

France: Immigration history museum opens without official inauguration

A sign of mounting opposition to Sarkozy's policies

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5 November 2007

The National Centre for Immigration History (*Cité nationale de l'histoire de l'immigration*—CNHI) opened its doors to the public on October 10. There was no official inauguration of the museum by the right-wing Gaullist government of President Nicolas Sarkozy.

Above all, the government feared that any official opening would lead to public demonstrations by workers, human rights groups and intellectuals, due to the widespread opposition to the government's immigration policies. In particular, there is growing opposition to a controversial immigration bill that is passing through its final stages in the French parliament, which includes DNA testing for immigrants who want to bring their families to France.

The government has not only tightened immigration laws but has intensified the hunting down of illegal immigrants (*sans papiers*) in order to attain its 2007 deportation target of 25,000. An atmosphere of terror has been whipped up in which several immigrants have lost their lives while trying desperately to escape from the police. On October 20, thousands of people participated in demonstrations in some 40 cities in solidarity with the *sans papiers* and against the new immigration law.

The project for the immigration museum was initiated under the Plural Left government of Lionel Jospin. But the National Centre for Immigration History committee was set up after the huge shock of the 2002 presidential election when the racist, neo-fascist National Front leader, Jean-Marie Le Pen, reached the second round of the presidential elections, eliminating Jospin, the Socialist Party candidate.

Sarkozy's party, the Union for a Popular Movement (UMP), came to power in 2007 appealing to the neo-fascist vote through its nationalistic propaganda and promise of tough action against immigration. An official inauguration of the museum would have been seen as an about-face and not acceptable to his far-right supporters.

In a clear attempt to undermine the work and purpose of the CNHI, the government has set up two rival bodies: the "Institute for the Study of Immigration" and the "Foundation for the Memory of the War in Algeria and the Battles in Morocco and Tunisia," scheduled for 2008. This latter institution figured in the February 2005 law that also stipulated that school curricula should recognise the "positive role of the overseas presence of France." This measure provoked a mobilisation amongst teachers and researchers, which obliged then president Jacques Chirac to withdraw that section of the law. The proposal for the Foundation, however, passed into law.

The Institute for the Study of Immigration was inaugurated on October 8 by Brice Hortefeux, Sarkozy's minister for immigration,

integration, national identity and co-development, just two days before the CNHI opened its doors to the public. *Libération* queried: "Is Nicolas Sarkozy trying to set up right-wing think tanks with obedient researchers on the issues of immigration and colonialism?" (October 2).

The newspaper reported: "A petition is circulating against the setting up of the Institute, coordinated by Patrick Simon, a researcher at the Ined (National Institute of Demographic Studies)." The petition states: "the Institute—whose claimed independence is accompanied by no institutional guarantee—is a new instrument for the political orientation of research which will determine the 'pertinent fields and subjects' on which to carry out scientific work."

The petition also expressed concern that the organisation's president will be the historian Hélène Carrère d'Encausse, whose grossly racist comments caused a shock when she associated the autumn 2005 urban youth revolt, caused by years of government neglect of the working class housing estates, with polygamy amongst a tiny minority of African immigrants. (See "France: Gaullist officials stoke up racism to justify state of emergency")

There is also widespread opposition to the proposed Foundation in scientific circles. Simon explained: "We are witnessing a takeover by the right in general and the government in particular of research on questions of immigration, integration, remembrance, the history of colonialism.... The government is basing the decisions it takes on diagnostics, and it is important for it that these diagnostics be shared by the scientific community." As an example, he pointed out that government figures on immigration, which showed France taking in more immigrants than other countries, were contested by researchers

Gérard Noiriel, research director at the EHESS (School for Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences), and Patrick Weil, research director at the Centre for XX Century Social History, University of Paris 1, were among 8 of the 12-member history committee of the National Centre for Immigration History who resigned May 18 this year to protest against the creation by President Sarkozy of the Ministry of Immigration, Integration, National Identity and Co-Development. They had been working with the committee since 2003.

They launched an international petition entitled "No to the ministry of 'Immigration and National Identity,'" which has been signed by more than 16,000 historians, academics and artists from universities around the world.

In their resignation statement, the historians explained that the centre's purpose was "to change the perspective modern society has on immigration, by reminding our contemporaries that over the past

two centuries subsequent periods of immigration have helped develop, transform, and benefit France as a whole. By accepting and understanding the diversity of histories as well as individual and collective memories in France, by bringing together a history for everyone, including both the proud and the shameful moments, will help overcome stereotypes and preconceived notions.”

They said Hortefeux’s new ministry calls these objectives into question because, “In politics, words serve as symbols and they serve as weapons. It is not the responsibility of a democratic state to define ‘identity.’ Associating ‘immigration’ and ‘national identity’ in a common ministry has no precedent in the history of the French Republic: it is a founding act of the new presidency, defining immigration as a ‘problem’ for France and for the French in its essence.”

