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COMMUNICATIONS

POLICE VIOLENCE IN PARIS, OCTOBER 1961: HISTORICAL SOURCES, METHODS, AND CONCLUSIONS

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ABSTRACT. *For some years now, the repression of the Algerian Front de Libération Nationale (FLN) by the Paris police on 17 October 1961 has been a subject of controversy. This is despite the fact that those who have written about this incident are in agreement about its magnitude (more than 14,000 people arrested in two days) and its senseless violence. Yet there remains disagreement over the emotive question of the number of people killed. The recent publication of a study by Jim House and Neil MacMaster provides an opportunity to return to this issue, and to raise important questions about the methodologies and standards of research that have been used.*

The book I wrote several years ago on the subject makes the extent of police savagery abundantly clear.[1] At the same time, I tried to situate the police repression in a historical perspective. This is in contrast to the majority of authors who have simply denounced the prefect of police Maurice Papon and his subordinates on moral grounds.

I insisted that a 'vicious cycle' had taken hold. The deeply racist Parisian police were victims of almost daily attacks by the FLN: 47 policemen were killed, and 140 wounded in total. Many policemen were favourable to the Organisation de l'Armée Secrète, better known as the OAS, the extremist organization opposing Algerian independence. The result was that the police no longer drew a clear line between members of the FLN and North Africans generally. Consequently, 17 October was to be an act of revenge. That day, the Fédération de France du FLN had ordered all Algerians residing in Paris and its suburbs to congregate in the streets to protest peaceably against the curfew imposed on North Africans by the prefect of police.

The curfew was intended to throttle the FLN, which, given the job commitments of the majority of its Algerian members, operated mainly in the evening and at night. It also aimed to put a stop to the repeated assassinations of Algerians who refused to support the FLN, a point to which I will return. Numerous

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[1] Jean-Paul Brunet, *Police contre FLN. La drame d'octobre 1961* (Paris, 1999).

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unimpeachable academics support this analysis. François Maspero has written that the Fédération de France du FLN, though well aware of the tragic political risks, manipulated the Algerian population, 'with the political aim both of impressing the French government and re-affirming its weight vis-à-vis the Provisional Algerian Government in Tunis'.[2]

What, then, is controversial? The central issue at stake is the number of people killed. Including all those who were to die of their injuries before the end of 1961 – and taking into account those whose deaths were not necessarily the result of deliberate police repression but rather of incidental violence – I estimated that around 30–50 people lost their lives. This in itself is a significant number. It would constitute the bloodiest repression in the French capital since the Paris Commune of 1871. Nevertheless, several authors, backed up by various media sources, have suggested that the number of casualties was as high as 300, even 400. These figures have never been proved.[3] However, the publication of Jim House and Neil MacMaster's *Paris 1961: Algerians, state terror, and memory* is an opportunity to look again at the nature and consequences of the police action in 1961.[4] In particular, the book raises questions about the methodologies and standards of historical research.

Throughout their study, House and MacMaster cast doubt on the reliability of the police archives: 'the historian would seem to be faced with the impossible task of trying to uncover the truth through police archives that were falsified in their very constitution' (p. 107). This rather surprising claim seems unfounded. Are there any archival sources that do not bear the imprint of their context, with its assumptions and perhaps even its 'falsifications'? In this specific case, is the historian in fact so powerless that his task becomes 'impossible' so that he needs to fall back on a disparate mass of oral testimonies? A certain number of examples will help to clarify this dilemma.

I showed in my book that, amongst the reports of the Inspection Générale des Services (IGS) for the year 1961, those that have been conserved in the Archives de la Prefecture de Police (APP) demonstrate a partisan partiality that might give cause for cynicism. There are a number of absurd cases in which the IGS makes no attempt to adopt a critical distance towards police testimonies.[5] With respect to the abuse of Algerians, there was quite clearly a widespread connivance on the part of the police and complicity on the part of the IGS. The latter were also skilled at undermining the charges brought forward by FLN lawyers. The files related to these charges brought together complaints against the police from various different sources and were skilfully doctored by the IGS. This being as

[2] 'Et cela dans un but politique qui était, autant que d'impressionner le gouvernement français, d'affirmer son poids vis-à-vis du Gouvernement provisoire algérien de Tunis'. François Maspero, Postface to Paulette Péju, *Ratonnades à Paris* (Paris, 2000), p. 199.

[3] See Jean-Luc Einaudi, *Octobre 1961: un massacre à Paris* (Paris, 2001). The two first chapters of my *Charonne: lumières sur une tragédie* (Paris, 2003) are a closely argued reply to this work.

