The association of communism and totalitarianism became axiomatic at the height of the Cold War, premised on the idea that communist regimes used ideology to mobilize the masses and combined ideology with coercion to subsume all elements of civil society under state control. Discussions of the relationship between communism and totalitarianism focused on countries in which communist movements gained control of sovereign states. However, any potential relationship between communist parties and sovereign states cannot be generalized to colonized societies.

The colonial state in Algeria, as elsewhere in Africa, maintained itself through a combination of direct force and indirect rule over the indigenous majority, allowing political rights for the minority designated as French citizens. The anti-colonial struggle shaped itself around this political reality. The Algerian experience suggests that communist parties seeking to embed themselves in anti-colonial struggles – civil-society-based movements against colonial rule – develop an antagonistic political relationship to the colonial state that forms their understanding of and commitment to both collective and individual democratic rights. The analysis of communist movements and state-society relations, therefore, must be placed within the historical context in which communist movements emerge and operate in relationship to the state and cannot be understood solely by reference to political ideology.¹

Communism is intrinsically concerned with the collective right of classes, namely the proletariat and the peasantry, to be free of exploitation. Yet Communists have all too often struggled to recognize the collective rights of oppressed nations to self-determination. This was certainly the case for the Parti Communiste Algérien (PCA or Algerian Communist Party). Largely European in composition during its initial years, only

¹ While drawing on Mahmood Mamdani: Indirect rule, civil society, and ethnicity: the Africa dilemma, in: Social Justice, 23, 1-2, 1996, http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_hb3427/is_n1-2_v23/ai_n28673347/ <13 August 2011>, I disagree with his characterization of civil society as 'above all the society of the colonists'. Despite their lack of freedom, colonized people assembled and organized in many domains, from the village assembly to the local café.
in the wake of the Second World War and the rise of Algerian nationalism unleashed by the war did the PCA consistently strive to become demographically representative of Algerian civil society and to address Algeria's right to national self-determination. The war's end led to a remapping of world politics that opened up political space, both internationally and nationally, for anti-colonial movements. Europe's territorial boundaries were redrawn and its colonial empires, with their resources depleted, were under threat as the United States became the world's greatest power. On 26 June 1945 representatives of fifty countries signed the United Nations Charter, whose first article called for the development of 'friendly relations among nations based on respect for the principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples'.

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The implementation of such rights within states was far from assured, however. With the prestige of its role in the French Resistance and the belief in the possibility of a 'new France', the Parti Communiste Français (PCF or French Communist Party) played an important role in the drafting of a new post-war French constitution, which was agreed by national referendum in October 1946. The new constitution led to the formation of the Union Française [French Union]. Despite the PCF's dreams of a freely-chosen union between the metropole and its colonies, the colonial relationship remained intact. The new constitution allowed some representation of colonized peoples on the National Assembly and in the Assembly of the French Union. Other reforms included the abolition of the code de l'indigénat [native code], of forced labour and – except in the case of Algeria – of the dual college electoral system. The PCF supported the French Union as a means to improve the situation of colonized peoples, while opposing the call for independence at that time.

In democratic post-war France, the PCF had freedom to operate and may have briefly felt close to state power. But the PCA's relationship to the colonial state was profoundly different. In Algeria the anti-colonial movement was on the upswing as Algerian civil society became increasingly politicized and politically active. For the PCA, the war's end raised the prospect of once again prioritizing the anti-colonial struggle, which it had marginalized during the war in the name of unity with France against fascism. The PCA

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2 Communism in Algeria was launched in 1920 as the Algerian region of the Société Française de l'Internationale Communisme – later the French Communist Party. In 1936 an organizationally autonomous Algerian Communist Party was formed.


had worked very closely with the PCF during the war, even adopting the thesis of its general secretary Maurice Thorez that Algeria was a ‘nation in formation’ comprising some twenty races.

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Algerian nationalists had been alienated by the PCA's reticence about independence; however, the departure of the war-time PCF delegation for France facilitated the PCA's autonomy, which increased as the PCF became increasingly preoccupied with Cold War politics. From 1946 the PCA made a concerted effort to address the question of national liberation, attracting growing numbers of Algerians. It launched a policy of indigenization that resulted in a marked increase in Algerian members paralleled by the departure of European members. Although the PCF's approach to national self-determination was framed in terms of the nation in formation thesis, the PCA reinterpreted the thesis as Algeria's political conditions changed.

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As prospects for electoral reform proved barren and in the face of mounting repression, both communists and nationalists, faced the same dilemmas: how to fight colonialism from within the colonial system and how to struggle for democratic rights under an increasingly authoritarian regime that strove to nullify such efforts? The PCA's struggles against an authoritarian regime compelled it to struggle for collective as well as individual democratic rights. Its work for democratic rights took three main forms: firstly, the launch of amnesty committees against repression; secondly, the use of elections as forums to call for democratic rights; and thirdly, the formation of organizationally pluralist united fronts in defence of democratic rights and liberties. These activities took place in the context of increasing repression and censorship, and throughout this period the PCA elaborated its vision of democratic rights with its press, its meetings and its campaigns. This vision was based on a dual notion of freedom that reflected the nature of the anti-colonial struggle: freedom from repression and freedom to develop. 5

