

Who benefits from the official silence?

Maurice Papon and the October 1961 massacre of Paris

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This article was originally published in French in December, 1999. We are republishing it for the first time in English for the 60th anniversary of the October 17, 1961 Paris massacre. A comment on the anniversary is published separately here.

In April 1998, Maurice Papon, then aged 88 years old, was sentenced to prison by a French court for organising the deportation of 1,690 Jews from France during the wartime Vichy regime, while he was the general secretary of the police prefecture in the Gironde.

The trial lasted two years and was widely covered in the international media. It placed a spotlight on an important chapter in the collaboration of the French regime with the Nazis. The trial also revealed important historical facts that, until that point, had remained largely buried and which, in the eyes of the French ruling establishment, ought to have remained so forever. Papon, who until 1981 continued to occupy high-level positions in the French state, including in the finance ministry, also committed crimes of a similar magnitude in the post-war period. This was demonstrated in the testimony of the historian Jean-Luc Einaudi, who participated as a civilian party in the 1998 trial.

Einaudi is the author of the 1991 book, “The battle of Paris, 17 October 1961” (*Éditions du Seuil*). From the bar of the Bordeaux court he described, in October 1997, what took place in Paris 36 years earlier, when Papon was then the prefect of police of Paris under the government of Charles De Gaulle. At that time, at the high point of the war with Algeria, hundreds of Algerians were massacred in the French capital, and more than 12,000 were arrested, during a protest of more than 30,000 people for Algerian independence.

Prefect of police in Algeria and Paris

Papon’s political career began in 1929, when as a 19-year-old he joined the Republican and Socialist University League of Action, a radical-socialist youth organisation. This is where he met a large number of future political collaborators, including Jacques Soustelle, Maurice Schumann and Georges Pompidou, who would become influential political figures after the war.

In the 1930s, Papon worked as a high functionary under different governments, including the Popular Front, before serving under the Vichy regime of General Pétain. It is for his crimes committed during this period for which he has been sentenced.

In June 1944, while the Allies were landing in France, he prepared for himself an alibi as a “resistor” by providing some information to the Resistance. He was thus able to assure a continued career after the war.

In 1956, Guy Mollet, then Socialist prime minister, conferred to Papon the position of inspector general of the administration in Constantine, Algeria. Two years later, the Radical-Socialist Interior Minister Bourgès-Maunoury named him Paris police prefect.

His actions in Constantine, enforcing order with an iron fist during the war in Algeria, demonstrated of what the Vichy administrator was capable. The most brutal torture interrogations were commonplace. In the year to 1957, thousands of Algerians were killed, 114,000 interned in camps where, according to a report by Michel Rocard published in *Le Monde*, between 50 and 60 people died every day. No man’s lands were declared in which hunting of the local population was authorised.

In contrast to General Jacques de Bollardière, who resigned his position in 1957 in protest at the methods employed in Algeria, Papon distinguished himself with the encouragement of the harshest measures. This is the period where he received his promotion to officer of the Legion of Honour, his first decoration since 1948.

In 1958, France was on the verge of civil war. With the aim of forcing Algeria to submit to being part of France, the parachute regiment of General Jacques Massu threatened a coup d’état. To take control of the situation, the Radical-Socialist government appealed to General De Gaulle, after having named Papon as Parisian prefect in March of that year. De Gaulle confirmed the nomination, giving Papon the assignment to “hold Paris” while he sought a negotiated agreement for Algeria.

Papon was not unknown to De Gaulle. In August 1944, he had already served under one of De Gaulle’s close collaborators, since, as stated by one of the Gaullist witnesses during Papon’s trial, “After the Liberation, De Gaulle used the Vichy public service to rebuild the country.”

Papon revealed himself to be a reliable employee who would not back down at any level of violence to keep order in the capital. He ordered the arrest and torture of Arab students, the confiscation of books and the banning of performances and meetings.