[4] Jim House and Neil MacMaster, *Paris 1961: Algerians, state terror, and memory* (Oxford, 2006).

[5] Brunet, *Police contre FLN*, pp. 119–20, 125, 129ff, 154ff.

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much a war of propaganda as anything else, no holds were barred. Yet, even if a number of FLN accusations were doctored, a close examination of the IGS documents and other related sources led me to believe that the complicity of the IGS, far from protecting a police force that was suffering seriously from FLN attacks, in fact contributed to a state of lawlessness.

Let us take another police archive – that of the *police municipale* – and turn our attention to the narration of events on 17 October. During the night of the 17–18 October, the director-general of the *police municipale*, Maurice Legay, sent the following message:

> AG [appel général] à tous services PM Paris-banlieue. Faire connaître pour 4 heures à l'EM-PM (43–95) le nombre de FMA qui ont été conduits dans les divers centres d'identification et ceux qui pourraient se trouver encore dans les postes. Par le même AG, vous ferez connaître le nombre de FMA morts ou blessés au cours de cette manifestation.[6]

The standard methodology for source criticism requires us to ask a certain number of questions of this document. Is the text an original? In this case, the answer is yes. Has the text been altered? No. Did the authors of the text set out to deceive us? No, since this is an internal police document not designed for public circulation.

The final question must be: did the authors themselves make a mistake? In reply to this final point, let us say first that the formulation of the order indicates a desire to document the number of Algerians arrested, injured, and killed. Of what consequence could it have been to the director of the *police municipale* that there were ten, twenty, or a hundred deaths? Might the district police services have wanted to hide from the prefecture a certain number of deaths? A veritable battery of arguments suggests otherwise.

Long-established police culture was averse to concealing deaths: senior police officers in charge at the time (such as *commissaires* Jacques Delarue or Paul Roux), and whose word is unimpeachable, have made it clear to me that a police officer would never have done such a thing. It would constitute grounds for immediate dismissal. Moreover, police officers were supposed to have been attacked by demonstrators. The whole machinery of the State – from de Gaulle downwards – agreed that it was the duty of the police to prevent by whatever force was necessary any demonstration that might weaken France in its struggle with the FLN. Finally, no other piece of archival evidence at the APP or elsewhere contradicts the replies given to this particular request from the director-general of the *police municipale*. We can, therefore, accept with little hesitation the figures drawn from this particular exchange. With one important caveat: that this document

[6] 'General call to all PM [*police municipale*] services in the Paris and suburban Paris area. Make known before 0400 to all the EM-PM the number of FMAs who have been sent to the various identification centres and those who might still be there. By the same general call, please indicate the number of FMAs killed or injured in this demonstration.' *Police contre FLN*, p. 205. EM refers to *état-major de la police municipale* (police high command); FMA refers to *Français musulmans d'Algérie* (French Muslims of Algerian descent).

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reflects the situation as it was between 2 and 4 a.m.[7] This in no way prevents us from including other deaths – and, in particular, other injuries – in our final total. Indeed, there were to be a good many more casualties.

We could repeat this methodological exercise for each archival source. What becomes clear is that the police only became aware of the demonstration during the night of 17 October. With only 1,659 men available (716 from the *police municipale*, 662 from the *gendarmerie mobile*, and 280 from two Compagnies Républicaines de Sécurité recalled from the provinces), the balance of forces appeared to be disproportionately in favour of the demonstrators, of whom there were 20,000–30,000. The police officer in charge of the Pont de Neuilly had at his disposal a mere 65 men to stop thousands of Algerians from Nanterre, Colombes, and the western and north-western suburbs from penetrating into the Avenue de la Grande Armée and the Place de l'Etoile.

The vast majority of those involved with the psychology of public order – be they practitioners (such as Paul Roux and Jacques Delarue, whom I have interviewed on this subject) or sociologists – have observed that a great imbalance in forces almost always results in violence and, occasionally, extreme reactions.[8] House and MacMaster claim that there was no way the police forces could have been overwhelmed because they were 'armed to the teeth with riot sticks, pistols and submachine guns' (p. 116). But it is precisely the opposite that appears in the official reports. It did seem that the police were in danger of being overwhelmed near the Pont de Neuilly. Of course, this information is not explicit in the documents: which police official was going to admit to his superiors that his unit was about to be overwhelmed? Nevertheless, we can deduce as much by comparing various documents. A final point: traditionally, as soon as police forces come under fire, they multiply the number of circumstantial documents, often including photographs of bullet holes in vehicles. The absence of any such documents, as well as the refutation of certain officers' claims to have come under fire, lead us to believe that this was not the case.

