
Article:
Eldridge, C. orcid.org/0000-0002-9159-3547 (Cover date: Spring 2021) Algiers, Mecca of Revolutions. History Workshop Journal, 91 (1). pp. 240-247. ISSN 1363-3554

https://doi.org/10.1093/hwj/dbab006

Elaine Mokhtefi, *Algiers, Third World Capital: Freedom Fighters, Revolutionaries, Black Panthers* (London and New York: Verso, 2018) ISBN: 9781788730006

From November 1954 until July 1962, the National Liberation Front (FLN) fought, militarily and diplomatically, to free Algeria from French colonial control. The eventual victory of the FLN was heralded across the globe by other liberation and revolutionary movements, many of whom then flocked to Algeria, and specifically to its capital city Algiers, hoping to benefit from political support and practical training that would enable them to obtain similar results in their own struggles. In addition to the challenges of building a new nation from the rubble of colonialism in the wake of an extremely violent and destructive war, presidents Ahmed Ben Bella (1962-5) and Houari Boumediene (1965-78) and their socialist regimes thus also had to navigate the expectations surrounding Algeria's new-found status as the 'Mecca of Revolutions', to use anti-colonial activist Amilcar Cabral's famous phrase. Employed for her language and communication skills first by the FLN and then by the post-independence Algerian government and multiple liberation movements who landed in Algiers, Elaine Mokhtefi was afforded a front row seat to all of the above. From this unique vantage point, her memoir provides personal insights and intimate anecdotes which reveal the human dynamics that animated and shaped some of the major geopolitical events and processes that defined these decades.

The book opens in 1951, as twenty-three-year-old Mokhtefi boards a boat in Virginia headed for France, a country she had fallen in love with from afar. Once there, she soon abandons her studies in favour of increasing involvement in political activism, continuing a path first embarked upon in the United States when she was a member of the Union of World Federalists. Her introduction to Algeria's struggle for independence and her associated realization of the hollowness of the French motto 'liberty, equality, fraternity', comes after witnessing the exclusion of Algerian labourers from the annual May Day parade in 1952. Drawn progressively into anti-colonial activism and into the orbit of FLN militants, including Frantz Fanon, she ends up working for the Algerian Office at the UN, deploying her language skills to try and build international support for the FLN's cause. Once independence is attained, Mokhtefi moves to Algiers with her then partner Mohamed Sahnoun. The next twelve years are spent living an 'exciting and eventful' life (p. 69) that

sees her employed by the Algerian government in various communication-oriented roles for the Algerian Tourist Office, the Algerian Press Service, Radio Télévision Algérienne (RTA) and the Ministry of Information, plus a stint at the École de Journalisme at the University of Algiers. She is drafted in to help organize the 1969 Pan-African Cultural Festival, provides translation and interpretation services to many of the liberation movements being hosted in Algeria, most notably the International Section of the Black Panther Party (BPP), and even appears as an extra in Gillo Pontecorvo's 1965 film *The Battle of Algiers.* The life she has built, which by 1974 incudes her husband, the former FLN militant and writer Mokhtar Mokhtefi, ends abruptly when she is deported to France after refusing to act as an informant for the Algerian secret police. After two decades in France, the growing racism there prompts the Mokhtefi's to move to New York, where Elaine continues to live and to campaign for various causes, Mokhtar having died in 2015. The book's epilogue outlines the formative childhood experiences that forged the character we have encountered in the preceding chapters, emphasising a lifelong affinity for outsiders, informed by her own Jewishness and encounters with anti-Semitism, and a commitment to trying to 'build a more perfect world' (p. 210).