On October 5, 1958, Papon decreed a curfew for all Algerians, barring them from leaving their homes from 8:30pm to 5:30am, an anti-constitutional measure that enforces segregation. This is the beginning of a literal witch hunt in Paris. In the Vincennes woods, an internment camp is built, similar in every respect to the Mérignac camp from the time of Vichy. There are multiple round-ups of Algerians, and Algerian workers suffer assaults at the hands of the police.

Papon issues police orders for mass arrests, including with quota requirements per police officer. In 1960, he creates an auxiliary police force composed of “Harkis,” Algerians serving in the French army, under the control of the French police. It is directly under the orders of Papon, who uses it to infiltrate the Algerian National Liberation Front (FLN). Hotels are requisitioned in Paris’ south-western 15th arrondissement and the northern 18th arrondissement, where prisoners are tortured.

Papon's methods were not publicly accepted unanimously by the French authorities. A former detainee in the Dachau Nazi extermination camp, Edmond Michelet, who had been justice minister from 1959, publicly protested against the use of torture. He was supported by Simone Weill, herself also a former concentration camp detainee employed in the courts. Under pressure from the prime minister, Michelet was forced to resign in the summer of 1961.

The massacre of October 17, 1961

A referendum on Algerian self-determination was held in France in January 1961, with a large majority of 75.2 percent voting in favour of self-determination. One month later, the Secret Army Organisation (*Organisation de l'armée secrète*— OAS) was founded, a secretive terrorist organisation that fought to maintain French-controlled Algeria. It was made up of French colonists in Algeria and members of the army, and organised terrorist attacks until the end of 1962. The FLN organised reprisal attacks in France.

The conflict escalated in October 1961, with the French police forces in a frenzy. Papon instructed the police on October 2, 1961 as follows: "For every blow, we reply with 10." He encouraged the police to shoot first: "...we will protect you, you will be in a state of legitimate self-defence."

To protest against the permanent curfew of Algerians, the FLN ordered its supporters to protest peacefully in the streets of Paris. It called for a mass protest on October 17 at 8:30pm, calling upon Algerians to turn up in the most well-known public locations of Paris with their families.

Over 30,000 Algerians took part in the protest, including women and children. With the aim of winning the support of the Parisian population for their peaceful protest for independence, the FLN gave the order that not a single arm was to be permitted among the protesters. They walked into a horrific trap.

From the afternoon of October 17, Papon's well-equipped police forces began round-ups of Algerians with their arrival in the centre of Paris. In the evening, false rumours were spread by and among the police that Algerians had fired on police officers. What followed was a massacre of the most extreme brutality.

Groups of Algerians were pushed continuously from Opera to the Place de la République. At the Neuilly Bridge gunshots rang out and witnesses observed police throwing their victims into the Seine, some of them shouting that they could not swim. At metro train entrances Algerians were arrested by police, placed in police vans and metropolitan buses and driven to the Palais de Sports at the Porte de Versailles in northern Paris, to the Coubertin stadium, and even to the Velodrome d'hiver, the same building where thousands of Jews were rounded up before their deportation. Police "welcoming committees" murdered and assaulted them.

In the police prefect offices Algerians were brought before Papon and beaten and strangled. A police officer reported the actions to the Contrôleur General in order to have the massacres stopped. Around midnight, several police officers spoke to the journalist Claude Bourdet from the *France Observateur* and reported to him that 50 Algerians had been killed in the building of the police prefecture before being thrown into the Seine.

In the course of the evening, according to the current estimates, 11,730 Algerians were arrested and transferred to different locations, including the internment camp at the Vincennes woods. For the following weeks, bodies were continually found and fished out of the Seine. When Claude Bourdet, during a session of the Paris Council, asked Papon to comment directly on the events, he remained silent.

The official count referred to "three" deaths, ascribing these to a settling of scores between rival Algerian groups. The police activity was reduced to placing north-Africans in buses for their own security. Such is the official version that was maintained by the authorities for the next thirty years.