All this may seem commonplace to the experienced historian. So might criticisms that can be levelled at the way in which House and MacMaster deploy oral evidence. In general, they accuse me of having given greater credence to the official archives to the detriment of testimonies by French and Algerian dissidents.[9] Responding to what I write in *Charonne*, they assert that I believe the autopsies produced by the Institut Médico-Légal 'must be true because [they were] carried out by reputable senior doctors' (p. 12 n. 32). In so doing, they move

[7] In other words, 2 deaths (a third was to be documented shortly), 1,200 injured, and 11,538 detained.

[8] Jacques Delarue was at the time a *commissaire* for the judicial police. He has since become a well-known historian and witness. Paul Roux was at the time a *commissaire* at the Renseignements Généraux (RG) of the prefecture of police (in charge of the Maghreb and overseas territories). He became director-general of the RG in 1981 and then prefect. He subsequently volunteered his services for the Ligue des Droits de l'Homme. In my book *Police contre FLN*, I have cited a number of other witnesses that confirm my conclusions.

[9] Brunet, *Charonne*, p. 26.

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from my endorsement of one specific autopsy – that of Saïd Djamouny – to a generalization.[10]

In the case of Djamouni, the autopsy revealed that he died of natural causes. His death was brought on by a deterioration of the brain, the result of a meningitic haemorrhage. There was no evidence of violence on the body. I therefore argued in a communication with Jean-Luc Einaudi – who had attributed the death to police violence – that 'who could pretend that a qualified and well-reputed doctor such as Professor Derobert would have dressed up his report to please the prefect of police?' I remain convinced of this point. One might, at most, claim that the doctor's diagnosis was erroneous; that he would have falsified his autopsy is implausible. The ethical exigencies of the medical profession, the de facto separation of responsibilities (even if the Institut Médico-Légal was within the responsibilities of the prefecture of police) and the absence of any interest on the part of Professor Derobert seem to me to discount such a suggestion.

But let us return to oral testimonies. According to House and MacMaster, I am of the opinion that 'oral history constitutes a lesser order of "truth" than the written document, although this type of source simply requires its own well-recognised methodology' (p. 13). There can be little doubt that the use of oral sources presents unique difficulties. Yet, despite their claim, House and MacMaster make little use of them. They have next to nothing to say about the challenges of methodology. Instead, they are content to pile reference upon reference, without going into detail about the nature of the source material they are citing (see pp. 111, 126, 133, 135, 174). They cite newspapers, oral testimonies (gathered by Einaudi and others), and make allusion to secondary materials, including my own book. But references alone do not constitute historical truth. With oral sources, in particular, the historian must remain extremely cautious.

A good example is an apocryphal police report that claimed that 140 Algerians were killed during the demonstrations of 17 October. It was given plausibility by multiple oral sources and incorrectly attributed to the Inspection Générale de la Police Nationale. However, I interviewed the member of Maurice Papon's cabinet who was the original source of the report and it became apparent that what for some had become a historical truth was in fact a misunderstanding. The chief administrator of *France-Observateur*, Maurice Laval, misinterpreted his reporter's words. The latter, who claims to have been more impressed by police victims of FLN violence, had told Laval that 140 bodies had been admitted to the Institut Médico-Légal during the months of September and October 1961.[11] This, of course, is very different from a claim that 140 Algerians were killed on the night of 17 October.

Oral testimonies should nevertheless be considered as of central importance to the historian. They give life to a history that otherwise remains dry, administrative, and formal – and they allow us to clarify intricate historical moments. For

[10] Saïd Djamouny was found dead on the pavement in the Rue aux Ours, 3rd arrondissement, on 19 Oct. 1961 at 20:25.

[11] Brunet, *Charonne*, pp. 18–21.

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instance, my interviews with six senior police officers allowed me to understand better the radio communications between the high command and the prefecture of police. They also made it much easier for me to grasp the geographical distribution of police forces – sometimes divided by 'district', sometimes by 'division'. Other officers explained to me the nature and capacity of the police buses used to transport Algerians arrested during the demonstrators; their descriptions allowed me to recreate the inhuman conditions in the overcrowded buses.

