

Whitewashing the crimes of French imperialism in Africa

President Macron admits French assassination of Ali Boumendjel in the Algerian war

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Last week, French President Emmanuel Macron acknowledged “in the name of France” that Ali Boumendjel, a lawyer and activist for the National Liberation Front (Front de Libération National—FLN), was “tortured and murdered” by French General Jacques Massu’s paratroopers in 1957, during the Algerian war. His execution was made to look like a suicide.

Macron’s statement was published on March 2 by the Elysée Palace. The same day, Macron met with Boumendjel’s grandchildren. During the Battle for Algiers, Boumendjel “was arrested by the French army, placed in solitary confinement, tortured and then executed on March 23, 1957,” the statement read.

Boumendjel was born in 1919 and was the son of a Kabyle schoolteacher, a Berber ethnic group in the Kabylia region of northern Algeria. In 1946, he joined Ferhat Abbas’s Democratic Union of the Algerian Manifesto, and became one of the main lawyers for the Algerian nationalists. He joined the FLN in 1955, the year after the start of the Algerian war, while working for the Shell oil company.

The criminal colonial war waged by French imperialism left half a million people dead in Algeria. Out of 10 million Algerians, France detained 3 million in internment camps. Twenty-five thousand French soldiers died in the war and over 60,000 were wounded. Of the 1.5 million French soldiers involved in the war, most of them young conscripts, many returned traumatised by the crimes they had seen or committed.

Boumendjel was arrested on 9 February 1957, during the Battle for Algiers, an urban guerrilla war against

French police and paratroopers in the Algerian capital. Detained and tortured for a month in various places in the Algiers region, he was murdered 43 days after his arrest, on March 23, 1957. He was thrown from the top of the sixth floor of a building in El Bair on the orders of Commander Paul Aussaresses. The Elysée press release recalls that in 2000, “Paul Aussaresses himself confessed to having ordered one of his subordinates to kill him and to make the crime look like suicide.”

During the same period, Maurice Audin, a young mathematician and activist of the Stalinist Algerian Communist Party (PCA), and supporter of Algerian independence, was detained and tortured in the same building before being executed by the French army. In 2018, Macron admitted that Audin was tortured and murdered by the French state.

Macron’s admission of Boumendjel’s assassination follows a report by historian Benjamin Stora. Commissioned in July 2020 by Macron to “draw up a fair and precise inventory” of the memory of colonisation and the Algerian War, Stora submitted his 160-page report in January. In his report, Stora formulates various recommendations to be “implemented for a possible memorial reconciliation between France and Algeria.”

In fact, Macron is trying to whitewash the crimes of French imperialism during the Algerian War. The Elysée statement continues: “No crime, no atrocity committed by anyone during the Algerian War can be excused or concealed. They must be looked at with courage and lucidity, with absolute respect for all those whose lives they tore apart and whose destiny they

shattered.”

Macron’s recognition of the French state’s crime in Algeria is a cynical and empty political manoeuvre. In January, Macron refused to apologise for French crimes in Algeria. There would be “no repentance or apology” either for the colonisation of Algeria or for the bloody eight-year war (1954-1962) that ended 132 years of French rule, he said. The Elysée added that Macron would instead participate in “symbolic acts.”

Moreover, Macron’s gesture will have no legal consequences for the officers who led the repression in Algeria, including Jean-Marie Le Pen, the founder of the far-right National Front (since renamed National Rally). They were protected and exonerated by the state.

To claim that this cynical and empty action could erase or forgive the enormous crimes of French imperialism in Algeria is an insult to the workers and oppressed masses of the former colonial countries. Moreover, the gesture of the “president of the rich” did not win any significant response in the Algerian or French population. Paris’s hollow “reconciliation” action is in fact directed toward the Algerian regime, which was shaken by mass protests in 2019-2020, and is part of a strategy to dominate the north African region.

As Macron makes his symbolic confession about the assassination of Boumendjel, he is himself moving towards a far-right policy by promoting anti-democratic measures and militarism. In Europe, his government is pursuing a policy of “herd immunity” toward the coronavirus that has devastated Europe. In Africa, he is intensifying the imperialist wars launched by his predecessors to defend the geostrategic interests of French imperialism.

For France, relations with Algeria are essential not only for the profits of major French companies, especially due to its oil and gas resources, but also for the waging of war in the Sahel. France launched this war with its intervention in northern Mali in 2013, following the 2011 war in Libya.

Paris has relied on the support of the Algerian regime to fight the war. Algeria allowed French warplanes to use its airspace to bomb Mali, with which Algeria shares a 1,300-kilometre desert border.

In 2013, Socialist Party Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius explicitly thanked the Algerian regime for

allowing French flights over its territory, and for closing their border with Mali to trap militias in Mali hostile to Paris’ interests.

This highlights how, since Algeria’s formal independence, the bourgeois nationalist regime of the FLN has integrated itself into the camp of imperialism to defend the local bourgeoisie’s interests, while playing a central role in exploiting the Algerian working class and repressing class struggles.

Macron’s hypocritical acknowledgement of French imperialist crimes comes amid mounting social opposition against war and social inequality across the region and in France itself, as part of a radicalisation of the working class on a global scale.

Since February 2019, Algeria has been rocked by social anger and the Hirak protest movement against the FLN regime and the army. This movement is part of an international resurgence of class struggle against social inequality and imperialism. Mali has also seen several demonstrations in recent months to demand the withdrawal of French troops. Anger is erupting in Mali against the official lie that France’s aim is to protect the population from jihadist terrorist networks threatening to conquer Mali.

In this context, Macron’s acknowledgement of France’s assassination of Ali Boumendjel is an effort to dull workers’ anger on both sides of the Mediterranean, in Europe and in the Maghreb. The way forward to stop further imperialist crimes, such as the assassination of Boumendjel, is to unite and mobilise the international working class against capitalism and war on an international socialist perspective.



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