



# European Review of History: Revue européenne d'histoire

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cerh20>

## Lethal provocation: the Constantine murders and the politics of French Algeria

by Joshua Cole, Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 2019, ix + 317 pp., US \$37.95, ISBN 9781501739415

Adi Saleem Bharat

To cite this article: Adi Saleem Bharat (2021) Lethal provocation: the Constantine murders and the politics of French Algeria, European Review of History: Revue européenne d'histoire, 28:2, 351-352, DOI: [10.1080/13507486.2020.1797322](https://doi.org/10.1080/13507486.2020.1797322)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13507486.2020.1797322>



Published online: 03 Sep 2020.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 19



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

**Lethal provocation: the Constantine murders and the politics of French Algeria,**  
by Joshua Cole, Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 2019, ix + 317 pp., US  
\$37.95, ISBN 9781501739415

It seems that, every few months, some Western politician, journalist or polemicist claims that people in the Middle East and North Africa have been at war for millennia, that war and conflict are somehow inevitable and inherent to 'that part of the world'. Most recently, in January 2020, following the US drone strike that killed Iranian general Qasem Soleimani, Donald Trump's former deputy national security adviser announced on Fox News that 'their [Middle Easterners'] normal state of condition is war.' The narrative of perpetual Jewish-Muslim conflict is rooted within this framework. As an interpretive lens, perpetual Jewish-Muslim conflict can then be employed to make sense of a wide range of events as simply a function of an 'ancient' hatred, thus obscuring important historical and socio-political circumstances.

In the past few years, a number of historians have challenged dominant narratives of Jewish-Muslim tension in France by highlighting the complex, contingent, and, ultimately, fluid nature of Jewish and Muslim histories and identifications from the nineteenth century to the present. In particular, historians such as Ethan Katz and Maud Mandel have highlighted the importance of the French state in shaping the very terrain on which Jewish-Muslim relations play out. Joshua Cole's book builds on this recent scholarship by examining a single event, the 1934 Constantine riots, that is often seen as emblematic of a supposedly 'ancient' hatred between Jews and Muslim. As a microhistory, Cole provides an impressively detailed and well-research account of the riots that disrupts the narrative of perpetual conflict.

Cole begins by providing a careful analysis of the changing dynamics of identity and relations between Jews, Muslims and 'Europeans', from the French invasion in 1830 to the 1934 Constantine riots. He argues that the riots 'emerged precisely because of the many dissonant ways that the people of this North African city found the term "French" to resonate with meanings of "Jewish" and "Muslim"' (p. 5). It is, however, his analysis of the event itself, supported by extensive archival research, that is truly ground breaking. The riots have long been seen as the spontaneous expression of popular antisemitism and, thus, as a 'classic pogrom'. While Cole suggests that there was a spontaneous element to the riots, he also uncovers evidence of a premeditation that disrupts the simple framing of the riots as an expression of 'primitive hatreds' (p. 158).

There are several versions of the incident that is said to have sparked the 1934 riots in Constantine, Algeria, that led to the deaths of 25 Jews and three Muslims over the course of several days. Each version, however, shares the same basic outline. On the evening of 3 August, a Jewish tailor and *zouave* named Elie Khalifa was making his way back from a café when an argument broke out between him and several Muslims in the Sidi Lakhdar Mosque, which faced Khalifa's home. In order to get to the front door of his apartment, one needed to go down a narrow passage and pass by one of the mosque's windows. This window, when open, allowed pedestrians to look into the area of the mosque where men would take their ablutions before prayers. That evening, as Khalifa was passing by the window, which happened to be open, he looked into the mosque and confronted several Muslim men who were in the process of washing themselves before the evening prayers. According to the Muslim men, Khalifa 'interrupted their ablutions by calling them savages and insulting their religion' (p. 117). According to Khalifa, he was returning home with his wife and children and noticed, through the window, that the men washing themselves were naked. He brought his family home, quickly returned to the window and told them 'to be more careful in displaying their nudity in front of his wife' (p. 117). Khalifa claimed that one of the men then called him

a *sale juif* to which he replied *sale bicot* before returning home once more. The dispute soon turned violent. Several people were injured and a Muslim man named Belkacem Boutarane was shot (he would succumb to his wounds several weeks later). The next day, Jewish and Muslim leaders sought to ease the tension. However, on 5 August, violence erupted again, this time to much more deadly effect.

Cole's greatest contribution is distinguishing the events of 3 August from those of 5 August. 'The initial outburst on August 3,' he writes, were of a spontaneous nature. However, the majority of the murders on 5 August can be attributed to a small group of perpetrators with 'complicated goals'. Cole focuses on a certain Mohamed El Maadi, a French Muslim soldier affiliated with French far-right groups. El Maadi would later work for the Gestapo and serve as a captain in the SS. Cole also uncovers 'circumstantial evidence [that] points to a cover-up of [his] participation' by the army, police and political establishment, despite documents showing that they believed that he was among those responsible for the murders (pp. 247–8). Ultimately, by focusing on El Maadi and his affiliations, Cole highlights the often obscured links between the French far right and some Algerian Muslims, *while* reframing the events of August 1934 as a French story, rather than a Jewish–Muslim one. As such, he deliberately confronts us with the implication of the French state and French antisemitism instead of a sole focus on 'ancient hatred'.

Cole has certainly written what will no doubt be *the* authoritative history of the Constantine riots of 1934. But this book will be of great value to a wide range of students and scholars. Scholars of contemporary French culture and politics are keenly aware of the fact that it is impossible to understand contemporary France meaningfully without a deep engagement with the legacy of French colonialism. Indeed, the contemporary crises of French republicanism and universalism are, in many ways, related to unresolved questions and contradictions of France's colonial past. For this reason, Joshua Cole's microhistory of a single particularly tragic and politically charged event will be of great interest to students and scholars in a variety of disciplines in the humanities and the social sciences.

Adi Saleem Bharat  
University of Michigan  
 [abharat@umich.edu](mailto:abharat@umich.edu)

© 2020 Adi Saleem Bharat  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13507486.2020.1797322>



**Photography and War**, by Pippa Oldfield, London, Reaktion, 2019, 215 pp., £22.50 (paperback), ISBN 9781789141450

In *Photography and War*, Pippa Oldfield, a photography curator and photo-historian, has produced an ambitious, wide-ranging and inclusive exploration of the relationship between conflict and photography. Forming part of Reaktion's *Exposures* series on photography, *Photography and War* combines a rich and diverse selection of images with decades of scholarship into a very good introductory book.

Building on decades of photographic research and criticism, Oldfield extends the category of 'war photography' beyond photojournalism, incorporating state-produced surveillance and cartographical photography, civilian photography, art photography and photomontage.