The use of oral sources does not, however, necessitate the suspension of all critical judgement. A number of statements made by Algerians detained in the Palais des Sports and the Stade de Coubertin on the night of the 17th seem patently incorrect.[12] Their claim that tear gas was used is implausible. How would it have been possible for it to have been used without causing total chaos, and also affecting the police, the small number of civilian and military medical personnel, and social workers on site? Would these groups not have denounced such practices? In the event, they did not. I am inclined to believe that claims of 'gas' being used were the consequence of the frightful sanitary conditions, the persistent strong odours, and possibly the smell of powerful cleaning products eventually used to sanitize the area. We might connect this to the numerous reports of detainees who fainted or felt ill through the night. But such an accumulation of anecdotal material does not constitute historical fact.

A methodological principle that underpins oral history is that statements and testimonies should be recorded or transcribed. We can thus subject them to the same critical criteria as written sources. The difficulty is that this rule can more easily be applied in the case of 'family history', for example, than to controversial and topical subjects. While working on the tragedy at Charonne (8 February 1962), I could certainly have recorded the statements given by my informants. I did not – in part because of the significant time such an operation would have required, in part because all the testimonies were in agreement with the written sources. In the case of the events of 17 October 1961, verification and transcription of oral sources would be even more arduous. For some years now, doctoral student Rémy Valat has been interviewing *harkis* (Algerians in French service) from the auxiliary police force. He located, for example, the *harki* who some have claimed let off a burst of machine gun fire at the Pont de Neuilly – an allegation today strenuously denied by the man in question. Witnesses are often unwilling to have their statements recorded; already it is difficult to get them to talk. This being the case, even if a historian cannot supply an exact reference to an oral source, he must still apply the same critical judgement as with other documents. Above all, he must not be seduced by a simple accumulation of oral testimonies.

Few doubt the severity of the police repression on the night of 17 October. I myself have demonstrated it in a number of precise analyses. For instance, by studying hospital registers, I was able to show that a number of injured

[12] See Jean-Luc Einaudi, *La bataille de Paris: 17 octobre 1961* (Paris, 1991), p. 191, and *Octobre 1961: un massacre à Paris* (Paris, 2001), p. 83.

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Algerians – some of them in a critical condition – were taking to hospital only after several days (in the worst cases, up to six days). I wrote that this represented 'utterly disgraceful behaviour' on the part of the officers in charge of the operation.[13] Most critics have not touched on this aspect of police repression, preferring instead to concentrate on the number of deaths during the demonstrations of 17–18 October. This is where House and MacMaster focus their attention. They suggest that the number of Algerians killed was somewhere in the region of 108–21 and that this was '*almost uniquely* a reflection of police violence' (p. 167, italics added). Broadening their chronological scope, they assert that '[from 29 August] down to the events of October, the Prefect of Police unleashed a wave of remorseless terror against the Algerian immigrants' (p. 95) and that 'mass killings by the police … extend[ed] in a single phase over a period of about eight weeks, with a dramatic and more visible peak on 17–18 October' (p. 106). The police were all the more responsible for this mass of deaths because 'there was no wave of murderous and fratricidal killings internal to the Algerian community' (p. 167).

Let us test this assertion using hitherto unmentioned sources: the files of the judicial police. These are indispensable to the issue in question. In principle, a file is opened after any suspicious death or attempted homicide followed by a deposition. These files are compiled with professional meticulousness. Of course, their conclusions should not be accepted without a thorough examination, but they are more than simply idle police gossip. They contain the statements of the victim's friends, family, colleagues, and neighbours. These statements are collected by members of the police force and presented in the language of the police but under the supervision of a magistrate, whose work is regulated by a long history of administrative practice and whose hierarchy is quite different from that of the *police municipale*. The original copies of all the files related to 1961 – including both the final conclusions of the judicial inquiry and the various attached pieces (for the most part, witness statements) – should have been deposited at the Ministry of Justice. There is no trace of them at the ministry. Fortunately, a copy of every file was deposited in the archives of the judicial police at the Quai des Orfèvres, where I was able to consult them openly. Two years ago, these files were moved to the Archives de la Préfecture de Police, where they can be consulted on request, in the same way as the files of the *police municipale*.

I have consulted all the files of the judicial police for 1961 and the months either side that relate to North Africans who died of violent causes or were victims of attacks. The documents present two specific problems. First, can we be sure that they are faithful copies given that they have been type-written and are both difficult to read and often have truncated lines? Having taking into account the many potential objections, I believe we can. Second, are these files, if not 'objective', than at least impartial?