Despite being a self-confessed 'dreamer', what Mokhtefi's account most often provides is a nuts-and-bolts insight into the daily practicalities of revolutionary politics. Scholars such as Matthew Connolly and Jeffrey James Byrne have highlighted the importance of the FLN's diplomatic strategy, whereby the group sought to leverage the international situation, especially the importance of alliances in the context of the Cold War, to their advantage in order to compensate for their military weakness via-à-vis France.[1] Mokhtefi shows the behind-the-scenes details of the human interactions, connections and networks that underpinned this strategy. Her energized writing reflects the electric atmosphere and frenetic pace of these years, describing a constant stream of activity that incorporated a fair degree of chance and chaos along the way. In the absence of the trappings of formal statehood, what emerges palpably from Mokhtefi's account is the importance of interpersonal transnational connections and solidarities as the representatives of the

[1] Matthew Connelly, A Diplomatic Revolution: Algeria's fight for Independence and the Origins of the Post-Cold War Era, Oxford, 2003; Jeffrey James Byrne, Mecca of Revolution: Algeria, Decolonization, and the Third World Order, Oxford, 2016.

different groups seeking greater rights and freedoms attempted to organize effectively and co-operatively. This helps explain why, once their struggle reached it successful conclusion, the post-independence Algerian government felt duty bound to shelter and assist other liberation movements and revolutionaries.

Those familiar with the history of the FLN and the War of Independence will recognize much of what appears in Mokhtefi's account. But they will equally be aware of certain omissions and over-simplifications. Although she does acknowledge 'fissures' within the FLN, she generally underplays the depth and the impact of these divisions. For example, she recalls being aware at the time of the differences between the 'relatively conservative' Friends of the Algerian Manifesto (AML) versus the 'more radical' Movement for the Triumph of Democratic Liberties (MTLD), but describes both groups as having 'dissolved upon joining the FLN' (p. 29). In reality, the MTLD, loyal to Messali Hadj – acknowledged as the 'father of Algerian nationalism' for his role as the founder of the first openly nationalist organization, the North African Star (ENA) in 1926 - were effectively liquidated by the FLN as part of an extremely violent struggle between rival nationalist movements for supremacy that was waged in both Algeria and metropolitan France.[2] In a similar vein, while no one would deny the existence of a 'racist' European settler community who lived the 'good life' in colonial Algeria at the expense of the indigenous population, or that there was 'solidarity' between the Jewish and Muslim communities, these schematic summaries gloss over a much more complicated picture of intercommunal relations during the colonial era and the War of Independence.[3]

Mokhtefi's views on the post-independence regimes of Ben Bella (1962-5) and Boumediene (1965-78) are more detailed and more critical, especially following the latter's coup in 1965: 'We were too willing to believe and to excuse, naïvely perhaps, the populist discourse of the

[2] On this rivalry, see, for example, Rabah Aissaoui, Immigration and National Identity: North African Political Movements in Colonial and Postcolonial France, London, 2009.

[3] For personal accounts that capture some of this complexity, particularly regarding relationships between Jews and Muslims, see Leïla Sebbar (ed.), An Algerian Childhood: A Collection of Autobiographical Narratives, St Paul MN, 2001; Denis Guénoun, A Semite: A Memoir of Algeria, New York, 2014; Hélène Cixous, 'My Algeriance: In Other Words, To Depart Not to Arrive From Algeria', Triquarterly, 100, Fall 1997, pp. 259-279; Maurice El Médioni, A Memoir: From Oran to Marseilles (1935-1990), London, 2017.

one-party system, the FLN', she writes, going on to note that 'the glory of nationhood was not sufficient to reverse systems put in place during the liberation war by individuals versed in intrigue and machinations' (p. 70). This focus on the post-1962 period makes sense given that Mokhtefi directly experienced these years on the ground in Algeria, in contrast to the War of Independence, which she spent in New York or travelling with the FLN's international delegates. It is furthermore logical given that she was personally impacted by several of the failings she outlines. When she first meets her husband in 1972, for example, he is employed by Sonatrach, Algeria's state-owned oil company. But even though the company paid for him to finish his education in France and to receive training in international finance before installing him in a top floor office, 'no work was ever detailed to him' and instead he 'twiddled his thumbs and read the press' until he lost patience and resigned. Mokhtefi blames a culture of mediocrity in which those less talented were afraid to give work to those with skills lest this expose their own shortcomings or threaten their own employment (p. 141). Yet her progressive disillusionment with the Ben Bella and Boumediene regimes sits alongside an acute awareness of the enormous challenges faced by post-independence Algeria, in particular the colonial legacies of deep-seated poverty and lack of education: in 1962 there were but 1500 university students and 500 graduates to manage a country of nine million inhabitants, ninety percent of whom were illiterate (p. 60). These initial post-independence years have long been neglected, academically speaking, squeezed between the War of Independence and the terrible violence Algeria experienced during the 'black decade' of the 1990s. But the rich history that Mokhtefi's memoir describes, which included plenty of optimism, excitement and achievements in addition to challenges and frustrations, is now being brought to light by scholars, notably Natalya Vince through her fascinating 'Generation Independence' project.[4] The value of these approaches is that they replace existing grand narratives - whether the official state glorification of the FLN and its struggle for independence or the counterpoint narrative of a 'confiscated' revolution – with more nuanced and more interesting bottom-up histories. They also respond to calls by Malika Rahal, James McDougall and others for histories that give due attention to the postcolonial