The massacre in Constantine

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Even as the Second World War ended, a new war was beginning. On 1 May 1945 trade unions held their annual May Day demonstrations in the country's major cities. Representing the Confédération générale du travail (General confederation of labour), the

French Communist Pierre Fayet reminded workers in Algiers that Hitlerism was not yet dead. The 'First of May was celebrated in Algiers in almost a pre-war manner', reported the British Consul General, who remarked on the 'large number of women and Arabs taking part in the processions'. The demonstration would have been peaceful, he observed, 'but for the unfortunate clash which took place between the police and Arab nationalist demonstrators'. The authorities had already ordered the police to disperse nationalist demonstrators, he elaborated. 'A procession was formed and moved in an orderly manner towards the Central Post Office. Only one placard bearing the words: "Libérez Messali! Algérie pour les Algériens!" was carried.' But as Algerians shouted nationalist slogans, 'cries of "Vive Pétain" came from the windows overlooking the street.' The police fired.

Like the PCF, the PCA saw the events through the lens of anti-fascism. Messali Hadj was the charismatic and radical head of the country's leading nationalist organization, the Parti du peuple algérien (Algerian people's party, PPA), launched in 1937. The PCA immediately blamed the PPA for its 'Hitlerian' slogans; the PPA responded that the demonstrations had been peaceful and that Messali was neither anti-union nor pro-fascist but for national liberation.

On 8 May the Allies accepted Germany's unconditional surrender. As Europeans in Algeria celebrated VE day, Messali's PPA and the Amis du manifeste et de la liberté (AML, Friends of the manifesto and freedom), launched in 1944 by the moderate Ferhat Abbas, held demonstrations demanding their own liberation. In Algiers and Oran, where the violence of 1 May had been followed by mass arrests, there were no demonstrations. And in most towns and cities the demonstrations took place peacefully.

But not so in the Department of Constantine. In the politicized town of Sétif, some 8,000-

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7 H. M. Consul General, 14 May 1945; A bas les provocateurs Hitlériens; Peuple Algérien; all TNA FO 371: 49275.
10,000 demonstrators gathered on 8 May, inspired by the formation of the United Nations. While the AML's Ferhat Abbas and Chérif Saâdane waited at the governor-general's office in Algiers to congratulate him on the Allied victory, police in Sétif opened fire and killed some of the demonstrators for refusing to lower the Algerian flag. It was market day – peasants going to market, hearing the news, began attacking Europeans. By late morning, perhaps several dozen people had died. Two Communists, Amar Ouzegane and Henri Alleg, were driving back to Algiers that day; by the time they reached Sétif between noon and one pm, the streets were deserted and strangely quiet. They did not realize until later that Albert Denier, the local Communist leader they had planned to see, had been severely attacked and that the socialist mayor Deluca, a friend of Abbas, had been killed. Although essentially a battle between Algerians and their colonizers, political discord amongst Europeans also played a role: conservative Europeans in the region had vowed revenge for anti-corruption policies seen as left-wing.

The news was carried across the region by travellers in buses or cars. After leaving Sétif, Ouzegane and Alleg were stopped by a group of Algerians but allowed to continue; driving on, they passed military trucks proceeding towards the embattled region. A taxi carried the news to Périgotville – a crowd of peasants gathered, cries of jihad were heard. Elsewhere, villagers attacked European settlements and symbols of colonial authority. That afternoon around five pm violence broke out in Guelma, a rural town that was about 80 per cent Muslim. The sous-préfet, André Achiary, had already banned demonstrations on 4 May, but on the 8th a crowd carrying an Algerian flag met him head on. Police fired, the flag carrier and three others fell. This was a signal: the next day peasants from surrounding villages converged on Guelma, attacking European farms en route.

The region erupted. Telephone lines were sabotaged, houses of the hated forest rangers burned. Some 10,000 troops were called to the region; planes bombed and strafed villages and mountain settlements. By 13 May the authorities had quelled the insurrection and regained control of northern Constantine. In a show of solidarity with their compatriots in Constantine, albeit out of sync with events there, PPA leaders in the


Aux Autorités Anglaises et Alliés, 8 May 1945, TNA FO 371: 49275.


Sivan: Communisme et Nationalisme (see FN 8), 140, 143.
department of Algiers called for a general insurrection. Government property in Oran was attacked on 18 May, and in Kabylia, on 23 May; a plot to attack the military headquarters at Cherchell was foiled. Eventually the might of colonial forces squashed the rebellion.12

But European civilians went on a rampage, slaughtering tens of thousands of Algerians across the Constantine region, village after village subjected to mass summary executions, before the blood-letting finally ceased. The mass attack continued until early June. All told some 103 Europeans died and unknown tens of thousands of Algerians. The official report grossly underestimated Algerians deaths at 1,165, while PPA and AML leaders put the Algerian toll at 45,000, claiming genocide and likening the events to the Nazi atrocities. Scholarly reports vary – perhaps 20,000-30,000 Algerians died; perhaps more. At Guelma, Achiary organized a civilian militia, setting a pattern followed by other European communities. The vigilance committee that controlled the militia included a large majority of leftists, including members of Fighting France and the PCA; several Communists were involved in the murders of Algerians. There, as but one example, cadavers of about 500 Algerians were trucked away and burned in a quicklime oven owned by a local European.13