The historians added, “The association of these issues is interwoven in a broader discourse that stigmatises immigration and in a historical tradition of a nationalism based on a distrust and hostility toward ‘foreigners,’ particularly in times of crisis. “ (See <http://www.upolin.org>)

Patrick Weil said of the *Cité Nationale de l’Histoire de l’immigration*: “It’s a history of interest to all French people, of course.... I think that...this museum shows the contribution of immigration as regards France while the Ministry of Immigration and National Identity is a sign of mistrust concerning immigration.... The government is uncomfortable with an historical project which bases itself on the facts of history, rather than on prejudices.”

Gérard Noiriel was asked by *l’Express* magazine “why the debate on immigration in France excites so much passion and is so politicised.” He replied: “It’s a long history. From the appearance of the word in the 1880s, immigration has been seen as a problem. Now, we are a country which owes most to immigration, like the United States, where, besides, the opening of such a museum was not so complicated.”

The museum brings out the hidden history of immigration and its contribution to French society. France has experienced a large influx of immigrants for 200 years, the first immigrants coming mainly from European countries. The Industrial Revolution contributed to the increase of immigration to countries needing a labour force.

During World Wars I and II, large numbers of men from the French colonies participated and died in action. In World War I, France recruited more than 400,000 immigrants. Work permits became obligatory for them and it signalled the end of freedom of movement. At the time, the government kept most of the immigrants in camps, separate from the French population.

France lost 1.4 million young men in World War I and needed extra workers’ labour to reconstruct the country. Immigration in France grew from 1.5 million in 1921, to 2.4 million in 1926, and to nearly 3 million in 1931. During the economic crisis of the 1930s, the government did not hesitate to send immigrants home, or put them in interment camps.

During World War II, the Vichy government, which collaborated with the Nazi occupiers, agreed to assist in deporting Jews to Nazi death camps. It persecuted immigrants and encouraged xenophobia.

After the war, the French government opened its doors to immigration from the colonies to rebuild the country. Immigrants paid the terrible price of discrimination: low wages and poor living conditions. Most of them lived in tents and shantytowns until the government began the construction of council housing.

From the early 1970s to the present, immigrants have always been

the first to be blamed: as unemployment rose, so did anti-immigrant propaganda.

While the French education system has tended to hide the history of immigration, the immigration museum provides the possibility for studying and understanding the role of immigration in France and to help counter xenophobia and racism.

According to 2006 figures of INSEE, the national institute of statistics, France has 4.9 million foreign-born immigrants, 8 percent of the France population.

In the 2007 election campaign, the Socialist Party and its presidential candidate Ségolène Royal adopted a right-wing programme that differed only superficially from Sarkozy’s on immigration, among other issues. The SP mayor of Paris, Bertrand Delanoë, speaking at the unofficial inauguration of the museum, criticised the government, saying: “This museum is about pulling together around a shared history and a common future; the government’s policy is dividing France and feeding the temptation of making foreigners our scapegoats.” He said this despite the fact that he had voted for the SP election programme, with its policy calling for a crackdown on immigration.

The mass movement against the crackdown on immigration coordinated by organisations like the RESF (*Réseau éducation sans frontières*—Education without Borders Network) and the UCIJ (United Against Throw-Away Immigration) expresses genuine solidarity in the population with immigrants. This movement is caught up, however, in the politics of those “lefts” who peddle the illusion that the government can be pressured to soften its racist and anti-immigrant policies.

These forces—hailing from the Communist Party, the LCR (Revolutionary Communist League), LO (Workers’ Struggle) and the SP—refuse to expose the unity of the left and right on immigration restrictions, as well as the militarisation on the borders of Fortress Europe against immigrants by means of the EU frontier force Frontex.

As a statement by the WSWS pointed out: “The emergence of a regime as right-wing as that of Sarkozy cannot be explained simply as the product of personal quirks of ruling politicians. It is the collective response of the French bourgeoisie to massive changes destabilising world capitalism—the emergence of cheap-labour manufacturing powerhouses in the developing world, and the debacle confronting US imperialism in Iraq, Afghanistan, and the wider Middle East.” (See “France: The struggle against Sarkozy requires a new political perspective”)

The humanitarian principles motivating the people who designed and set up the *Cité Nationale de l’histoire de l’immigration* and who oppose Sarkozy’s brutal immigration policies can only prevail on the basis of ending of the system of nation-states and globalised capitalist competition, which lead to colonial-style wars and occupations in the interests of transnational corporations, which rely on national, ethnic and religious divisions to set workers and communities against each other.



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