[4] For further information on Vince's project see: http://generation-independence.com/ Also wonderfully evocative of daily life in Algeria during this time are Ed McAllister's blog posts, see 'Algeria Belle Epoque', Textures du temps (December 2012 – June 2013) Three part series available at: https://texturesdutemps.hypotheses.org/author/edmcallister

period, but which do not define Algeria and Algerians solely by the violence they have experienced.[5]

A significant part of Mokhetfi's memoir is devoted to her work with the International Section of the Black Panther Party. Fleeing prosecution in the United States, Eldridge Cleaver and his entourage travelled, via Cuba, to the 'Mecca of Revolutions' in June 1969. The group remained in Algiers until the early 1970s, securing status as a recognized liberation movement from the Algerian government, which came with perks such as a house, telephone and telex connections, and a monthly stipend. During these years, Mokhtefi provided a range of services to the group, and especially to Cleaver. Describing herself as their 'key to the local establishment' (p. 100), Mokhtefi helped the Panthers navigate Algerian society and the conduits of power, essentially acting as their translator and fixer. Although this work initially co-existed alongside her day job, her instinctive sympathy with their cause and her enjoyment of Cleaver's company leads her to ever greater levels of involvement, even going to the United States in 1971 to raise funds for the group, recently re-branded as the Revolutionary People's Communication Network following the split between Cleaver and Huey Newton. These are certainly dramatic years, encompassing multiple international trips, two airplane hijackings, and Cleaver confessing to murdering fellow Panther Rahim Clinton Smith, allegedly for having slept with Cleaver's wife Kathleen. Mokhtefi is alert to the 'aura of glamor surrounding the Panthers... the admired stars of the local scene' (p. 104), evocatively captured in the famous 'Panthers in Kasbah' front cover of the *Black Panther* magazine which is included as one of the book's illustrations. Nor is she immune herself to the charisma of Cleaver, although it is made very clear that their relationship was completely platonic by mutual consent. Yet what she actually ends up chronicling is the story of a group who, for all their rhetorical swagger and sense of entitlement, seem out of their depth. They lack knowledge both of their host society and of the wider Third World geopolitical landscape they find themselves within; and show little desire to learn about either. Indicative of this is an episode where Cleaver uses a speech at a

[5] Malika Rahal, 'Le temps arrêté. Un pays sans histoire. Algérie, 1962-2103', Ecrire l'histoire, 12.2, February 2013, pp. 27-36; Malika Rahal, 'Fused Together and Torn Apart. Stories and Violence in Contemporary Algeria', History and Memory, 24.1, March 2012, pp. 118-151; James McDougall, 'Savage Wars? Codes of violence in Algeria, 1830s-1990s', Third World Quarterly 26.1, February 2005, pp.117-131.

Communist-funded conference in the Congo to criticize the Soviet Union, either unaware or unconcerned by the finances underpinning his speaking invitation and the Congolese state at that time. As a result, the Cleaver's find themselves abruptly moved from their hotel room in the middle of the night 'for their own good' (p. 128).