De Gaulle covered for Papon and silenced all those who demanded his resignation. "The protest was illegal," he said. "The police prefect received instructions and was forced to oppose it. He did what he had to do."

A new act of state violence was to take place shortly thereafter. Days before March 18, 1962, with the signing of the Evian Accords the ratified Algeria's formal independence, the OAS stepped up its terrorist attacks. On February 7, 1962, it organised an attack blinding a four-year-old girl, Delphine Renard. The following day, a protest called by the trade unions took place chanting "OAS—murderers!"

Once again, the police violently attacked the protesters. A section of the demonstrators sought to take refuge in the nearest metro station, Charonne. But the metal gates at the entrance to the station were locked and those who were the first to descend were crushed and suffocated under those who followed. Nine people, including eight members of the CGT, were killed. When, weeks later, the secretary of the police union François Rouve opposed Papon, he was removed from his functions, while the weekly *Express*, which had reported on the massacre, was seized.

Minister of Information Alain Peyrefitte monitored all newspaper reports and ensured that radio and television channels suppressed any information about the killings. He oversaw the hiring of journalists and ensured that any who did not remain quiet were removed. Later, as justice minister under Raymond Barre, he would remain loyal to his role as censor by championing the death penalty. Up to his death in November 1999, he was never held to account for his role in the October massacre.

Finally, in October 1965, Moroccan oppositionist Mehdi Ben Barka was kidnapped in broad daylight in Paris and thrown into a car. He was later found murdered. The implication of high-level police functionaries in the assassination forced De Gaulle to publicly separate himself from his zealous agent.

From amnesty to amnesia

Thus, from 1958 to 1967, Papon had been police chief under three Gaullist prime ministers: Michel Debré, Georges Pompidou and Couve de Murville. But his career was far from over.

After a brief interlude in the private sector as Director General-President of Sud-Aviation, he becomes in 1968, the national treasurer of the Gaullist UDF party, a post which later leads to Raymond Barre, prime minister in the government of Giscard d'Estaing, naming him in 1978 as finance minister. Jean-Louis Debré, the son of Michel Debré, becomes his chief of staff.

In May 1981, an article appeared in the weekly satirical magazine *Le Canard Enchaîné* revealing his role as Nazi collaborator in the 1940s. The article appeared on May 6, 1981, between the two rounds of the presidential election which, for the first time, would give Mitterrand the possibility of coming to power as Socialist Party president. This is why Mitterrand did not publicly oppose the article published in *Canard Enchaîné*. But this would change as soon as he came to power.

The revelations about Papon were immediately denounced as "scandalous attacks" by the Gaullist parties. In December 1981, the first legal charges were filed against Papon by Gérard Boulanger, then in May 1982 by Serge Klarsfeld. The investigation was first dragged out and then

cancelled on February 11, 1987, under the government of Mitterrand and Prime Minister Jacques Chirac.

The families of Jewish victims in Bordeaux, however, refused to give up, and Papon was charged a second time in 1988, then a third time in 1992, with crimes against humanity. Finally, in October 1997 his trial began, and in April 1998 he was condemned to ten years of prison for complicity in crimes against humanity. He was never charged for his crimes of the post-war period.

While the historian Einaudi was permitted to make a formal deposition during Papon's trial, the post-war events were completely ignored by the presiding judges in the trial, and the documents of 1961 were kept classified in the national archives.

These archives are subject to the most restrictive legislation in Europe. A law in 1979 stipulated that the documents be held classified for up to 30 years, and sometimes 60 or even 100 years. In February 1999, *Libération* commented, "From the end of the war, the amnesty decided with a speed and scope without precedent in our history (none of the participants in the Charonne massacre were questioned) has doubled in practice as a form of state amnesia."