The Constantine uprising marked 'the first time', commented historian John Ruedy, that 'the dispossessed and pauperized masses of the countryside...had linked up for meaningful action with a nationalist movement that urban Algerians had created and which had been spreading in the cities for fifteen years.' The urban political elites, however divided, succeeded in bringing their message to the countryside and rural towns, even if the uprising that erupted was brutally crushed. Even as the United Nations proclaimed the right to national self-determination, open democratic protest was not possible for Algerians in Algeria – this was the extraordinarily cruel lesson of Sétif.14


13 Sivan: Communisme et Nationalisme (see FN 8), 143-145; Cheylan G. / Chevlan: Victorin, in: René Gallisso (ed.): Algérie: Engagements sociaux et question nationale de la colonisation à l'indépendance, de 1830 à 1962, Ivry-sur-Seine / Paris 2006, 218; Planche: Sétif (see FN 8), 219, 310-312; Ageron: Histoire de l'Algérie (see FN 10), 573-574, cites the Tubert report, which puts the European death toll at 103 and the Courier Algérien, which puts it at 88; Martha Crenshaw: The effectiveness of terrorism in the Algerian War, in: Martha Crenshaw (ed.): Terrorism in Context, University Park 1995, 473-513, 479, states that estimates range between 15,000 and 45,000; Benot: Massacres coloniaux (see FN 8), 13-14.

14 Ruedy: Modern Algeria (see FN 12), 149-50. The sources vary on the number arrested and sentenced: compare Ruedy with Ageron: Histoire de l'Algérie (see FN 10), 575.
The news may have spread like wildfire amongst Algerians, but the European press was slow to report the events due to the impact of the censorship that accompanied the reign of political repression. What was the Communist response? The force of Algerian nationalism that May undermined Thorez’s thesis that Algeria was but a nation in formation; the murderous hatred shown by so many Europeans undermined the PCA’s claims that ordinary Europeans were not the enemy. Nonetheless, in the demonstration’s immediate aftermath, uninformed about the nature and scale of the event, the PCA and the PCF saw the events through the anti-fascist lenses. Perhaps they genuinely feared the resurgence of fascism in North Africa after its defeat in Europe. Two days after the Sétif demonstration a delegation representing the PCA and PCF − Ouzegane, Paul Caballero, Henriette Neveu and Victor Joannès − met with a representative of the governor general in Algiers and denounced ‘the provocations of Hitlerian agents in the PPA and PPF’. They castigated other ‘agents’ in supposedly democratic organizations that were actually serving imperialism, as well as ‘the fascist lords of colonization, the feudal Muslims and the high-level functionaries of the Vichy regime’. That same day the progressive Algèrie Républicaine published without commentary a government communiqué stating that ‘des éléments troubles d’inspiration et de méthodes hitlériennes se sont livrés à des agressions à main armée sur les populations qui fêtaient la victoire dans la ville de Sétif et dans les environs’ [elements aimed at agitation using Hitlerian methods indulged in armed aggression on populations celebrating victory in the city of Sétif and surrounding areas]. Two days later, L’Humanité labelled Messali Hadj and other alleged ‘pseudo-nationalists’ as ‘criminal agents’ who should be punished.

By mid-May both the PCA and PCF were aware of the extreme violence being used against Algerians – machine guns, tanks, bombs. Yet they continued condemning even moderate nationalists. On 17 May Liberté published a report dated 13 May by Roger Esplaas, its special envoy to Sétif. ‘The city is in mourning’, wrote Esplaas. ‘Everywhere, armed soldiers. Most of them are Algerian infantry. Machine guns and light machine guns at the most important crossroads….The events at Sétif were the work of the Fifth Column. That is to say, that handful of miserable agents of Hitlerism (false nationalists, lords of colonization, feudal landholders, agents of trusts).’ This was followed by five censored lines. Esplaas then pointed out that the ‘disturbances’ preceded the important upcoming municipal elections and condemned them as orchestrated provocation, while noting that

15 Sivan: Communisme et Nationalisme (see FN 8), 141, translation from French; Ruscio: Les communistes (see FN 8), 220, 224.
Muslims had saved Europeans from attacks by other Muslims. M. Neveu called for unity to ‘break the provocation of the 5th Column and of fascist imperialism’ and for the immediate suspension of Berque, the director of Muslim Affairs, and Balensi, the director of Economic Services, plus one other censored name. In the same issue Ouzegane castigated the ‘false nationalists’, those ‘informers, criminals and servants of fascism’. He claimed that none of the PPA leaders were at the head of the demonstrations and that none were wounded. He insulted former Communist Ben Ali Boukort, who was working with the PPA, as a ‘traitor’. On 31 May, L’Humanité applauded the arrests of the moderate AML leaders, Abbas and Saâdane, on whom it placed responsibility for the ‘tragic events at Sétif’. The PCA then tried to recruit the membership of the dissolved AML, which only earned it more scorn from the nationalists. Albert Camus, by contrast, was far more judicious in his assessment of Abbas and his movement.

