

Le 17 octobre des Algériens. Marcel et Paulette Péju.

Suivi de ***La triple occultation d'un massacre.*** Gilles Manceron

Paris, La Découverte, 2011. Pp 200. 14 euros.

On 17 October, 1961, a demonstration took place in Paris against the curfew imposed on North Africans living in the capital. Over the following hours and days hundreds of peaceful protestors were arrested, beaten and sometimes tortured, and hundreds were killed. It was the most deadly assault by authorities on the Parisian population since the Commune of 1871. And yet for many years this incident was little known and tended to be overshadowed by, or confused with, the events at the Charonne metro in February 1962, when nine – mostly European – protestors were killed by police. This publication includes a number of documents and essays that seek to cast light on these events: the previously unpublished manuscript written by pro-Algerian independence militants Marcel and Paulette Péju in the days immediately after the massacre; reports and protests from the time, including the petition signed by hundreds of French writers and intellectuals; and an essay by the historian Gilles Manceron analysing the background to the demonstration and the reasons for the occultation of these events.

In the months leading up to the demonstration actions against Algerians living in France, both by the police and by the 'special forces' recruited among pro-French Algerians, (there were some 400,000) grew more numerous and more deadly. Militants and ordinary residents were arrested off the streets, their bodies sometimes found with signs of torture, while some simply disappeared. The Péju text includes many examples of these 'disappearances'. In revenge, police who could be identified as having taken part in such assassinations – and sometimes other police too – were targeted and killed by the underground network of FLN [National Liberation Front] fighters. It was, Marcel and Paulette Péju suggest, the 'battle of Paris,' an echo of the 'battle of Algiers' that had taken place in 1957. When the chief of the Paris police – one Maurice Papon, later to be tried for his

role in deporting Jews during the Occupation – imposed a curfew on ‘Muslim Algerian workers’ on 5 October 1961, the French Federation of the FLN called for a massive but peaceful demonstration. The response by the police was sustained and brutal, and was encouraged by the chief of police himself.

Particularly interesting is Manceron’s subtle analysis of the complex and unstable period of late 1961, only months before the end of the Algerian war. De Gaulle had accepted that negotiation towards Algerian independence was the only course, a decision approved by a large majority in a referendum. But there remained many influential and powerful supporters of a French Algeria, including the Prime Minister, Michel Debré, who ensured the key posts of Minister of the Interior and chief of police were held by men ‘in whom he could have confidence’. Manceron argues that the measures taken against the Algerians resident in France were a deliberate provocation aimed at delaying or derailing negotiations.

Manceron’s principal aim, however, is to explain the silence that engulfed the events and for this he offers three main reasons. The most obvious was the desire of the French government and the chief of police to conceal what had happened. To silence its critics, the government had recourse to a ruthless and rigorous censorship, seizing books, banning articles, destroying archives. The second major factor was the silence of the principal political parties, including the French Communist Party, which could not bring itself to support the struggle for Algerian independence, and the unions, with the honorable exception of the Christian CFTC. It was marginal organisations and publications such as *Les Temps Modernes*, that reported the full horror of the events, and these were consequently often censored.

The Algerian authorities, once in power, had their own reasons for ignoring the massacre: the new nation had to be built on the founding myth of a war of liberation fought on home soil by the FLN forces that united in 1954. The role of the Federation of France was downplayed, all the more because its leaders had been the losers in the fratricidal post-independence settling of political accounts.

Manceron's arguments are well-supported, with detailed references to contemporary accounts and recent research - it is striking indeed how much has been published over the last ten years, in contrast to the previous forty years of silence. Yet if the silence has ended, the controversy has not. On October 17 2012, for the first time, a French president, François Hollande acknowledged the 'sanglante répression' [the bloody repression] of the demonstration of 1961. His statement was immediately criticised by the leader of the UMP opposition for undermining the reputation of the police and the Republic itself.

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