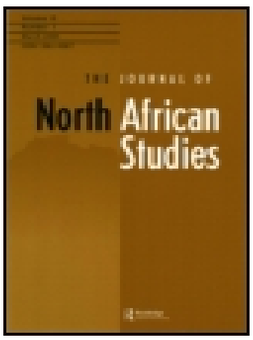

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L'éveil politique de la société algérienne: Révoltes, soumission, assimilation et nationalisme, 1830–1936

by Abla Gheziel, preface by Guy Pervillé, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2018, 342 pp., €35 (softcover), ISBN 978-2-343-14574-7

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BOOK REVIEW

L'éveil politique de la société algérienne: Révoltes, soumission, assimilation et nationalisme, 1830–1936, by Abla Gheziel, preface by Guy Pervillé, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2018, 342 pp., €35 (softcover), ISBN 978-2-343-14574-7

Explaining how and why France lost Algeria was a burning question among historians in the four decades that followed the end of the Algerian war, and in many ways still looms large. Closer to the present, the ongoing debate over assimilation in France seems to have reinvigorated the interest in earlier colonial ideologies. Yet notwithstanding the extensive literature on 'Abd al-Qadir's resistance to French rule, our knowledge of how Algerians related to the new ideas that emerged in the early colonial context remains nebulous, largely due to a lack of works that examine Arabic and Berber sources. Abla Gheziel, in the book under review, studies the local intellectual milieu by investigating, as Guy Pervillé points out in the preface, whether the idea of an 'Algerian Muslim nation' already existed in 1830, or rather developed during the colonial period. Gheziel's answer is no to the first part of this question and yes to the second. As the title indicates, this work examines the interplay between resistance, submission, assimilation, and nationalism between 1830 and 1936. Although this quadripartite division suggests a type of fragmentation in four ideological directions, the book in fact describes two parallel developments: on the one hand, the early resistance movement's gradual transformation into a nationalist force that sought to politicise the masses, and, on the other, the concurrent transformation of quietist (even pro-French) forces into an assimilationist camp that sought reforms and inclusion instead of independence.

These themes do not map neatly onto the book's structure, however. Instead, the work is divided chronologically into three parts: the rise of colonisation between 1830 and 1870, the triumph of the French conquest and persistence of local resistance between 1870 and 1912, and finally the emergence of Algerian nationalism between World War I and 1936. Gheziel begins by pointing out that Algerian nationalists have for long instrumentalized the study of history, reading the period of early colonisation through the prism of decolonisation. One of this book's central aims consists of peeling away the layers of nationalist interpretations that have accrued since the 1960s and obstructed our view of the true nature and extent of Algeria's 'national awakening' since 1830. In addition, Gheziel rejects the simplistic search for a singular origin of a purportedly monolithic nationalism and instead parses the idea of national belonging by focusing on at least four (sometimes competing) allegiances: to the Islamic community (*ummah*), to the wider Arab nation, to the Maghreb, and to the Algerian homeland (*waṭan*).

The first part of the book is divided into three chapters, which cover the initial conquest (chapter 1), the early movements of resistance to French rule (chapter 2),

and the various phases of French colonisation until the late 1860s (chapter 3). According to Gheziel, any attempt to portray the 'Algerian nation' as the agent of resistance during this early period would be erroneous, as no true national consciousness existed at that time. She argues this point by considering the ideas of three Algerian leaders: Hamdan Khodja, Ahmed Bouderba, and Hadj Ali Sidi Saadi, none of whom, she claims, succeeded in arriving at a vision of the nation that overcame its ethnic divisions. Yet Gheziel does believe that 'Abd al-Qadir had succeeded in establishing 'the foundations of a modern state' (61) during his long resistance to French rule. But the ideas that underpinned this state apparatus, Gheziel claims, are much more difficult to ascertain. She notes, for instance, that it is difficult to interpret 'Abd al-Qadir's use of the word patriotism in an 1838 letter he sent to the sultan of Morocco because we only have access to the French translation, and it is not clear what the original Arabic term might have been. Gheziel's guess that 'Abd al-Qadir likely used a phrase such as *ḥubb al-waṭan* (love of the homeland) appears plausible, and it points to a vague sense of patriotism. Instead of leading to nationalism, therefore, early resistance to French rule led to the creation of a competing state structure and at most only 'the beginnings of a political awakening' (73) that rested largely on a religious foundation between 1830 and 1848. For Gheziel, moreover, a 'regional patriotism' (87) framed the 1849 Zaâtcha revolt, while a religious sentiment animated the revolt that took place between 1864 and 1868.

