 1961, p. 3; *Egyptian Gazette*, 2 Nov 1961, p. 3.
25. *Pakistan Times*, 18 Oct 1961, p. 6.
26. *Pakistan Times*, 21 Oct 1961, p. 6.
27. UN Office of Public Information, *Yearbook of the United Nations 1961* (New York, 1963), p. 99-101.
28. *Link*, 26 Nov 1961, p. 58.
29. *Ghanaian Times*, 19 Oct 1961, p. 7.
30. *Agence Guinéenne de Presse. Bulletin Quotidien*, 24 Oct 1961, p. 16.
31. *New Statesman*, 27 Oct 1961, p. 596
32. P.Panayi, 'Middlesborough 1961: A British Race Riot of the 1960s?', *Social History*, XVI, 2(May 1991), pp. 139-153.
33. R.Witte, *Racist Violence and the State: a comparative analysis of Britain, France and the Netherlands* (London, 1996), pp. 116-118.
34. M.Evans, *The Memory of Resistance: French opposition to the Algerian War (1954-1962)* (Oxford), pp. 191-194.
35. *Ghanaian Times*, 15 Nov 1961, p. 2.
36. *Afrique-Action*, 21-25 Oct 1961, p. 1.
37. *Vérité-Liberté*, Jan 1962, p. 1.
38. *Times*, 20 Oct 1961, p. 13.
39. *Reynolds News*, 22 Oct 1961, pp. 4, 8.
40. P.Lennon, *Foreign Correspondent: Paris in the Sixties* (London, 1995), p. 121.
41. Hansard, *Fifth series, vol. 646, House of Commons Official Report* (London, 1961), cols 155-166.
42. For example, *Reynolds News*, 22 Oct 1961, p. 4.
43. Compare *Daily Mail*, 30 Oct 1961, p. 1 to *Daily Mail*, 18 Oct 1961, p. 2.
44. *Spectator*, 17 Nov 1961, p. 700.
45. *Spectator*, 10 Nov 1961, p. 656.
46. *Time*, 27 Oct 1961, p. 29.
47. F.Fates, 'La lutte de libération algérienne vue par le magazine Time (1954-1962)', in M.Touili, *Le retentissement de la révolution algérienne: colloque international d'Alger (24-28 novembre 1984)*, (Algiers, 1984), pp. 34-41.
48. *New Republic*, 27 Nov 1961, p. 8.
49. *New York Times*, 21 Oct 1961, p. 20.
50. *Afrique-Action*, 25-31 Oct 1961, p. 8; *New Statesman*, 27 Oct 1961, p. 596.

51. See E.Herman and N.Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (New York, 1988), p. 302.
52. *Time*, 27 Oct 1961, pp. 30 , 7.
53. *Ibid.*, p. 30.
54. *Vérité-Liberté*, Nov 1961, p. 5.
55. M.Papon, *Les chevaux du pouvoir: le préfet de police du général de Gaulle ouvre ses dossiers 1958-1967* (Paris, 1988), p. 207.