

The Holocaust and Algeria: History for Who?

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The history of Algerian Jews during the Holocaust has been both neglected and politicized when it has been studied. In Algeria, a French colony which was seen as an integral part of France, the anti-Semitic legislation of the Vichy regime was directly applied. In the following years, the colonial government implemented the Statut des Juifs and other anti-Semitic legislation, abrogated the Cremieux Decree which had granted French citizenship to some Algerian Jews, and set up concentration camps throughout the country. Through an examination of four historical studies of Algerian Jews during the Holocaust, I ask—for whom was this history written? How does this position shape the narrative constructed by the historian? Satloff, whose self-proclaimed goal is to “make the Holocaust an Arab story” further erases Algerian Jews from their own history. Similarly, Oliel’s study of Vichy’s camps seeks to render the Holocaust in North Africa as a part of French history. While some scholars – Oliel and Satloff – have fit their study of the Holocaust in Algeria into national narratives, methodologies such as those of Bahloul, Boum and Stein focus on Jewish narratives of the Holocaust in Algeria as histories in their own right. By examining these histories not based on their value or relationship to other histories, but as rich stories of change deserving academic study in their own right, Bahloul, Boum and Stein suggest a path to more just scholarship.

By valorizing the study of Algerian Jewish history through its integration into broader Arab or French history (respectively), Satloff and Oliel fall short of examining the construction of identities such as French and indigenous, Arab and Jewish, and diversity within these identity groups. In his 2006 *Among the Righteous: Stories from the Holocaust’s Long Reach Into Arab Lands*, Satloff asks “did any Arabs save Jews during the Holocaust?”¹ A close study of the experiences of North African Jews in the Holocaust has the potential to challenge the division of

¹ Robert Satloff, *Among the Righteous: Lost Stories from the Holocaust’s Long Reach into Arab Lands* (New York: Public Affairs, 2006), 1.

Arabs and Jews into separate categories and to examine how these divisions were created.

However, Satloff's framing of his book's central question replicates this binary assumption.

In seeking to write the Holocaust into an Arab narrative of history, Satloff effectively writes Algerian (and other Arab Jews) out of their history. Satloff's purpose for investigating Arab actions during the Holocaust stems from his stated goal "to make the Holocaust an Arab story."² In his attempt "to make the Holocaust an Arab story," the lived experiences of Jewish North Africans in Vichy concentration camps in Algeria and Morocco are lost. In his chapter "Buchenwald in the Sahara," Satloff focuses on the life of Morice Tondowski, a Polish-Jew who ended up in a North African concentration camp. He also draws on survivor testimonies from Harry Alexander, a German Jew, and other Polish Jews. These primary source choices exclude the voices of North African Jews. Indeed, Satloff writes, "tales of Jews who suffered their Holocaust fate in the deserts and mountains of Morocco and Algeria are virtually unknown."³ To fill the gap he sees, Satloff draws on European sources, without giving space to North African Jews who have written memoirs of their internment in such concentration camps.⁴ Additionally, the choice of chapter title, "Buchenwald in the Sahara," asserts the horror of these experiences in relation to a Nazi concentration camp in Europe, instead of allowing the reality of concentration camps in North Africa to stand on their own.

While Satloff states that his book seeks to integrate the Holocaust into Arab history, this approach also integrates North African experiences of the Holocaust into Euro-centric narratives about Arabs as ignorant and in need of civilizing and education. This is not a story of the

² Satloff, *Among the Righteous*, 5.

³ *Ibid.*, 58.

⁴ For an example of a memoir written by an Algerian Jew who experienced concentration camps, see: Arezki Berkani, Mohammed. *Three Years of Camps: A Year of Concentration Camp, Two Years of the Disciplinary Center: Djenien-Bou-Rezg Sud-Oranais 1940–1943 Vichy Government*. Translated by Miruna Barnoschi and Mehnaz M. Afridi. Algeria: Koudia-Setif, 1965.

Holocaust and North Africa that belongs to those who witnessed it—Jewish, Muslim, or otherwise, but rather one that privileges Satloff as the owner of the narrative, who sets out to inoculate against “Arab ignorance.” In the introduction, he writes, “I decided that the most useful response I could offer to 9/11 was to combat Arab ignorance of the Holocaust.”⁵ The introduction is prefaced by quotes from Arabs who deny the Holocaust, a North African history professor who criticized how Arabs discuss the Holocaust, and a quote from a Saudi Prince after his visit to the U.S. Holocaust museum. The quote of the Saudi Prince contrasts that of the Arab Holocaust deniers, but the United States is the source and sight of his enlightenment. Algerian or other North African Jews are not seen as actors in their own history but are notably absent from it. This approach is dually alienating—it integrates the Holocaust in North Africa into two broader narratives, that of Arab history and that of European and US-centric views of the Arab World.

