

Historicizing the Constantine riots, 1934: crossed perspectives

Responsable

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Mercredi 12 juillet 2023
14h30-16h30
Salle Déméter 006

Intervenants

Joshua Cole
(Université du Michigan)

Avner Ofrath
(Université de Brême)

Yuval Tal
(Université hébraïque
de Jérusalem)

Résumé de l'atelier

This panel aims to bring together the most recent international works on the Constantine riots of August 1934, greatly renewing our knowledge of these events. Each paper addresses the question of the meaning and significance of these riots, which left 28 people dead, including 25 Jews, from its own perspective, emphasizing the role of different factors: the importance of the colonial far right, the escalation of the conflict in Palestine, and the class antagonism between Jews and Muslims. It also draws into different historiographies: French and colonial history, Middle-Eastern and transnational history, social and economic history. In doing so, the panel offers a rare opportunity to discuss these hypotheses together, and to address broader questions such as the scope of anti-Semitism in the Arab world in the interwar period.

Programme

Joshua Cole

The Constantine Murders of 1934: Provocation and Antisemitism in Interwar French Algeria

This talk will be based on my 2019 book *Lethal Provocation: The Constantine Murders and the Politics of French Algeria* (Cornell University Press). Part murder mystery, part social history of political violence, *Lethal Provocation* is a forensic examination of the deadliest peacetime episode of anti-Jewish violence in modern French history. It reconstructs the 1934 riots in Constantine, Algeria, in which tensions between Muslims and Jews were aggravated by right-wing extremists, resulting in the deaths of twenty-eight people.

Animating the unrest was Mohamed El Maadi, a soldier in the French army. Later a member of a notorious French nationalist group that threatened insurrection in the late 1930s, El Maadi became an enthusiastic supporter of France's Vichy regime in World War II, and finished his career in the German SS. The book cracks the "cold case" of El Maadi's participation in the events, revealing both his presence at the scene and his motives in provoking violence at a moment when the French government was debating the rights of Muslims in Algeria. Local police and authorities came to know about the role of provocation in the unrest and killings and purposely hid the truth during the investigation that followed. *Lethal Provocation* brings into high relief the cruelty of social relations in the decades before the war for Algerian independence.

This reconstruction of the events of August 1934 in Constantine is based on documents in seven different archives in France: Archives nationales

d'outre-mer, Archives nationales de France, Archives de la Préfecture de Police, Service historique de la Défense, Archives de l'Alliance israélite universelle, Archives du consistoire de France, and the Bibliothèque de documentation internationale contemporaine.

Lethal Provocation has received several book prizes, including a National Jewish Book Award from the Jewish Book Council, the J. Russell Major Prize from the American Historical Association, and the Alf Andrew Heggoy Award from the French Colonial History Society.

Avner Ofrath

The Echo of Palestine: A Transnational Study of the Constantine Riots

How present was the issue of Palestine in interwar Algeria, and how central was it in the relations between Jews and Muslims? This question concerns the very core of recent historical debates on tensions between Jews and Muslims in Algeria in the interwar period, particularly concerning the riots of Constantine in 1934. The goal of this paper is twofold. First, it seeks to demonstrate and analyse the impact of the escalating conflict in Palestine on Jewish-Muslim relations in Algeria between the communal violence of 1929 in Palestine and the 1934 riots in Constantine. Second, it shows that the shock and anxieties caused by the Constantine riots – alongside other factors – led to a significant shift and a growing interest in developments in Palestine amongst Algerian Jews. Whilst leading Muslim and Jewish figures in Algeria sought to forge and publicly stage amicable relations, the issue of Palestine forced itself upon them as the conflict there escalated, increasingly straining their conversations on a common future in a shared homeland. Drawing on press articles in French and Arabic, reports and material collected by police agents, and sources from the archives of the Alliance israélite universelle (AIU), the paper traces the impact of news reports, rumours, and fundraising campaigns around the conflict in Palestine on how Jews and Muslims in Algeria viewed each other. While by no means ignoring local factors – campaigns for citizenship, far-right settler anti-Semitism, or the crises of the Third Republic – this paper argues that as violence in Palestine spiralled, partition plans were formulated, and Nazi persecution in Europe worsened, the very promise of common citizenship challenged the rapidly shifting horizons of solidarity and belonging.

Yuval Tal

From Class Resentment to Ethnic Violence: Jewish-Muslim Consumer Relations in Colonial Constantine

This paper explores the development in colonial Constantine of ethno-class resentment between workingclass Muslims and Jews. It shows how, in the 1920s and 1930s, material and status hierarchies created class antagonism between the two groups, which turned in sites of consumption into inter-communal violence. Muslims resented the fact that Jews were given social opportunities that were structurally denied to them. Jews were anxious to preserve their slightly elevated yet extremely fragile social conditions. This ethno-class antagonism went unnoticed in the countless daily interactions between the two groups. Yet in sites of consumption, that is, in artisanal shops and market food stands, such antagonism became visible, manifested in dozens of violent incidents between mostly Jewish sellers and Muslim clients concerning the price of staple commodities or accusations of petty theft.

These violent incidents gradually eroded Jewish-Muslim solidarity and thus created the social settings that enabled the development of the deadly Constantine Riots of August 1934. The riots, which resulted in the death of three Muslims and twenty-five Jews, revealed that the ethno-class resentment that developed in consumer sites reduced the social and emotional capacity of Jews and Muslims to recognize each other as common victims of colonialism and capitalism and exacerbated in the process Jewish-Muslim communal relations.