

[Heckman on Cole, 'Lethal Provocation: The Constantine Murders and the Politics of French Algeria'](#)

Review published on Monday, July 13, 2020

Joshua Cole. *Lethal Provocation: The Constantine Murders and the Politics of French Algeria.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019. 336 pp. ISBN 978-1-5017-3943-9; ISBN 978-1-5017-3944-6.

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Printable Version: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showpdf.php?id=54585>

Between August 3 and August 5, 1934, violence broke out in Constantine, Algeria, resulting in the deaths of twenty-five Jews and three Muslims. Of the Jewish victims, sixteen were murdered in more targeted, coordinated attacks under cover of widespread street riots. In this timely, thoughtful work, Joshua Cole shows that Mohamed El Maadi—an Algerian Muslim with French citizenship and extreme French nationalist right-wing convictions and connections—may have helped direct these sixteen murders. Despite the available evidence linking El Maadi to French extremist nationalist anti-Semitism both among the settler population in Algeria and in the French metropole, and despite initial internal police reports attesting to this possible connection, it was in the interest of local and imperial authorities to frame the affair as yet another spontaneous, irrational outbreak of entrenched and inherent Muslim-Jewish “primitive hatred” (p. 158). It was, Cole argues, a cover-up.

The real story, according to Cole, is that “the violence in Constantine broke out largely because of the possibility that both Muslims and Jews might be *included* in the French polity on equal terms” (p. 4). Problems of inclusion and exclusion, belonging and alienation in a starkly segmented French colonial racial and legal hierarchy, in other words, were the true culprits, not some inherent Muslim-Jewish antipathy. As Cole points out, the rather exceptional character of Mohamed El Maadi and his ardent desire for acceptance as French highlights that the events of August 1934 concerned France much more than any sense of atavistic intercommunal strife. El Maadi, who served France in many capacities before being imprisoned for right-wing extremism in the late 1930s, thrived under the fascist Vichy regime and ultimately served in the Nazi SS before his exile and death in Cairo. He is a tragic metaphor of colonial identity disfigurement. Cole writes: “‘Frenchness’ was a moving target that was hard to hit” (p. 80). This was true for Muslims as well as Jews living in French Algeria, albeit in different permutations.

For scholars of the Maghrib, in particular Jewish life in the Maghrib, Algeria often represents the most dramatic case study of French colonialism in the region. The 1830 French invasion of Algeria inaugurated 132 years of brutal colonial rule, with particular legal status complications for the territory as a whole and its denizens. While Tunisia and Morocco became protectorates (1881 and 1912 respectively), Algeria was ingested into the body of France, theoretically as French as the Hexagon itself. In 1870, Algerian Jews (with the notable exception of those in the south) became French citizens per the Crémieux decree, and the 1889 Naturalization law encouraged European settlers from outside of France to migrate to Algeria in order to boost the “Frenchness” of the

territory. Muslims (and Jews in the south) remained *indigènes*—indigenous or “native” subjects—and while a tiny fraction would receive French citizenship, the vast majority were systematically excluded. (Cole writes: “The ‘native’ was a category that made sense only in a world where ‘Europeans’ moved about while everybody else stayed still,” p. 31.) Scholars of the region, particularly of Jewish history in the region, have long noted the growing gulf between Muslims and Jews under French colonial rule, due to French colonial policy to “divide and rule.” Documents in French colonial archives typically describe moments of Jewish-Muslim tension as the result of age-old essential antipathies. However, as Cole points out, such a narrative obscures the agency of France in fomenting the conditions of conflict, and its power in framing its origins.

At the time of the Constantine riots and their immediate aftermath, however, the prevailing climate of anti-Semitism and racism against Muslims among the European settler colonial population bolstered this narrative of “native” squabbles. Anti-Semitic violence, particularly at the hands of European settlers, was not novel in Algeria—the Dreyfus affair, for example, had had widespread and bloody repercussions for Algerian Jews and was followed (and preceded) by predominantly European-driven outbursts of anti-Semitism. As Cole importantly points out, most European attempts to goad Muslims into anti-Semitic violence failed. Further, even though Jews had a privileged legal status within French empire relative to Muslims, during the interwar period and into the 1940s, “Algeria’s Muslims understood that their Jewish neighbors were being attacked by European anti-Semites for what they had in common with Muslims, as the despised bearers of a precolonial North African culture” (pp. 44-45). El Maadi was an outlier, but an outlier illustrative of the painful hierarchies and logics of colonial France. Most Jews left Algeria, “repatriated” to France as French citizens as part of the massive European outmigration surrounding Algerian independence in 1962. However, the events of 1934 did not preordain the effective end of Jewish life in Algeria. In 1934, as in 1962, France was a critical agent of alienation and violence. This is not to deny the growing chasm between Muslims and Jews in Algeria, particularly following the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 and accelerating onward. It is to point out that while so much attention has been lavished on Muslim-Jewish tension, that attention has often overlooked France.

At the time of the riots, politically active Jews of Constantine, including Adolphe Sultan, blamed France for its “absence” in the face of ongoing anti-Semitic violence across Algeria, which should have prepared them to combat the riots of August 3-5. However, Cole writes, “the events of that day had everything to do with France.... Adolphe Sultan would have been deeply troubled had he realized it, but his formulation—that ‘France was absent in Constantine’ on August 5—became an important part of the way that the authorities deflected responsibility away from themselves and toward the whole population of Algerian Muslims” (p. 158). Accordingly, Cole seeks to center France in a story that has often been more prominently featured in connection to Algerian nationalism, pan-Islamic nationalisms of the interwar period (with, in some cases, connections to Nazi Germany and fascist Italy), and as a “consequence that arrives dressed up as a point of departure” (p. 165).

With this recentering, Cole presents a meticulously researched and persuasive account. However, this focus also partly excludes from view the wider context of pan-Islamic and pan-Arab nationalism, which crops up only in brief references to ongoing violence in British Mandate Palestine and the movements of the infamous Hajj Amin al-Husseini, the mufti of Jerusalem. The international Jewish political and social world, too, is largely left to the side, with a handful of mentions of powerful organizations such as the Ligue internationale contre l’antisémitisme (LICA, the International League

against anti-Semitism), the Alliance Israélite Universelle, and others. Indeed, after the events in Constantine the LICA would dramatically intensify its efforts in North Africa to bring together Jews, Muslims, and “Europeans” to fight anti-Semitism as well as the creeping popularity of fascism in the region. The violence of Constantine was produced by an international web of political influences manifesting at the local level; it also had reverberations for Jews in the wider French empire.

This story is an intensely local one, and deliberately so, while shedding critical light on France and French imperial practices. Separately, while El Maadi comes up prominently in the introduction to the book, he largely disappears before coming to the fore in the final few chapters. These small critiques aside, Cole’s work is a welcome addition to recent literature on the complex workings of Algerian intercommunal politics and social identities across the vicissitudes of twentieth-century history. It also adds to the historiography of modern Jewish history and the history of the modern Middle East and North Africa (MENA) more broadly. Perhaps above all, it is a thoughtful, nuanced work that deftly and soberly assesses an incident that has been widely politicized in fraught and ahistorical directions. There has been a recent growth of scholarly attention to the interwar period in the MENA region as well as the period of the Second World War—this book contributes tremendously to both and will serve scholars and students alike working on related subjects.

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Citation: Alma Heckman. Review of Cole, Joshua, *Lethal Provocation: The Constantine Murders and the Politics of French Algeria*. H-Judaic, H-Net Reviews. July, 2020. **URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=54585>

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