Equally, despite the support extended to them by the Algerian regime, in line with their 'open-door policy of aid to the oppressed' (p. 95) and status as a Third World leader, transnational solidarity here seems to only flow one way: 'They [the Panthers] provided themselves with advantages – for them, necessities – that other liberation movements would never obtain: houses, cars, media coverage, visiting celebrities. They dated and could be seen around town with attractive women, both Algerian and foreign. They were highly visible guests in a shaded, conservative environment' (p. 104). All this during a period of austere state socialism under a leader publicly committed to social equality whose own personal life was the polar opposite of Cleaver's. The Panthers demonstrate no conception of the recent colonial past, including the 'ravages of the war or the profound underdevelopment that the regime was attempting to tackle… They had no serious sense of their hosts, of their politics or their reservations, and they underestimated them' (p. 167). This is made abundantly clear in the Panthers' response to the Algerian government's handling of the second of two landings of hijacked American planes in Algiers. In the first such incident, in June 1972, although the Panther's were deprived of the ransom, which was quietly paid back to the American airline, the hijackers, Willie Roger Holder and Cathy Kerkow, were granted political asylum. George Wright and his fellow hijackers were given a less supportive reception when their plane landed a few months later in August as the Algerian authorities kept the Panthers firmly out of the way and, once again, confiscated the ransom money. Incensed at being deprived of finances they viewed as theirs, the Panthers published an open letter criticising Boumediene and accusing his regime of siding with America over the oppressed. This 'gaffe', as Mokhetfi calls it, highlights the Panthers' lack of understanding of the broader political context and their refusal to acknowledge the unequal power dynamics between themselves and their Algerian hosts.

The Panthers dominate the middle sections of the memoir, as they clearly did Mokhtefi's life at this time. Yet they perhaps are less interesting in and of themselves, at least for historians

of North Africa, than for what they reveal about the workings of Algerian politics in this period domestically and internationally. The authorities' efforts to deal with their American guests illustrates the delicate balancing act of a regime that needed to retain its credentials as 'avowedly Third World and an outspoken critic of the colonialist and imperialist West', while also remaining cognizant of its status as a newly independent nation operating within a hierarchical international system and the constraints this imposed (p. 164). As the two hijacking incidents make clear, the authorities had to publicly demonstrate that Algeria was not a rogue state in thrall to the liberation movements being hosted on their soil, while not simply giving up the hijackers to their oppressive home governments. These were the realpolitik choices that accompanied being a self-proclaimed Third World leader and help explain the less generous response of the Algerians to the second hijacking incident. Yet Mokhtefi is very clear that although there were tensions between the Panthers and the Algerian authorities in the wake of the open letter to Boumedience, the Panthers were not kicked out of Algeria as has often been claimed; they left of their own accord at varying points over the following months (p. 176).

Another claim that the book wholeheartedly refutes is Cleaver's assertion that he supported himself in Algeria by dealing in stolen passports and cars, rather than through an Algerian state stipend and limited royalties from his writings. Cleaver himself emerges from this account as a compelling if difficult character. Mokhtefi is upfront about how flattered she was to be his confidante and how impactful his presence was on her. She mostly allows his flaws to speak for themselves via the descriptions of his behaviour. That Cleaver was someone who made 'no sacrifices' and whose 'own desires were uppermost and had to be assuaged' is thus apparent to the reader long before Mokhtefi feels able to render that verdict directly onto the page (p. 194). When she reaches out to him for assistance regularising her situation in France after having been deported from Algeria, he promises to help but never delivers. This feels like an especially brutal, if unsurprising, end to their relationship given that over the preceding years Mokhtefi had 'pressed a lifetime of friends and contacts into service for him' (p. 195).