Just as Satloff integrates the history of Algerian Jews into Arab and Euro-centric narratives, Oliel incorporates this past into French history. Oliel’s 2005 book *Les camps de Vichy: Magrheb-Sahara, 1939-1945* documents daily life in camps, work conditions, and cultural activities. In explaining the importance of this history, he situates the Holocaust and North Africa within a broader narrative of French history for a Francophone national audience. He locates the value of the topic in its relevance and importance to French history, asking “How many of knew?”⁶ As the book was published in Montreal by a publisher based in Montpellier, France, the “us” in this sentence is likely the French or French-Canadian public. Knowing this history matters to Oliel and his readers because it is framed to be part of their history. While this approach may pique readers’ interest and instill a sense of curiosity or responsibility, it also

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Jacob Oliel, *Les Camps de Vichy: Magrheb-Sahara, 1939-1945* (Montreal: Edition du Lys, 2005), 147.

accords relevance to the Holocaust experiences of North African Jews on the basis of their belonging to a French historical narrative which is not their own. This inclusion in the historical narrative is what justifies scholarly attention to the North African Jews who were interned in Vichy concentration camps. In incorporating the history of concentration camps in Algeria into French history, Oliel relies primarily on French government documents about the numbers of and locations of camps. However, he does include testimonies from survivors of these camps from a variety of backgrounds, including Algerian Jews.⁷

The integration of North African Jewish history into larger narratives shape the conclusions with which Satloff and Oliel leave their readers. In claiming that he needs to make the Holocaust “an Arab story,” Satloff does not interrogate the identities upon which his assumptions rest. How have historical events and discourse created a distinction between Arab and Jewish, French and indigenous? The colonial-era classification between French and indigenous is particularly important for Algerian-Jewish history: the majority of Algerian Jews were given French citizenship, with the exception of Mzabi or Saharan Jews.⁸ Thus, in the eyes of the colonial state, they were classified as French until Vichy-era policy stripped them of their citizenship. This policy predates the Holocaust, but it informed how the Holocaust unfolded for Algerian Jews. Yet it is absent from the portrait of the Holocaust in North Africa which Satloff crafts. As historical studies of the Holocaust in Europe reveal, Holocaust policies, attitudes, and realities were shaped over several years. In trying to tell the Holocaust story in the Arab world, Satloff leaves out this context and the divisions on which Holocaust era policies were implemented by the Vichy regime. Similarly, Oliel does not discuss how the people who ended

⁷ Jacob Oliel, *Les Camps de Vichy: Magrheb-Sahara, 1939-1945*, 134.

⁸ For more information on Mzabi or Saharan Jews, see: Sarah Abrevaya Stein, *Saharan Jews and the Fate of French Algeria* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2014).

up in Vichy's camps came to be categorized as Jewish, indigenous or French. Despite the ways in which these classifications shaped life under the colonial regime in Algeria more broadly and in the camps more specifically, Oliel does not explore how these categories were constructed and how that informed prisoners' treatment in the camps.

While Oliel and Satloff's approach integrates North African Jewish history into other narratives, Boum and Stein's anthology explores past attempts (similar to those of Oliel and Satloff) to include this history in other narratives and reasons for the marginalization of this field within historical study. The anthology underscores a range of reasons for the marginalization of North African experiences from Holocaust history: the view of some scholars that the Holocaust was a European affair, which is echoed in contemporary Israeli curricula and textbooks, and the view of some North African scholars that directing academic attention towards the Holocaust and North Africa distracts from histories of colonial violence against Muslims.⁹

Just as Boum and Stein examine the intersection of Holocaust studies and histories of North Africa, the anthology presents an alternative model to past approaches in temporal and subject-area scope. First, the temporal boundaries of the anthology are not limited to the years of the Holocaust—the chapters of the anthology discuss the history leading up to these events. In including these years, Boum and Stein open the space to unravel and interrogate the creation of identities such as French, Algerian, indigenous, Arab, and Jewish. In a chapter on Vichy anti-Semitic legislation and colonial racial hierarchies, David Schroeter shows how Algerian Jews shifted between categorization as indigenous and as French, and how these policies informed their experiences in the Holocaust. In Susan Slyomovics' essay on the Bedeau Internment Camp, where French Algerian Jewish soldiers were imprisoned, the testimonies, manifestos, and

⁹ Aomar Boum and Sarah Abrevaya Stein, eds., *The Holocaust and North Africa* (Stanford, California: University of California Press, 2019), 8-9.