As the horrific scale of the massacre was revealed, bit by bit, the PCA could hardly help but reassess its position, however cautiously. By the end of May, Liberté, with some of its articles censored, was condemning the repression. Chastened by Boualem Khalfa, who had witnessed the police attacks on unarmed Algerians at the 1 May demonstration in Algiers, Alger Républicain’s editor-in-chief Michel Rouzé clashed with the paper’s printer Joseph Parrès – a member of the PCA’s central committee – over the publication of a tract titled Messali l’Hitiérien [Messali the Hitlerite]. Several weeks after the initial 8 May demonstration, Rouzé travelled to the Constantine region. There he learned that tens of thousands had been slaughtered, that local Europeans had formed militias to direct and engage in the slaughter and that ovens had been built to burn the bodies. As a result of this trip, Communists in Algiers became aware of the mass slaughter.

Nonetheless, the PCA’s central committee still maintained that the ‘bloody events’ were the work of fascist provocation, which the Party had foreseen. It claimed that ‘European and Muslim masses in cities and countryside were becoming conscious of their solidarity

18 Liberté, 17 May 1945, 1, 3; translation from French; Planche: Sétif (see FN 8), 85; Ruscio: Les communists (see FN 8), 223-224.
19 According to Henri Alleg, Rouzé produced a detailed report that although censored, was publicized by José Aboulker in July. Alleg: Mémoire (see FN 10), 123-124; Alleg / Benzine / Khalfa: Grande Aventure (see FN 16), 41; Sivan: Communisme et Nationalisme (see FN 8), 140-142, 146; Jacqueline Lévi-Valensi (ed.): Camus at Combat: Writing 1944-1947, Princeton / Oxford 2006, 212-214.
20 Liberté, 24, 31 May 1945.
21 Alleg / Benzine / Khalfa: Grande Aventure (see FN 16), 39-41; Rouzé Michel, in: Gallissot: Algérie: Engagements sociaux (see FN 13), 536-538.
based on the identity of their immediate interests and the will to forge a common fraternal future'. The claim may have reflected the classic Marxist priority with class politics, but the aspiration was scarcely imaginable in light of the May events. Europeans, Muslims, and Jews were realizing more and more the historic need to live together, maintained the PCA, and 'nothing can turn them away from the historic path that leads to the formation of a national Algerian community capable of living its own life.' But it conceded the development of a ‘feeling of an original nationality linked to ideas of freedom’ and began campaigning against the heavy repression, organizing amnesty committees around the country.22

The PCA’s denunciation of the heavy repression that followed the massacre had been going on for some months, and some of its articles had been censored.23 The authorities detained any political activists they could put their hands on, and around 5,560 Algerians were arrested in the massacre's aftermath. Some were eventually released, and many were sentenced to varying terms, several hundred to life imprisonment and some 99 to 121 to death. On 24 October 1945 the PCA's political bureau called for the organization of amnesty committees to help free the political prisoners — although Ouzegane evidently asked that the PPA and AML leadership be exempted from amnesty on the grounds that they were 'antifrançais'. Over the next months Liberté called for amnesty and the 'annulment of racist sentences'. Only around late 1945-early 1946 did the PCA abandon its attacks on the nationalist leaders.24

If Ouzegane assailed the nationalist leadership as anti-French, there were good reasons for seeing the PCA as a French party, and this was the stigma that it bore in the eyes of most Algerians. By the end of 1945 the PCA's membership had grown to eight or nine thousand, and Liberté had 25,000 subscribers and a print run of 115,000. But its

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22 Manifeste du Parti communiste algérien. Union pour le progrès et la liberté. Vive l’Algérie démocratique! (12 Août 1945), in: Claude Collot / Jean-Robert Henry (eds.): Le Mouvement National Algérien: Textes 1912-1954, Paris 1978, 208-212, 209-210, translation from French; Sivan: Communisme et Nationalisme (see FN 8), 152; Rey-Goldzeiguer: Aux origines de la guerre (see FN 8), 359. Even in 1962 the PCA had still not come to terms with the depth of European racism, claiming in 'For a Free Algerian Republic', 35, that the massacre was ‘carried out under de Gaulle’s orders in May-June of 1945.’

23 Liberté, 24 May 1945 contained censored articles; Larbi Bouhali: Après les incidents de Sétif, la répression se trompe d’adresse, Liberté, 31 May 1945, 1; Ruscio: Les communistes (see FN 8), 226.


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members were still disproportionately European, and its new leaders had been trained by the French communist delegates of 1943/44. The Party might accurately be described as the ‘avant-garde’ of anti-Nazi resistance – but not of anti-colonial resistance, the struggle that the overwhelming majority of the indigenous people saw as their greatest need and that shaped their politics.  

The PCA had taken heart in the gains it made in the July 1945 municipal elections – gains possible because the PPA and AML, both illegal and with many of their leaders and members imprisoned, refused to contest the elections; about 40 per cent of potential Algerian voters boycotted the elections. However, European voters came out solidly for the Fighting France candidates, who endorsed both assimilation and the ordinance of 7 March 1944. Even the conservative city of Sidi bel Abbès voted Socialists and Communists into office.

