

French president Hollande acknowledges 1961 massacre of Algerians in Paris

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On the 51st anniversary of the police massacre of hundreds of unarmed Algerian protesters in Paris, French Socialist Party (PS) president François Hollande offered the first official recognition by the French government that the massacre actually occurred.

His brief communiqué stated: “On October 17, 1961, Algerians who were demonstrating for the right to independence were killed in an act of bloody repression. The Republic recognizes lucidly these facts. Fifty-one years after the tragedy, I pay tribute to the memory of the victims.”

The massacre took place during Algeria’s war for independence against France, when the Algerian National Liberation Front (FLN) called a peaceful protest in Paris against a curfew for “Muslim Algerians” imposed by then-President Charles de Gaulle. Some 30,000 Algerians marched. They were attacked by police under the orders of Paris prefect Maurice Papon, a former official in France’s fascist Vichy regime who played a major role in the deportation of Jews to Nazi Germany during World War II.

Large numbers of Algerian demonstrators, who had come to a peaceful protest with their entire families, were murdered--shot, drowned in the Seine River, or beaten to death. The exact number of victims is unknown, as police archives have not been made public, a key demand of victims’ relatives and survivors of the massacre. Historian Jean-Luc Einodi, who wrote *La Bataille de Paris (The Battle of Paris)* about the massacre, estimates the death toll at 250, though Papon’s absurd tally of 3 dead and 64 wounded still stands as the French state’s official toll. (French filmmaker Alain Tasma made a moving film in 2005, *Nuit noire (October 17, 1961)*, about the incident.)

Police arrested 11,538 demonstrators and detained

them in locations throughout Paris, including the *Vél D’Hiv* cycling stadium--where, 19 years before, Paris police under the orders of René Bousquet had detained thousands of Jews before sending them to Nazi death camps.

Hollande’s decision to briefly acknowledge the atrocity is a calculated act of political cynicism. His statement neither specified the death toll nor opened the police archives of the period, which remain closed; nor did it explain why the French state refused to acknowledge the massacre for half a century. Hollande apparently hopes that the move will give him some “left” credibility while costing him nothing, as no existing political organization in France will fight for an accounting of responsibility for the crime, in which the PS itself is deeply implicated.

None of this prevented the corrupt FLN regime in Algeria--currently helping French and US imperialism prepare an intervention in nearby Mali--from applauding Hollande’s gesture. Algerian Prime Minister Abdelmalek Sellal praised France’s “good intentions.” FLN spokesman Kassa Aïssi called Hollande’s statement “a historic recognition of proven facts.”

On the other hand, inside France, the Gaullist Union for a Popular Majority (UMP) and the neo-fascist National Front (FN) denounced Hollande’s gesture. Christian Jacob, the leader of the UMP group in the National Assembly, warned against undermining France’s “pro-Republican forces,” adding: “This declaration is dangerous for the cohesion of our country.”

Jacob’s statement was a perhaps involuntary admission of the explosive impact any real investigation of the 1961 massacre would have. The massacre exemplifies the role fascist collaborationists

played in post-war France, and particularly in France's brutal colonial wars in Indochina and Algeria, as well as their direct connections with the officials that rule France today.

Their ability to do this depended above all on the filthy role of the Stalinist French Communist Party (PCF). It entered into a bourgeois government to disorient the revolutionary struggle that developed after World War II, prop up the bourgeoisie and block a full accounting of the collaborationists' crimes.

Former Vichy officials went on to subsequently occupy high posts under governments both of the right and the social-democratic "left." Such officials included Papon, Bousquet, and above all, President François Mitterrand, who led the PS from 1971 until his death in 1995 and was a friend of the other two men. Papon served as a top security official, while Bousquet worked at Indochina Bank and helped bankroll French social-democratic politicians.

Like Martine Aubry, Ségolène Royal, Lionel Jospin, and virtually the entire current top leadership of the PS, Hollande began his political career under Mitterrand, helping to cover up his crimes and those of his associates.

This history is also an indictment of France's so-called "far left" parties--the political descendants of various renegades from Trotskyism, such as the New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA), which promoted Mitterrand and the PS in the post-1968 period.

Having been decorated in 1943 with the *Ordre de la Francisque* under Vichy, Mitterrand went on to serve as interior and justice minister in social-democratic governments waging the Algerian War during the 1950s, governments that approved the use of the guillotine for Algerian nationalist fighters. He refused clemency to 45 Algerian prisoners condemned to death after 1956.

The same year, Papon was sent to Constantine, Algeria to crush opposition to French rule there. Papon organized mass round-ups of Algerians, presiding over their torture and murder.

The issues of collaboration under Vichy and his role during the Algerian war bedeviled Mitterrand's two terms as president, in 1981-1995. The year after his election, Mitterrand forced through parliament the rehabilitation of four generals who attempted an armed putsch against de Gaulle in 1961 to prevent Algeria

from gaining independence.

Mitterrand maintained his friendship with Bousquet until 1986, when details of Bousquet's past began to emerge; the latter was indicted in 1991, but before his trial ended he was assassinated by Christian Didier in 1993. As for Papon--against whom charges for his role in the deportation of Jews were first brought in 1982--it was not until 1998 that he was found guilty of "complicity in crimes against humanity."

Asked about Mitterrand's collaborationist past by Pierre Péan for his 1994 book *Une Jeunesse Française* (*A French Youth*), Jospin cynically replied: "We would like to dream a simpler and clearer itinerary for the man who led the French left in the 1970s and 1980s."

In office as prime minister from 1997 to 2002, Jospin closed the police archives into the 1961 massacre at the time, on the grounds that "they could interfere" with the Papon trial. Sentenced to 10 years in prison, Papon was released on health grounds in 2002, after serving only three years of his sentence. Though the report that secured his release described him as "impotent and completely bedridden," Papon walked out of the Santé prison on his own two feet.

Speaking of Papon as PS first secretary in 2002, Hollande declared: "If his state of health has been judged as necessitating his release, I have no comment to make."

The author also recommends:

Valuable films from France (including *October 17, 1961*)

[28 September 2005]

An interview with Alain Tasma, director of *October 17, 1961*

[28 September 2005]



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