



9-2022

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Leland Conley Barrows

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Recommended Citation

Barrows, Leland Conley (2022) "Book Review: *Mokhtar Mokhtefi. I Was a French Muslim: Memories of an Algerian Freedom Fighter*, Benjamin Stora. *Les clés retrouvées: Une enfance juive à Constantine*," *Comparative Civilizations Review*: Vol. 87: No. 87, Article 12.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr/vol87/iss87/12>

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Mokhtar Mokhtefi. *I Was a French Muslim: Memories of an Algerian Freedom Fighter.*

**Translated from the French and with an Introduction by Elaine Mokhtefi
New York: Other Press, 2021.**

**Benjamin Stora. *Les clés retrouvées: Une enfance juive à Constantine.*
Paris: Flammarion, 2016.**

Reviewed by Leland Conley Barrows

If one were to choose two words to characterize the books under review, they would be *ambiguity* and *nostalgia*. Both are personal reflections of how the final years of French-ruled Algeria affected the authors.

Mokhtar Mokhtefi (1935-2015) was an Algerian Muslim freedom fighter who, in 1956, having completed high school at the Lycée Aumale in Constantine, enlisted in the National Liberation Army (ALN) of Algeria. We follow his story from early childhood in Berroughaia, a small town south of Algiers, to his re-entry into Algeria from Tunisia in July 1962, just as Algeria achieved independence.

Benjamin Stora (1950-) is a distinguished French historian of Algerian Jewish origin, born in Constantine, whose family was more or less constrained to settle in France in June 1962. They, like most Algerian Sephardic Jews had roots in North Africa going back hundreds of years, but the Crémieux Decree of 1870 had made them, willing or not, full French citizens. Thus their fate in 1962, exodus to France, was the same as that of the million or so European settlers (*pieds noirs*).

Both authors — native Algerians — are writing from exile. In Mokhtefi's case, exile is more of the classic sort. He left, disillusioned, twelve years after Algerian independence, having occupied positions of importance in his country. Stora left Algeria as a child but has devoted his whole life to a scholarly career that has linked him permanently to his Algerian Jewish French roots. He is the premier historian of the French-Jewish-Algerian relationship, having written or edited some thirty books and many articles on the shared history of this relationship. Indeed, in July 2020, Stora submitted his *Rapport sur les questions mémorielles portant sur la colonisation et la guerre d'Algérie* [Report on Memorial Questions Regarding Colonization and the Algerian War] to French President Emmanuel Macron who had commissioned it. He later published the report as *France-Algérie: les passions douloureuses* (Paris: Albin-Michel, 2021). Macron intended the report and the book to guide him in furthering reconciliation between France and Algeria — this more than half a century after the end of the Algerian War of Independence.

Both authors are nostalgic about *Algérie française*. Stora describes a happy childhood in the older, Muslim/Jewish neighborhood of Constantine. He reminds his readers of the synagogues of the city, the celebration of various Jewish holidays, the food, the rituals, as well as his early schooling in the neighborhood public school. He indicates that Muslims and Jews lived in close proximity in this part of Constantine, that the *shabbat goy* would be a Muslim. And he evokes the bilingualism, French and Arabic, of his parents' generation and of his own while pointing out that his maternal grandmother spoke only Arabic. And he presents the European population of Constantine as living on and to the south of the Coudiat Plateau, separate from the Muslims and the Jews — by custom, however, not by law.

Mokhtefi's nostalgia is of a different sort given that at age 21 after mastering the French language, becoming imbued with French culture, and acquiring a French high school education he took up arms against France. He had already developed a love for French literature and the French language that he came to speak and write better than his native Arabic. He was particularly attracted to Victor Hugo. Later, as a communications specialist in the ALN stationed in Oudja, Morocco, and required to live in a dormitory with no access to radio or newspapers, he recited the poems of Verlaine, Victor Hugo, and Lamartine to himself (p. 320). French civic education with its emphasis on "*liberté, égalité, fraternité*" inspired him but also made him increasingly aware of the contradictions between the egalitarian ideology of republican France and the unequal situation of most of the Muslim population of Algeria — French subjects, not full citizens. The more he progressed in terms of his French education, the more he found the contradictions intolerable. But then, once in the ALN and playing an important role in the Signal Corps that he had helped to set up, he began to realize that the new Algeria might not be what he and many others had expected, a secular, multi-ethnic and multi-lingual republic, not an Islamic, Arabized quasi-military dictatorship. Throughout his book, his memoir, he reminds the reader of what could have been but was not.