The PCA saw its electoral success that autumn as a vindication of its policies. The ethnic polarization evidenced by the May 1945 events propelled the French government to consider the reform of Algerian political institutions. Three constituent assemblies were planned. With Algerians now legally entitled to vote for the same number of delegates as Europeans, elections for the first Constituent Assembly were scheduled for October 1945. Both Messali Hadj and Ferhat Abbas urged their followers to boycott the elections; 52 percent of the potential electorate did so. Not surprisingly, the thirteen Algerians elected were generally assimilationists like Mohamed Bendjelloul or government candidates. Despite the boycott, the PCA contested the elections, winning 135,000 votes or close to 20 per cent of the total. It won more than 80,000 votes in the first European college, and two Communists, Ouzegane and Mohamed Chouadria, were elected to the second Algerian college.

When Ouzegane reported on the PCA's political situation a few months later he was very optimistic. He still described the events of 8 May 1945 as a fascist conspiracy, but blamed the massacre on the organizers of the reprisals and the initiators of the civilian militias – Berque, Lestraude-Carbonnel (former prefect of Constantine), Duval (general and

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26 Ruedy: Modern Algeria (see FN 12), 150-151; Lévi-Valensi: Camus at Combat (see FN 19), 234; Sivan: Communisme et Nationalisme (see FN 8), 152.
former commander of the Constantine division) and Achiary - none of whom had ever been arrested. The PCA was thriving, he noted, and its membership had tripled since before the war. Indeed, in the regions of Algiers and Médéa the Party was attracting young nationalists who had earlier been sceptical, if not hostile, towards it. However, its recruitment of Muslim workers in ports, railways, agricultural domains and on large farms was not keeping up with its growing influence. The pressing need was to work for democracy. As Stalin had put it, Ouzegane argued, the more democracy was strengthened, the weaker national oppression would become. Thus, the need to campaign for amnesty for political prisoners. While the PCA supported the right to self-determination, it was not in Algeria's interest to demand divorce from a democratic France that was also fighting against the large economic trusts that were damaging Algeria. Thus the PCA stressed four main points: reaffirm the Algerian personality by recognizing the equal official status of the Arabic language; equal rights for all; abolition of repressive colonial regimes, especially in militarized zones; increased agricultural production and rapid industrial development. Still based mainly in European civil society, the PCA was committed to democratic rights for individuals and classes, but not, at this point, to independence.

**Algerianizing the Party**

Yet despite the PCA's professed optimism, the horrific extent of the massacre in Constantine compelled it to reassess its views on nationalism. From 1946 it pursued a policy of indigenization with notable success. The rise of anti-colonial feeling that had developed following the arrival of Anglo-American forces in North Africa in November 1942 and had been reinforced by the Sétif massacre was felt in the PCA as well as in the nationalist organizations. Young politicized Algerians concerned with the problem of economic inequality found that the nationalist organizations did not address this issue. Thus, once the PCA rethought its assessment of the Sétif massacre and launched its amnesty campaign, some of them turned their attention to communism.

This demographic transition was reflected in the PCA press. When the PCF deputies left for France at the war's end, the PCA took over the weekly *Liberté*, which enabled it to maintain continuity of technical staff and in the coverage of trade union issues. Although a French-language paper, as 1946 unfolded *Liberté* became Algerian in content and was often referred to by its Arabic translation, *El Hourriya*. It presented the Party's human

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face, publicizing the photos and biographies of its leading figures in its press. It was a face that was multi-ethnic and increasingly representative of Algeria; by the late 1940s, the majority of its leaders were Algerian men.

*Liberté*’s new orientation was seen not only in its greater coverage of Algerian politics, but in its discussion of cultural issues, consistent with the aim of developing an Algerian identity reflecting the predominance of the Arab and Berber peoples. The cultural emphasis reflected the politicization of Algerian and Islamic culture as a result of French colonial policies. The new editors may also have been influenced by *l’Humanité*’s use of culture in the French context.

The cultural issues discussed were far ranging. An article by Bachir Hadj Ali argued that students at *médersas* could form the elements of an avant-garde necessary for developing an Algerian culture and that *médersas* could transform themselves into universities. This was possible, contended the author, if their educational programmes were reformed, if they changed their pedagogic methods, if their professors had the same capacities as those in secular schools, and if the material demands of their students were satisfied. Many issues contained Arab and Kabyle stories, and the paper frequently carried articles discussing the need for Arabic as an official language alongside French. Ouzegane was particularly active on the language question; despite his animosity towards organized nationalist politics, he wholeheartedly pushed the need to promote Arab culture as central to building an Algerian nation. The French-language popular front newspaper, *Alger Républicain*, the most successful of left newspapers, also began employing more Algerians and giving greater coverage to Algerian themes.