One of the reasons working with the Panthers appeals to Mokhtefi is that it reconnects her to her Americanness and to her roots in American political activism after decades spent

adapting, first to France and then to Algeria. In contrast to the Panthers, Mokhtefi is respectful the norms and mores of her host society, conscious of 'integrating into a society whose rules were not those of my native country… The place of woman, and of foreign women in particular, had to be taken into account' (p. 29). In her work for the FLN and the post-independence regime, she is clear that her role is to help facilitate their projects, which she firmly believes in, rather than impose her own agenda. As a result of these efforts, after a few years Mokhtefi is able to write: 'I felt like a well-fitting cog in the machine of Algeria's reconstruction. On a deeper level, I had found a home' (pp. 62-3). In many senses, therefore, this is an insider's account, which is what makes it so compelling and valuable. But there are inevitably limits to her integration, which Mokhtefi remains cognizant of. This insider/outsider duality and the shifting balance between the two statuses drives much of the book's narrative. Mokhtefi is enough of an insider to gain a series of positions working for the post-independence state and to be able to call on various friendships and favours when needed, mostly obviously on behalf of the Panthers – it is she who brokers the lunch with the state official that leads to the group being granted the status of a recognized liberation movement and associated support after their formal written application appears to be going nowhere. But it is arguably also her status as an outsider that makes her valuable to the Algerians in the first place, particularly her ability to mediate between them and the Anglophone world. Her insider status is also always precarious, her fate often decided by others. For example, she is transferred out of her first post in Algeria at the Tourist Office 'literally from one day to the next' to become assistant to Chérif Guellal, press and information advisor to Ben Bella, after meeting him at a reception and exchanging a few words. But when 1964 sees the arrival of a new, more conservative director of the presidential cabinet who decides it is 'unseemly' to have an American woman to be employed at the presidential level, she is again transferred without warning, this time demoted to the State Secretariat level (pp. 59-61). A similar story plays out in relation to her involvement with the creation of *Sud,* a glossy magazine intended as a forum to discuss Third World problems and concepts: after a change in personnel, the editorial team are informed that the magazine can only proceed if Mokhtefi is dropped from the team, at which point her colleagues resign in protest and the magazine folds. Reflecting on the possible reasons for this diktat, Mokhtefi writes: 'Why? I never knew, though I did a line-up of the possibilities: American, foreigner, Jewish, female, spy, non-Arabic speaking?' (p. 149)

That her questioning goes no further perhaps reflects the fact that it could have been any, all, or none of the above. Indeed, it is worth noting that abrupt employment changes were not experienced only by foreigners; Algerians were equally subject to the whims of an opaque state bureaucracy in which connections often trumped skills and qualifications. This is not the only time that Mokhtefi references the various traits that positioned her outside of Algerian society, although somewhat frustratingly she does not reflect in any detail on the ways in which these things clearly did shape her experiences in Algeria and the implications of that.

Nonetheless Mokhtefi remains a careful and astute observer of what happens around her, consciously so after realizing during her time at the UN that 'I had much to learn about politics and political motivation, about discretion and the importance of observation.' (p. 20). Possibly reflecting decades spent translating and interpreting for others, Mokhtefi displays a consistent reluctance to centre herself, even though it is her memoir, preferring instead to act as the 'fly on the window' (p. 69). Yet Mokhtefi is no detached reporter, saying of her decision to move to Algiers, 'I had espoused a cause and taken the consequences' (p, 62). She fully immerses herself in the causes she commits to, even going so far as to (unsuccessfully) apply for Algerian nationality at one point and is deeply loyal. Thus for all the criticisms of and disappointment in the political system, the book ultimately functions as an extended love-letter to the people of Algeria: 'I believed in the Algerian people's heart and soul, throughout the war and in the reconstruction of the battered country. In return, I received affection, a sense of acknowledgement and a home' (p. 210); and no-one would begrudge Mokhtefi the 'profound happiness' she feels upon learning, just prior to the publication of the memoir, that the interdiction banning her from Algeria has been finally been lifted. Yet she nonetheless retains the capacity for critical (self)reflection throughout and is particularly able to appreciate the complex interplay between individual actions and wider systems and hierarchies. Together these traits enable her to offer a perspective that, even if it doesn't fundamentally change our historical understanding, enriches our existing knowledge with invaluable accounts of the emotions, interactions, friendships and frailties of the people who did not just live through, but actively shaped this pivotal era.

Claire Eldridge, University of Leeds