Stora, who never questions his Frenchness, is nevertheless very conscious of the Berber origins of the Algerian Jewish community. He points out that despite what many observers had thought, Algerian Jews, for the most part, are not descendants of the Jews expelled from Spain in 1492; rather, they are descendants of Berbers, the native inhabitants of North Africa, who converted to Judaism at the end of the Roman Empire in North Africa. Unfortunately, Stora is vague as to how and why these conversions took place, nor does he cite authors who have claimed that when France invaded Algeria in 1830, they perceived that the Muslim majority despised the Jewish minority.

He remembers the Jewish community of his childhood as having been well-integrated with the Muslim population despite the well-intentioned action of Adolphe Crémieux, the most prestigious of 19th century French Jewish politicians, whose decree of 24 October 1870, promulgated while he was serving as the Minister of Justice in the French Government of National Defense, conferred, or one might say, imposed full French citizenship on the Algerian Jewish population, thus driving a wedge between Jews and Muslims.

Crémieux, who devoted much of his career to the defense of the Jews in France and in Europe, was determined to have full French citizenship extended to the Jews of Algeria whether or not they wanted it. He realized, following a number of visits to Algeria, that Algerian Jews would never voluntarily *request* French citizenship as per the Senatus Consulte of 1865. Doing so would have required that they renounce their personal legal status under Mosaic Law and, in their view, reject “God’s Law” for the *Code Civil*. Crémieux came to understand that they would not reject a change in status if it were imposed by the French government without their having to request it.

Had similar dispositions been taken for the Muslim population, they would have had the political effect of turning the European Christian settlers into a small minority in Algeria which, of course, would have been impossible in what was a nascent settler colony. Moreover, the Muslims too rejected the requirement, embedded in the Senatus Consulte, that they renounce their personal status under Sharia Law to accede to full citizenship and acceptance of the *Code Civil*. Doing so, according to the Muslim religious authorities, would be tantamount to committing apostasy. So, they remained second class French “nationals” denied most of the rights of French citizens. After 1947 their government identity cards listed them as French Muslims wherein the title of Mokhtefi’s memoir.

Nevertheless, in 1935 two secularized Algerian Muslim leaders, Ferhat Abbas and Mohammed Salah Benjelloul, informed the French Minister of the Interior, Marcel Régnier, that Algerian Muslims would accept full citizenship if it were imposed on them, but, like the Jews, they would refuse to request it on an individual basis (James McDougall, *History and the Culture of Nationalism in Algeria*, Cambridge, University Press, 2006, p. 92). Earlier, at the time of Crémieux’s activity, the Muslim majority did not have a defender in Paris of his stature and influence, and he himself displayed little interest in the Muslims. When full citizenship came after 1958, it came too late; the Algerian Revolution was well past the point of no return. Most of the *pieds noirs* settlers had opposed any liberalization of the Algerian Muslim status. Some of their leaders, indeed, had attempted to have the Crémieux Decree repealed, and it was repealed by the Vichy government of France in 1940. It was restored in 1943 after de Gaulle’s French Committee of National Liberation had installed itself in Algiers.

So Mokhtefi grew up in an environment of legal discrimination but one in which he, as a talented youth, became French in terms of culture and education while always being conscious that few Algerians had the same advantages as he. The contradiction between French republican ideals and the treatment of the Muslim population of Algeria, the evolving political situation, and the Independence War starting on 1 November 1954, led Mokhtefi to sympathize with, to work with, and then to join the National Liberation Front (FLN) and then to enlist in the ALN, the Army of National Liberation.

Mokhtefi's memoir unfolds his itinerary through July 1962 when, accompanied by a French companion, he crosses the frontier from Tunisia into the now independent Algeria. His account ends with a description of his encounter inside Algeria with an armed and illiterate freedom fighter (*moudjahid*) manning a checkpoint. This individual who pretends to check Mokhtefi's papers but cannot read them waves him through the checkpoint eliciting Mokhtefi's comment: "Ignorance out of the barrel of a gun is preparing us for bitter tomorrows" (p. 399).

Shortly after Mokhtefi completed his manuscript and submitted it to Editions Barzakh in Algiers, he died. Given his frank honesty, one wonders what a second volume focusing on his life and work in independent Algeria might have been. Upon returning to Algeria he became the president of the General Union of Algerian Muslim Students and then went on to hold positions in the Algerian Ministry of Agriculture and Land Reform. He became increasingly disillusioned with the Algerian government, particularly after his American wife and translator was expelled from Algeria in 1974.

The biggest problem with Mokhtefi's memoir comes from Elaine Mokhtefi's translation of it from French into English — not that the translation is bad but that she has slanted it, possibly unconsciously, to the left thus interjecting her own commitments to Black liberation in the United States and radical anti-colonialism in the Third World. She had worked for the New York mission of the Provisional Government of the Algerian Republic (GPRA) where she befriended Frantz Fanon just before he died of leukemia. After Algeria gained independence, she had moved to Algeria where she had helped organize the first Pan-African Cultural Festival held in Algiers in 1969 and then had assisted in setting up the Algiers office of the Black Panthers. Because of her socio/political commitments, she makes her husband sound more anti-French than he probably was even though he was irrevocably committed to Algerian independence.

