

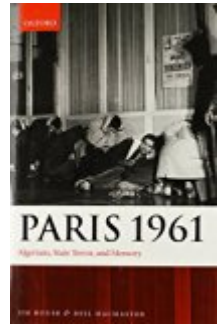
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Jim House, Neil MacMaster. *Paris 1961: Algerians, State Terror, And Memory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006. \$125.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-924725-7.

Reviewed by Holger Nehring

Published on H-Soz-u-Kult (July, 2007)



J. House u.a.: Paris 1961

The reader opens this book with some apprehension: perhaps not even primarily because of the volume's rather stiff price, but because he wonders why he should read 365 pages about one year in Paris when he could read a whole textbook on French post-World War II history in the same amount of time. But from the first page, the reader is drawn into the meticulously laid-out detective story that Jim House and Neil MacMaster have prepared. The authors examine what is now one of the most contested events in French post-1945 history: the demonstration of tens of thousands of Algerians in the streets of downtown Paris on 17 October 1961 that was countered with an extreme level of violence by the police forces and resulted in a considerable (and still disputed) number of deaths, a level of violence that goes beyond the force used by British troops on the much more well-known "Bloody Sunday" (30 January 1972), when the British army killed 14 Irish protesters at a Londonderry civil-rights demonstration. The authors show that 17 October 1961 in Paris was but the culmination of a series of acts of violence by the police forces. And they highlight that the violence also reflected the organisational consolidation amongst the French section of the Algerian national liberation movement, the Front de Libération Nationale (FLN) Fédération de France.

House's and MacMaster's book does more than merely reconstruct what happened on the march, and they achieve much more than the humble title "Paris 1961" suggests. In fact, they have managed to present a thickly-woven tapestry of Algerian-French connective history. The first part of the book places the events and

their memory within what the authors call 'the paroxysm of violence' caused by decolonisation. In the book's second section, the authors examine why memories of the event had faded quickly and only re-emerged until the mid-1980s and early 1990s. This is not the first book on the topic Cf., amongst others, Einaudi, Jean-Luc, *La Bataille de Paris, 17 octobre 1961, Paris 1991*; Brunet, Jean-Paul, *Police contre FLN: Le drame d'octobre 1961, Paris 1999*. For Algeria cf. the ground-breaking study by Branche, Raphaëlle, *La torture et l'armée pendant la guerre de l'Algérie, 1954-1962, Paris 2001*. , but it is the first in English and certainly the most comprehensive in any language. It eschews the hot polemics of the previous studies without neglecting any of the drama of the situation. It is based on an impressive array of sources from no less than 15 archival collections, perhaps most importantly the H series of the Prefecture of Police for the Algerian War period.

One of the conundra surrounding the violence used by the police on and around 17 October 1961 is that it occurred during a period of détente between the French government and the nationalists in Algeria. The authors show that this is but a surface impression. In their first chapter they take the reader deep into the corridors of powers of the Parisian police. They show how, under their head Maurice Papon, tried in the late 1990s for his collaboration in the Vichy regime, methods of colonial policing were introduced into the mother country, methods that had already characterised policing used against Jews in Vichy France. In the second chapter, House and MacMaster take the reader on a tour through the

shanty towns in and around Paris in which many Algerians, mostly unskilled workers, lived. Rather than disrupt FLN influence in these urban ghettos, police repression only helped establish the FLN's monopoly over its local rivals and thus contributed to the creation of an FLN counter-state in Paris that was held together by the informal bonds of kinship and neighbourhood. It was on this explosive ground that the crisis of decolonisation could escalate into a massive wave of violence, practised by police force, special units and, most infamously, by the Organisation armée secrete (OAS) between July and October 1961. It was matched by a parallel wave of FLN attacks on the French police and government.

The demonstrations that the FLN organised for mid-October were supposed to draw attention to the brutal police tactics. While most of the mass media reporting was at first critical towards the government's actions and police violence, a number of factors contributed to the 'social constructions of indifference' (Ronald L. Cohen) after the event. House and MacMaster brilliantly show how the ways in which social memory of the event was endowed with different meanings within different social groups and how this diversification ensured that the events of October 1961 never resonated throughout the whole of French society.

The violence of October 1961 was soon, in public perceptions, overshadowed by the shooting of anti-fascist demonstrators at the Charonne Métro station by the police in early February 1962 and the subsequent protests and general strike. Moreover, the Left, always rather ambiguous towards Algerian independence, preferred to campaign under the banner of 'anti-fascism'. Importantly, the Algerian government under Ahmed Ben Bella did not show an interest in commemorating extra-Algerian events. It was only under his successor Houari Boumediene that Algerians in France obtained a greater importance in Algerian politics. The memories of 'Paris 1961' within the Algerian community thus remained 'underground' and private. They only re-emerged when the general commemorative context of French and Algerian societies had changed, after the FLN lost its monopoly over the Algerian politics of commemoration in the late 1980s and when the Vichy period was quite literally on trial in France (most notably with Maurice Papon in 1997/8). The book's last chapter brings the memorialisation up to the present: it shows the authors' sophistication that they highlight the ways in which the memorialisation of the late 1990s and early twenty-first century

influenced their own approach to the topic.

The book thus not only contributes to a thorough understanding of the dynamics of violence in France. It shows that an adequate understanding not only of French but also of West European Cold War history has to come to terms with the considerable potential of violence of governmental power and the intricate connections between European and extra-European politics and society during this period. For an example that remained restricted to the colonies cf. Anderson, David, *Histories of the Hanged. Britain's Dirty War in Kenya and the End of Empire*, London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2005; Elkins, Caroline, *Britain's Gulag. The Brutal End of Empire in Kenya*, London: Jonathan Cape, 2005. Some of the topic's aspects remain a bit underdeveloped. One would have liked to hear much more about the role of mass media representations for the memorialisation (or lack thereof) of the October events. Indeed, the descriptions of the images generated by the mass media remain rather superficial. Nor do we get a precise understanding about how second-order observation through the mass media influenced governmental and movement politics.

Moreover, the status of the historical semantics of violence in post-World War II France remains rather shallow, as does the question about the genealogies, functions and meanings of the narratives of victimhood that became so popular over the course of the 1990s. Not least, one might have wished for some more systematic exploration of the ways in which thinking about the French nation and its "mission civilisatrice" might have impeded an apprehension of the French Algerians' problems amongst large sections of French society and might have contributed to creating the public amnesia towards the October events over the course of the 1960s.

These points cannot distract from the fact, however, that this book is a real triumph of historical scholarship: it is thoroughly researched, clearly written and methodologically innovative. It should not only be on the bookshelves of all serious French historians. It should also become core reading for all survey courses on post-World War II European history, as it changes our all too complacent views of the Cold War period as one of a "long peace" (John Gaddis) that are still very prevalent. Cf. in German Greiner, Bernd; Müller, Christian Th.; Walter, Dierk (Hrsg.), *Heisse Kriege im Kalten Krieg*, Hamburg: HIS-Verlag, 2006. One hopes, therefore, that OUP will bring out a reasonably-priced paperback edition quite soon.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/>

Citation: Holger Nehring. Review of House, Jim; MacMaster, Neil, *Paris 1961: Algerians, State Terror, And Memory*. H-Soz-u-Kult, H-Net Reviews. July, 2007.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=21569>

Copyright © 2007 by H-Net, Clio-online, and the author, all rights reserved. This work may be copied and redistributed for non-commercial, educational purposes, if permission is granted by the author and usage right holders. For permission please contact H-SOZ-U-KULT@H-NET.MSU.EDU.