Following the testimony by Einaudi during the 1997 trial, the archives were slightly opened. Minister of Culture Catherine Trautmann publicly promised to open them. History professor David Assouline, a member of the 1990 association "In the name of memory," immediately went following Trautmann's pledge to the Paris archives, where the chief conservator, Philippe Grand, acceded to his demand, he himself having also taken the minister's pledge at her word. Together, they evaluated boxes of the police prefecture and compared them to the list of those killed and disappeared, established by Einaudi in his book.

Assouline explained: "The pages for the months of October and November are filled with the names of FMAs (French Muslims from Algeria), stamped 'dead.' Some of them include even the word *repêché* [retrieved from the water]." After a brief examination, they had already counted 70 deaths.

The promise of the minister Trautmann was not kept, however. Instead of opening the archives, the minister of the interior Jean-Pierre Chevènement instructed his collaborator, state advisor Dieudonné Mandelkern, to examine the archives of the police prefecture and the interior minister. On January 8, 1998, Mandelkern submitted his report to Chevènement. He "corrects," in an extremely circumscribed manner, the official account of three deaths, raising the estimate to seven. He included the names of seven killed and stated that one "cannot exclude" that for 25 of the 88 bodies found during the period in question, there was no relation to the protest.

The reaction of Socialist Party Prime Minister Lionel Jospin was notable: four days later, on January 12, 1998, he once again formally closed the archives, justifying this with an official communique in the following terms: "...they could interfere with the current trial concerning M. Maurice Papon. Under these conditions, the government cannot take the initiative of publishing the report and opening the archives."

Mandelkern nonetheless clearly indicated that numerous important documents had recently gone missing. This included the report by Papon as police prefect to the ministry of the interior, of which the president and prime minister also received copies, on December 26, 1991. The archives of the river brigade of the police, the documents of the coordination service of Algerian affairs, and the files of the camp at Vincennes, also all disappeared.

With the Mandelkern report having been publicly contested, a second report was ordered. This time the justice ministry charged attorney Jean Geromini with overseeing the report. His report was submitted on May 5, 1999 to Jospin, and reported that 48 Algerians were killed, stating that this was likely an underestimate. The document states: "A note of the chief of staff of the justice ministry to the chief of staff of the prime minister,

dated October 27, 1961, mentioned the discovery of around 100 bodies and reports that, most often, according to certain proofs, the murders can be ascribed to the police."

Geromini's report demonstrates that the government authorities were completely informed about the facts of the massacre. The justice ministry had formally investigated, but all the investigation led to was a dismissal of the charges. All the allegations were closed without charges, except for two, which were filed against newspapers or journalists who denounced the October 17, 1961 massacre.

Einaudi repeated his accusations in a letter addressed to *Le Monde*. Maurice Papon, who did not file charges against Einaudi, either with the publication of his book in 1991, or after his testimony, recently filed defamation charges against him for a million francs. Einaudi, who worked meticulously for years gathered critical documents without ever having had access to the authorities' archives, has been able to turn the trial against his accuser.

For two witnesses who simply confirmed that the book by Einaudi was factually accurate, the conservator Philippe Grand and his colleague, their testimonies have had negative repercussions—they are now subject to disciplinary sanctions and have since been removed from their posts by Jean Tiberi, the mayor of Paris.

And today?

Up until November 1999, Maurice Papon has passed three nights in prison for the totality of the period where his role as Nazi collaborator had been publicly known. He appeared at the stand wearing his decoration of the Legion of Honour. As a result of his advanced aged and precarious health, he was permitted to leave the trial after three days, still in possession of his passport.

He remained in liberty while awaiting the outcome of his appeals. For his personal protection and that of his household, he was provided 24-hour surveillance. Papon was able to remove this surveillance detail upon request. It is not surprising that Papon was able to organise his flight to Switzerland.

While Papon has since been arrested and placed in French prisons, the facts of his and his collaborators activities in the post-war period remain unaccounted. The national archives remain inaccessible, the official figures internally contradictory, and the police agents and most diverse networks remain in the shadows. Why have present governments been remained so determined to suppress the truth? This is the question that must be answered.



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