I have found some instances of partiality. For example, there is the case of Mohammed Issaadi, an Algerian who drowned on 17 October as a result of

[13] Brunet, *Police contre FLN*, p. 244 (see also p. 246).

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stepping over the railings on the Pont Saint-Michel. He was attempting to escape from police beatings but was ultimately forced by the police to let go of the railing. His body was later found washed up on the Quai des Orfèvres. It showed evidence of beatings and had a fracture of the skull. The police inquiry first determined why the body had only floated a short distance down the river, in this case because it had drowned and resurfaced covered in mud. Since Issaadi's clothes contained all his papers, the officers were able to complete their investigative work with relative ease. The victim was a fifty-year-old resident of Choisy-le-Roi and worked in a foundry in Juvisy. He was in possession of a permit for travel to Algeria, a train ticket for 21 October and boat ticket of the Compagnie Générale Transatlantique. In the days leading up to the 17th, his employers had noticed a distinct change in his behaviour; he appeared to be preoccupied. On the day itself, he was absent from work between 17:50 and 19:00. Though teetotal, he seems to have been drinking to give himself courage for the evening's activities. The presence of alcohol was later confirmed in blood tests. It seems likely that, like many Algerians, he was forced by the FLN to attend the demonstration. It is at this point that the judicial inquiry – thus far objective – loses credibility. With the aim of exonerating the *police municipale* for any responsibility, the report suggests that Issaadi's death was accidental:

> Il est ivre et il est contraint de manifester. Pour se soustraire, tant aux recherches des policiers qu'aux directives des responsables du FLN, il descend sur les berges de la Seine. Il fait noir, il est ivre, il a peur, il est affolé et chute dans le fleuve par mégarde.[14]

There are a number of other files which give us cause to doubt, not so much the honesty of the officers of the judicial police, but their interpretations. Nevertheless, the general impression is one of meticulousness; many of the files are exhaustive in their detail.[15]

It is for this reason that I believe many of the 140 bodies that passed through the Institut Médico-Légal during September and October 1961 had nothing whatsoever to do with police violence. Some were *harkis* or ex-*harkis*; others were members or former members of the Mouvement National Algérien; still others were 'traitors' who refused to obey FLN directives. The latter included a wide cast of characters: former Algerian soldiers in the French army; husbands of French women who refused to join the FLN; Algerians who refused to pay the monthly fee demanded by the FLN; Algerians who were unwilling to obey

[14] 'He is drunk and forced to demonstrate. In order to hide, as much from the police as from FLN activists, he walks down to the banks of the Seine. It is dark, he is drunk, he is scared and falls into the river by accident'. Ibid., pp. 209–10 and 177.

[15] An extreme example is the file on Mouloud Bouarif, who died on 13 October at the hospital in Saint-Denis. It contains no less than 179 pages of close-typed text. Its conclusion is unclear: the death is said to have been the result of an 'affaire politique compliquée d'un règlement [de comptes] entre souteneurs nord-africains'. It is in any case clear that Bouarif was some kind of 'souteneur' (pimp) who, in the preceding few days, had been terrified because of his inability to pay the significant amounts requested by the FLN.

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Quranic law – for instance, by taking to drink and refusing fines or by calling on French courts to solve legal disputes.

I have argued all this at length in *Police contre FLN*. I repeated the same arguments in the first two chapters of *Charonne*. But this seems to have been of little consequence to House and MacMaster. They make no mention of this aspect of my work and have nothing to say about the source material in question. They even go so far as to suggest that my emphasis on the role of 'off-duty commandos' (which they call 'death squads') means that I have partially absolved 'the Prefecture of responsibility for killings' (p. 173). Clearly the authors believe that the Prefecture directed these commandos. Such a claim is both inaccurate and disingenuous in the extreme.[16]

At the same time, House and MacMaster claim that it would take 'years' to determine the cause of death for every Algerian (p. 163). This assertion is surprising. Though I benefited from conditions which might be considered exceptional, I was able to look through almost all the available archives over a period of fifteenth months.[17] With the exception of a small number of cases, I easily established the cause of death for the vast majority of bodies that passed through the Institut Médico-Légal during September and October 1961.[18] Why, then, did neither of the two authors choose to consult the same archives, if only to check my own conclusions?

House and MacMaster seem to have succumbed to the desire to rewrite history. Perhaps in an attempt to discredit my work, they have placed me alongside Maurice Papon (p. 93: 'Papon et Jean-Paul Brunet have argued'). Must partisan history always seek to tarnish the reputation of those who contradict it?