The PCA’s third congress took place on 21-24 March 1946. The Party could point to a significant success in its amnesty campaign: on 7 March, following the impassioned intervention of Mohamed Chouadria, its deputy from Constantine, the National Assembly approved an amnesty law. The Party had also made progress in its Algerianization: its four-person secretariat comprised Amar Ouzegane, as political secretary, Paul Caballero, assistant political secretary, Rachid Dalibet, organizational secretary, and Larbi Bouhali, secretary for mass work. The majority of the Central Committee were Europeans, but

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29 Liberté, 3, 10 January 1946, 7 February 1946, 9, 16 May 1946; Interview with Henri Alleg, Palaiseau, 23 June 2010.
30 Sivan: Communisme et Nationalisme (see FN 8), 174-175.
seven members of its thirteen-person political bureau were Algerians. The Party's new slogan was 'Union for democracy'. It demanded defence of the peace, bread for all, and the formation of a broad democratic movement with the goal of a democratic Algeria with more justice, happiness and freedom.\footnote{Après l'émouvante intervention de Mohamed Chouadria, la loi sur l'amnistie est votée, Liberté, 7 March 1946; Lévi-Valensi: Camus at Combat (see FN 19); Paul Caballero: Congres digne d'un Grand Parti, Liberté, 28 March 1946, 1; Liberté, 28 March 1946, listed nine members of the political bureau: Ahmed Mahmoudi, Pierre Fayet, Nicolas Zannettacci, Alice Sportisse, Henriette Neveu, Roger Rouzeau, Cherif Djemad, Bouali Taleb, Abdelhamid Boudiaf; Sivan: Communisme et Nationalisme (see FN 8), 149, 163.}

That April 1946 the Constituent National Assembly debated the question of the second Electoral College. Ouzegane presented the PCA's view. He argued that the 'Algerian personality' was becoming stronger every day and that, given Algeria's 'originality', at that moment the double electoral college was best suited to the country in its development. Communists could ask from an epoch no more than it could give – classic Marxist discourse used to justify caution. Behind the PCA's gradualist approach towards electoral reform was the concern to appease European anxiety to avoid further bloodshed. The colonial lords and fascists had whipped up a 'psychosis of fear' amongst Europeans, which had resulted in the massacres in Constantine, Ouzegane argued. It was vital to avoid a repetition. The 550.000 European voters would feel swamped by the 1.200.000 Muslim voters if there were a single electoral college. Colonialist newspapers such as the Écho d'Alger – dubbed the Écho de Vichy – and the Dépèche Algérienne – the Dépèche Hitlérienne – would whip up hysteria with their cries of 'Arab peril', 'Islamic fanaticism' and 'French thrown into the sea'.\footnote{Amar Ouzegane: Discours prononcé à l'Assemblée Nationale Constituante le 5 Avril 1946 sur: « Double Collège, condition de l'Union des populations Algériennes », reprinted in: Jurquet: Révolution Nationale Algérienne (see FN 25), vol. 4, annex document 2, 394-401, 395-397, 400.}

The Party's electoral euphoria did not last. Abbas, released in March 1946, formed the Union démocratique du manifeste algérien [Democratic Union of the Algerian Manifesto] (UDMA). This decided to contest the June elections for the second Constituent Assembly, even though the PPA continued the boycott. Boukort, needing a political home, began working with the UDMA – 'a heterogeneous movement' – assessing Messali to be too sectarian.\footnote{Ben Ali Boukort: Le souffle du Dahra, Algiers 1986, 122.} The PCA urged Algerians to vote. Dubbing itself the 'party of the future', it asked Algerians 'to spread the grand idea of a democratic union of Algeria' to the most distant douar and Saharan oasis and to form a fraternal union with the French people. The proportion of those boycotting declined, but was still significant at 48 per cent. This time
the nationalists surpassed the conservatives and the communists: the UDMA won 72 per cent of the vote or eleven out of the thirteen seats. The PCA won 53.000 votes, 8.4 per cent of the total, and lost its two seats. It suffered a substantial drop in its stronghold of Algiers, down from 82.000 votes to 23.000.\(^\text{34}\)

The Party still promoted the idea that Algeria was a nation in formation, but after the shock of its electoral loss there were efforts to interpret the thesis more flexibly. In July Liberté published the view of a Muslim reader who argued that the PCA was the French political party closest to the sympathies of most Muslim Algerians. Ouzegane replied that the PCA was not a French political party, but rather the only truly Algerian political party and thus the only party able to represent all Algerians. The other parties are either French or Arab or Christian or Muslim, he wrote. 'But they are not yet Algerian.'\(^\text{35}\) It was a thoughtful argument that reflected the Party's growing tendency to see Algeria as ethnically bifurcated rather than as the product of twenty races. But this imagined community may not have made sense for those who looked to the deeply-rooted Arab-Berber tradition as the core of the Algerian nation and whose primary concern was resistance to colonialism.

That same month, on 21-22 July, the PCA's enlarged central committee elaborated its position on the national question. It aimed to be a 'truly Algerian party ... neither European, nor Muslim, nor Arab, nor French, nor Eastern, nor Western, but Algerian.' It sought to eliminate racism amongst Europeans and xenophobia amongst Muslims.\(^\text{36}\) The Party issued a unity call claiming that Algerians of all origins were already forming a stable community linked by common interests and the struggle against common enemies – namely, the trusts that dominated the Algerian economy. This community constituted the basis of the Algerian nation in formation, one blending east and west. Despite shunning the nationalists throughout the war, the PCA hoped to unite the PPA, the UDMA, the Islamic Reformist oulemas (theologians), the socialists and the trade union movement in one ecumenical Algerian national democratic front to forge a free and democratic Algeria responsible for Algerian affairs, but willing to collaborate with France.