memoirs of survivors drive the narrative. This is an alternative to the narrative of Algerian camps which Satloff and Oliel presents in two ways: unlike in Satloff, the voices of Algerian survivors are given value. In contrast to Oliel, who relies on French government documents, Slyomovics allows Algerian memory to inform the historical narrative. “Eyewitness Djelfa: Daily Life in a Saharan Vichy Labor Camp,” is another chapter in the anthology about concentration camps in Algeria. The author contends with the experiences of Jews and non-Jews in the camps, with a focus on the memoir of Max Aub, a Mexican-Spanish Jew and survivor of Djelfa. When read as a whole, the anthology includes experiences of multiple concentration camps in Algeria and people from a range of backgrounds who survived these camps. By including a range of chapters about Algerian-Jewish Holocaust experiences, Boum and Stein’s approach illustrate the contrasts and complexities of the experiences of Algerian Jews and present a story that is neither uniform nor singular.

In addition to Boum and Stein’s contributions to the field, Bahloul’s 1996 ethnography provides a complex portrait of life within Algerian Jewish communities by examining one household and its surroundings. In her ethnography, Algerian Jews are actors and doers—their personal relationships, daily routines, and ongoing struggles are the focal point of the work. Taking a household within a community as starting point leads the reader to a picture of shifting Jewish-Muslim relations, as well as how French government policies affected everyday routines and choices. By centering around an Algerian Jewish-Muslim household, this ethnography destabilizes the assumption that Arabs and Jews were distinct groups. With the home as a starting point, Bahloul shows how Vichy policies manifested in day-to-day life, letting the experiences of Algerian-Jews to take the lead. For example, Jews were banned from French schools after 1942. As a result, Jewish workers who entered the job market towards the end of

World War Two rarely had any professional training, and this shaped how members of the Senoussi family (the Jewish family in the ethnography) made their income and pursued careers.¹⁰ Additionally, Bahloul shows how Algerian Jews imprinted upon their community, instead of only showing Algerian Jews as subjects of Vichy-era policy. She describes how Algerian Jews were a buffer from Christians and Muslims in their community.¹¹ In other instances, Bahloul shows how Algerian Jews helped other members of the household and neighborhood. By documenting these aspects of Algerian Jewish life, Bahloul shows how Algerian Jews contributed to society, instead of only focusing on oppressive measures towards them. In doing so, she gives the people who lived this history more agency.

Ultimately, these contrasting historical approaches lead to different conclusions with tangible consequences. Satloff boldly states, “The wartime experiences of two communities of Jews—the Jews of Christendom and the Jews of Islam—rarely crossed, and they had little to do with each other.”¹² Satloff asserts contrast, without imagining that the reverberations of the Holocaust for Jews in North Africa and in Europe could have intersected and overlapped. In contrast, Daniel Schroeter, author of a chapter in *The Holocaust and North Africa*, argues that in studying the Holocaust on Europe’s peripheries, scholars cannot separate colonialism from anti-Semitic policies.¹³ As historians, we are pushed to ask: what is at stake in both uncovering this history and retelling it this history? In the case of Algerian Holocaust narratives, documenting

¹⁰ Joelle Bahloul, *The Architecture of Memory*, trans. Catherine du Peloux Menage (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 85.

¹² Satloff, *Among the Righteous*, 58.

¹³ Daniel Schroeter, “Between the Metropole and North Africa: Vichy’s Anti-Semitic Legislation and Colonialism’s Racial Hierarchies,” in *The Holocaust and North Africa*, ed. Sarah Abrevaya Stein and Aomar Boum (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2019), 24.

the realities of the Holocaust in North Africa enabled survivors of some Algerian war camps to receive reparations from Germany.¹⁴

The goals of Satloff, Oliel, Boum and Stein, and Bahloul, the sources they include, and temporal scope of their work informs their contributions to the historical study of the Holocaust in Algeria. While Satloff and Oliel write Algerian Holocaust history into larger narratives, they further distance Algerian Jews from their history. This trend is indicative of a wider problem: the marginalization of the history of the Holocaust in North Africa. Bahloul's ethnography and the anthology edited by Boum and Stein present alternative paths to studying this history. Both Bahloul and the essays included in the anthology give value to Algerian Jewish voices as primary sources. Their work allows us to understand the construction and limits of binaries such as Arab or Jewish, French or indigenous. However, despite these contributions to historical study, "from the perspective of scholarship, justice has not been served," as Boum and Stein point out.¹⁵ Documentation of the Holocaust in Algeria, in archives and private collections in North Africa, France, Israel, and the United States, is largely unexplored. The choices historians make in framing their purpose and choosing their sources will shape how this history is told, written, and understood.

¹⁴ Aomar Boum and Sarah Abrevaya Stein, eds., *The Holocaust and North Africa*, 12.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 12.

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