In her introduction to her husband's memoir, Elaine Mokhtefi compares the situation of the Muslim population of Algeria confronted by French domination with the racist domination of African American Americans by Euro-Americans. There were similarities but also differences. French legislation treated the Muslim majority population of Algeria as a conquered people entitled only to restricted rights.

On the other hand, the strict commitment to Islam of most Algerians and the sequestering of women prevented what might have been a degree of “creolization” linking the French settlers and the indigenous Algerians. The barrier between the two populations, although backed by law, was more religious and cultural than racial.

One irritating example of Elaine Mokhtefi’s mis-comparison of the African American experience of racism and the Algerian Muslim experience of French domination is her designation of a poor neighborhood in Berroughaia, Dra’a Es-Souk, as “Niggertown” (p. 20), a wrong designation even if in the original French, Mokhtar Mokhtefi refers to the settlement as ‘*le village nègre*’ (Mokhtar Mokhtefi, *J’étais français-musulman: itinéraire d’un soldat de l’ALN*, Alger, Editions Barzakh, 2016, p. 25). Dra’a Es-Souk probably originated as a settlement created by descendants of freed slaves from south of the Sahara or of specialized workers, musicians, makers of charms, and the like for which a better designation in both the French and English texts would have been *dar el ousfen*. Also, in the era of the 1940’s that Mokhtefi is describing, the term, “nègre” was understood as meaning “Negro,” considerably less pejorative than the N-word.

Mokhtefi explains how he had the good fortune, thanks to the support of one of his primary school teachers, to be admitted with a scholarship to the Collège Duveyrier in Blida, a major garrison town located between Berroughaia and Algiers. Elaine Mokhtefi’s translation only cites the name of the town and of the school (p. 52). Mokhtar Mokhtefi’s original version includes a footnote (p. 50) giving a bit of the history of the school including the fact that it is where Benyoucef Benkhedda, the second president of the Provisional Government of the Algerian Republic (GPRA), serving in 1961 and 1962, earned his *baccalauréat*.

In a discussion of the political line-up for the 1947 elections in Algeria, particularly the duel between the two principal parties, the *Mouvement pour le Triomphe des Libertés Démocratiques/Parti du Peuple Algerien* (MTLA/PPA) led by Messali Hadj, and the *Union Démocratique du Manifeste Algérien* (UDMA) led by Ferhat Abbas, Mokhtefi’s French text quotes Abbas’ well-known declaration of 23 February 1936 to the effect that he would not die for an Algerian fatherland because it does not exist (p.66) whereas Elaine Mokhtefi passes over Abbas (p. 71) only mentioning that he wanted Algeria “to remain tied to France,” an oversimplification. With time, Abbas too would go over to the FLN and become the first president of the GPRA serving from 1958 to 1961.

The value of Mokhtefi’s memoir is that it gives an intimate and detailed picture of what it was for its author to come of age in the period prior to the outbreak of the Algerian Independence War, to become a militant within his high school, to collaborate with French supporters of the FLN, and then to join the war as a soldier. He describes how in 1956 he took the train to Oujda, Morocco, joined the ALN, and was subsequently assigned to the nascent Signal Corps headed by Abdelhafid Boussouf.

Here he took part in several missions infiltrating the Morice Line into Algeria to set up radio communication posts. Although in her Introduction Elaine Mokhtefi's praises the work of the Signal Corps, claiming that the French could not imagine that Algerians could "invent and actually build a wartime communications network," (p. xi), the memoir itself does not cite any victories against the French forces that the network brought about. What Mokhtefi describes in detail is his training in coding and radio transmission, a number of attempts by operators in Algeria and in Morocco to communicate among themselves, and the brutal execution by ALN soldiers of two MTLD/PPA supporters falsely accused of treason.

Stora and Mokhtefi both hint that they have regrets regarding the outcome of the Algerian revolution that required both, one as a pre-adolescent, the other as a former freedom fighter, to leave Algeria. Both authors ended up in France where Stora, thanks, in part, to the Crémieux Decree, became a distinguished professor and Mokhtefi lived with his American wife in the homeland of the civilization that he had admired both as a child and as an adult, even though he had referred to France as "the enemy" while serving as an ALN combatant. In France he wrote and published children's books in French on the origins of Islam, a description of Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia, and a description of Egypt, among other works.

The experiences of both writers remind the reviewer of a comment made to him by a ranking Algerian official: "Yes, we got our independence, but what we really wanted is what Dr. Martin Luther King obtained for African-Americans."