\(^{34}\) Appel du 3\(\text{e}\) Congrès du Parti communiste algérien. Union pour la démocratie, gage du bien-être de toutes les populations algériennes (21 mars 1946), in: Collet / Henry: Mouvement National Algérien (see FN 22), 215-219, 218, translation from French; Sivan: Communisme et Nationalisme (see FN 8), 153-154.

\(^{35}\) Amar Ouzegane: Le parti communiste Algérien, parti de la nation Algérienne en formation, Liberté, 18 July 1946, 1.

\(^{36}\) Marty: La question Algérienne, in: Jurquet: Révolution Nationale Algérienne (see FN 25), vol. 4, 430.
on external matters. It called for liberty, land and bread, to be financed by seizing the goods of Vichy collaborators and profiteers of colonization. Agrarian reform was essential to this agenda. By 1 August it demanded Messali’s return and the legalization of the PPA.

The Party's greater concern with the national question was also seen in the publication – at long last – of an Arabic language monthly, *Al-Jazā’ir al-Jadîda* [L’Algérie Nouvelle or New Algeria]. Launched a few months earlier in April 1946, *Al-Jazā’ir al-Jadîda* reached a circulation of about 5,000 – average for an Arabic language publication. It included translations of articles from *Liberté*, but it also covered issues of direct interest to Muslims and Arabic speakers. Nonetheless, French remained the language of most PCA publications. Colonial educational policy led to a much higher level of literacy amongst French-speakers whether European or Algerians. Moreover, many Algerians were illiterate; thus, the demand for French-language publications exceeded that for Arabic publications. *Liberté*’s new orientation meant a drop in readership, but at a 15,000 print run, it had, for example, three times as many readers as *Al-Jazā’ir al-Jadîda*, and this phenomenon was seen with the nationalist party publications as well.

Alongside the publication of an Arabic-language monthly, there was a marked increase in the use of Arabic for oral propaganda. The Party adapted the PPA’s technique of ‘flying meetings', preaching to assemblies of people gathered at markets or mosques, and held informal discussions in cafés. Arabic was increasingly used at congresses, meetings and party schools. Thus, French was no longer the privileged language, which created difficulties for some Europeans. The Party implemented bilingualism in mixed language groups, although in urban areas French remained the dominant language, since most Europeans did not speak Arabic, and many of the Algerians who joined the Party spoke both Arabic and French. In practice, there was a spirit of tolerance and flexibility; as one example, at the Party’s central committee on 27-28 December 1947, most of the interventions by both Europeans and Algerians were in French, but both Tahar Ghomri, who worked with peasants and agricultural workers around Tlemcen, and a certain Boudida spoke in Arabic. In rural areas Arabic was used more frequently since the local Europeans were more likely to speak Arabic compared to their urban counterparts. However, only small numbers of Europeans, such as William Sportisse or the Larribère

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37 Liberté, 25 July, 1 August 1946; Alleg / Benzine / Khalfa: Grande Aventure (see FN 16), 41; Khatib: 1er juillet (see FN 24), 10-11.

38 Ageron: Histoire de l’Algérie (see FN 10), 598-599; Sivan: Communisme et Nationalisme (see FN 8), 173-174.
brothers, addressed meetings in Arabic.\textsuperscript{39}

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The softer approach towards nationalism was followed by gradual changes in the fortunes of individual leaders – the overt anti-nationalism that Ouzegane had preached was now seen as problematic. The Party’s greater concern for the national struggle made many European members uneasy, especially those concerned primarily with socioeconomic issues, and, probably, some of those who had joined once war-time conditions had liberalized. Some of them left the Party, a trend evident in 1946/47. Algerian Communists, especially the younger ones, were concerned with the fight against national oppression and were increasingly intolerant of the lack of support from their European comrades. Chouadria, for instance, had left the Party in September 1946, claiming it was harming the national struggle and that one could not be Muslim and Communist at the same time. Nonetheless, Algerians kept joining the Party.

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Not only did they join, they began to occupy key positions that enabled them to gain experience and climb the party hierarchy. Algerians became section secretaries in small and medium towns and cities, village group secretaries in rural areas and sat on regional committees. Although Europeans still held the majority on the regional secretariats in the coastal cities of Algiers, Oran and Bône, Algerians were elected to regional secretariats in the hinterland cities of Tlemcen, Blida and Constantine.

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<tr>
<th>Ethnic profile of PCA leadership: Algerians and Europeans</th>
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<tr>
<td>3\textsuperscript{rd} Congress March 1946</td>
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<tr>
<td>Secretariat</td>
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<td>Central Committee</td>
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*European majority

Adapted from Sivan: Communisme et nationalisme (see FN 8), 163.

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This ethnic transition was accompanied by a change in age composition. Most of the Algerians joining the Party in the 1940s – and also a substantial proportion of the Europeans – were born between 1920 and 1935. This reflected the success of the

\textsuperscript{39} Un niveau de discussion élevé, une ardent volonté de lutte: les interventions, Liberté, 1 January 1948, 3; Sivan: Communisme et Nationalisme (see FN 8), 173, FN 43; interview with Alleg, Palaiseau, 23 June 2010.
Jeunesse Communiste (Young Communist League) and later the Union des Jeunesses démocratiques d’Algérie (UJDA, Union of Democratic Youth of Algeria) in recruiting young Algerians. These youth organizations became stepping stones for membership in the PCA.