[16] Without attempting to be exhaustive, here are two errors made by the authors. First, the interior minister Roger Frey and the prefect of police Maurice Papon are described as 'ultras' (p. 5), when, on the contrary, they always claimed to be loyal Gaullists. The only supporting evidence for this assertion is Maurice Faivres, *Conflits d'autorité durant la guerre d'Algérie* (Paris, 2004), pp. 50–60. On closer examination, there is little in Faivres's book which would support such a conclusion. Second, House and MacMaster claim that 'from the 5 September onwards over 500 men were arrested each day, controlled at the CIV and, in some cases, interned in camps or deported to Algeria' (p. 97). The evidence they use is a report dated 4 October, written by the director of the SCAA and addressed to the prefect of police force. It shows that, during the month of September, 15,414 identity checks were carried out. House and MacMaster have simply confused 'identity checks' with 'arrests'.

[17] I consulted the APP following the 'mission Mandelkern'. I had at my permanent disposal two large files containing a number of uncut documents. There were similarly ideal conditions at the archives of the judicial police at the Quai des Orfèvres. They allowed me to work quickly: consulting these archives took three days a week over the course of fifteen months.

[18] Another repeated error on the part of House and MacMaster (pp. 9 and 13) is that I am supposed to have obtained authorization for archival work at the APP on 29 March 1999. Since my book appeared in September that year, it is said that I 'rushed' it into print. The implication is that my work is not scholarly. Had they paid attention, they would have seen that I received authorization on 26 May 1998 (see p. 17 of *Police contre FLN*). Moreover, the two authors claim that, in my 'rush to get into print', I ignored a number of FLN documents in the APP. They are referring here to eighty 'rapports de manifestation' by Algerian demonstrators seized by the police on 9 November 1961. Again, had they paid sufficient attention to my work, they would know that I devoted two pages to these reports (pp. 319–20) and that I both discuss their reliability and quote from them at length.

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The reality of police repression in 1961 was sufficiently brutal for there to be no need for unfounded exaggerations. Why is it that, for purely political reasons, certain authors and some organs of the press insist on a death toll that runs into the hundreds? I myself have indicated that I believe the number of dead to be between thirty (the more likely figure) and fifty. Of these, I have identified thirteen deaths that were 'certainly or almost certainly' due to police repression (including those who died later of their injuries), eight deaths that could plausibly be attributed to police action, and four where this seems likely.[19] I have also underlined the importance of 'peripheral violence'. During September and October 1961, a number of Algerians were victims of attacks by police teams and occasionally civilians. The former were either on duty or in the role of 'parapoliciers', whose aim it was to mete out their own form of rough justice. No serious analysis – least of all that of House and MacMaster – has invalidated these conclusions.

It is also time to put a stop to various rumours reproduced uncritically by the two British historians. It seems most unlikely that 'some of the dead were buried clandestinely by their friends and relatives' (p. 119). Apart from a few isolated cases – and even then! – it is hard to see how such practices could take place in a country under the rule of law. And would we not have found these human remains after forty-five years? What is true, on the other hand, is that a number of injured Algerians avoided hospitals for fear of being arrested.

There is also the problem of corpses in the Seine. Taking into account the barrage at Suresnes, but unaware of the existence of a barrage at Bezons, House and MacMaster believe that a number of Algerians, living or dead, were thrown into the river from the Neuilly and Clichy bridges and that they subsequently drifted downstream towards Rouen never to be discovered (p. 165). The various opinions I gathered from forensic scientists cast serious doubt on such an interpretation.[20] Unless securely attached, a corpse will always float up to the surface after a certain length of time and the meanders of the rather sluggish Seine mean that it could not travel very far. Moreover, not a single body was found downstream from Paris.

Beyond simple facts, historians should not forget the need to explain historical events and the chain of causality surrounding them. Before making judgements on the cruelty of the police repression of 17 October 1961, it is essential to elucidate its origins, the competing forces at play, and the motivations of the various actors. If we must make moral judgements, these should not colour our analysis of the facts. Marc Bloch's *Apologie pour l'histoire* makes clear the extent to which our understanding of the present rests on an awareness of our past. Ignorance of the latter – and even more its falsification – invalidates actions in the present. Be it with respect to Franco-Algerian relations or the challenges of integrating young North African immigrants, we have nothing to gain from distorting the past.

Translated from the French by Emile Chabal.

[19] Brunet, *Police contre FLN*, pp. 325–31.

[20] See in particular Brunet, *Charonne*, pp. 30–1.

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