The second part of the book contains four chapters. Following a brief introduction to the Third Republic (chapter 1), Gheziel examines colonial reforms (chapter 2), the role of Sufi orders (chapter 3), and the numerous revolts that took place between 1871 and 1901 (chapter 4). She underscores that the reforms promulgated under the Third Republic served the goals of a triumphant colonisation and further marginalised a large segment of the local population, which increasingly faced arbitrary measures and saw its rights diminish despite the goodwill professed by Napoleon III. Local reactions to this new order remained divided. Like the Ottomans, Gheziel stresses, the French worked to fortify their presence by relying on the Sufi orders. She demonstrates that both the pro- and anti-French camps used Islam in order to legitimize their positions – but neither camp adopted an explicitly nationalist ideology. After an admirable and much-needed analysis of the Arabic vocabulary used by various rebels, Gheziel concludes that 'religious fanaticism' (182) played a minimal role during the anti-French revolts, which remained localised, limited in terms of ideological scope, and generally devoid of nationalist leanings. What emerges from this picture, then, is a society with an expanding colonial system; localised, chronic revolts grounded in circumscribed social, religious, and political demands; and a religious establishment that had mostly made its peace with the French presence. Before 1901, in other words, a nationalist current did not exist in Algeria.

In the third part of the book, Gheziel traces the ultimate emergence of Algerian nationalism. She examines the impact of World War I on Algerian Muslims (chapter 1), the transformation of French colonial policies after the war (chapter 2), the emergence of a Muslim elite between 1912 and 1927 (chapter 3), the development of Algerian political parties (chapter 4), and finally the rise of Algerian

nationalism by 1936 (chapter 5). In general, Gheziel's main contention is that the period between 1930 and 1936 marked the shift 'from a latent nationalism to an active nationalism' (186). Colonial conscription during World War I led to a renewed debate about the idea of citizenship and national belonging. Some scholars have argued that during the 1916 rebellion in the Aurès, the rebels had proclaimed a republic – not as a local statelet, but rather as a national republic seeking to encompass all of Algeria. Gheziel disagrees with this characterisation. She underlines the rural character of the rebellion and argues that the rebels appropriated the republican vocabulary not in order to build a national republic, but rather to wrest power from the French and to buttress their own regional grasp on power. This was a localised project, and one that owed much to the deep frustration with the conscription law, the return of wounded colonial troops, as well as the wider influence of pan-Islamism. The remainder of the book consists of a fine-grained analysis of the many political groups and personalities that dominated Algerian public life after 1910. Gheziel claims that neither the movement of Young Algerians nor Emir Khaled, the grandson of 'Abd al-Qadir, were nationalists: the former did not demand Algeria's autonomy, while Emir Khaled only called for a 'progressive emancipation' (259). According to Gheziel, Messali Hadj broke with Khaled's more moderate demands and championed a wider Maghrebi nationalism. The burgeoning nationalist camp developed in the context of better access to French schools, the experience of World War I, travels in France, and exposure to communism. This trend culminated in the ultimate politicisation of the masses in 1936. During a rally that took place in Algiers on 2 August 1936, a number of speakers addressed some twenty thousand attendees, and during this event Messali Hadj spoke to the assembled as 'the Algerian people' (303). For Gheziel, this meeting and the speeches by Abdelhamid ben Badis and Messali Hadj led to 'a new level of awareness (*prise de conscience*) among Algerian Muslims' (305) due to the explicit, public appeal to nationalism.

This brief summary presents only the general outline of Gheziel's excellent study, which contains many additional sub-arguments, illuminating analyses of Arabic archival documents, a thorough engagement with scholarship produced in Algeria, and a detailed examination of the full spectrum of political currents in Algeria, especially between 1914 and 1936. *L'éveil politique de la société algérienne* therefore offers a fine-grained study of the genealogy of colonial debates over national belonging. Moreover, this book presents a compelling challenge to the nationalist narrative, as it questions the core teleology upon which it rests: that all resistance to French rule during the colonial period contained the seeds of a 'national awakening', which inexorably led to the formation of an anti-imperial, pro-independence nationalist camp. Rejecting the nationalist reading of Algerian history, Gheziel shows that the pre-1936 revolts amounted – in aggregate – to a movement that possessed neither a decidedly pan-Algerian scope nor truly nationalist leaders, due to the latter's emphasis on regional grievances, appeals to religious sentiment, and circumscribed demands for social and political reforms. The fragmentation that characterised these revolts, Gheziel shows, did not ebb until the nationalist bloc's consolidation and its overt attempt to politicise the masses in 1936.

At the same time, some elements of this 1936 moment remain to be examined in more detail. For instance, how did the masses receive the speeches by Abdelhamid ben Badis and Messali Hadj during the rally in Algiers? Did the attendees in fact become politicized? And what type of influence did this rally have more generally, especially when compared to similar assemblies before and after 1936? Although Gheziel does not provide answers to these questions, she has succeeded in bringing much clarity to the origins of Algerian nationalism. In this admirable attempt to unread the nationalist narrative about its own origins, Gheziel has given us a more accurate view of how, where, and when modern Algerian nationalism manifested itself.

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