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<tr>
<th>Old members (pre-1942) and new members (post-1942) in the PCA’s leadership</th>
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<tr>
<td>Old</td>
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<td>Political Bureau</td>
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Adapted from Sivan: Communisme et nationalisme (see FN 8), 164.

Algerian workers who joined the Party generally did so via the trade union movement. But compared to the plebeian background of older Algerian Communists, these new members were generally more middle class; some even came from formerly-bourgeois families. Correspondingly, the PCA recruited few peasants. Not surprisingly, the formal education of this new generation was generally superior to that of the previous generation. While older Algerian Communists generally had a school certificate, the new entrants had usually attended high school or teaching training colleges. Some even had university degrees, especially those recruited into Communist cells at the University of Algiers. As Emmanuel Sivan points out, the social and professional backgrounds of the new Algerian Communist recruits were similar to those of the young Algerians joining the PPA and other nationalist organizations. Indeed, many Algerian Communists had family members in the nationalist movement. The growth in Algerian membership pushed the PCA to deal directly with the issue of national self-determination. In turn, the struggle for national self-determination in the context of increasing repression reinforced the struggle for individual democratic rights.40

For electoral reform and an Algerian assembly

In the meantime, buoyed by the UDMA’s electoral victory, Abbas proposed to the French government that Algeria should become an autonomous republic within the new French Union. This was rejected – a significant setback for the UDMA. Like the PCA, the two

40 Sivan: Communisme et Nationalisme (see FN 8), 162-166, 169; interview with Alleg, Palaiseau, 23 June 2010.
nationalist organizations saw the electoral boycott as a tactic to advance their own political parties, rather than as a strategic means to build a united anti-colonial opposition. Burnt by its failure, the UDMA boycotted the National Assembly elections that November. But Messali, released from internment, launched the *Movement pour le triomphe des libertés démocratiques* (MTLD, Movement for the Triumph of Democratic Liberties) and urged participation.

The MTLD, which operated above ground alongside the underground PPA, sought to build a plebeian constituency to rival the middle-class UDMA. The MTLD could not neatly be categorized as a political party, according to Mohammed Harbi, let alone a proletarian party. Rather, it was a ‘community of conviction’ based on a notion of unity as fusion and an organic conception of society that obscured class divisions: ‘Allah is One, the Nation is One, the People are One, truth is One.’ In such a world vision, Harbi argues, multiple political parties were hardly needed. Nor did the MTLD have a doctrine, a body of theory or schools for training cadre, as did the PCA. On the question of colonialism, it was radical, on the question of women’s rights, conservative.  

It struck a chord, winning five out of fifteen second-college seats in the National Assembly. Notable of those attracted by the MTLD was Ahmed Ben Bella, born in 1918 in Marnia (now Maghnia) in northwest Algeria, eight miles from the Moroccan border, the son of a small farmer and commercial trader. Ben Bella served in the French army during the Second World War, came into contact with the Italian resistance and received two medals for valour. Profoundly shocked and radicalized by the Sétif massacre, he joined the MTLD. Likewise, Boukort withdrew from the UDMA, finding its atmosphere ‘unbreathable’, and was soon approached by the MTLD to write for its newspaper.

Despite the PCA’s calls for a national democratic front, the nationalists remained sceptical. In December 1946 the PPA responded with its own call for a national union, one based on the coordinated efforts of ‘specifically indigenous groups, without excluding its eventual enlargement’. For the foreseeable future, this presumably meant the exclusion

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43 Ruedy: Modern Algeria (see FN 12), 150-151; Boukort: *Souffle du Dahra* (see FN 33), 122, 124-125; Boukort argues that the MTLD’s rapid switch on electoral participation led to a high rate of abstention.
of the Communists.\textsuperscript{44} The Communists’ initial response to the Constantine massacre had left Algerian nationalists with a profound distrust of the PCA, one that, with few exceptions and despite the Party’s new approach, could not be assuaged. When Mohammed Harbi, still at secondary school, approached Abdallah Toumi in Philippeville (now Skikda) for advice on how to respond to the only Communist in his school, he was told that the PCA was not an Algerian party but an offshoot of the PCF, that it always sacrificed Algerian interests to those of the Soviet Union and that it sought unity with the MTLD solely for its own benefit.\textsuperscript{45}

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The stigma of being a French party was hard to dispel, but the PCA’s response was to continue calling for democratic rights. In March 1947 its central committee demanded the suppression of the colonial administrative apparatus, along with universal franchise and an Algerian assembly. It also argued that Algeria should be recognized as an associated territory within the framework of the French Union that allowed for collaboration on external affairs with a representative of the French Republic.\textsuperscript{46} Nonetheless, Ouzegane underlined once again that the PCA was ‘a truly Algerian party’. The PCA was not, he insisted, ‘a French party in which "numerous Muslims are already active". Nor is it a Muslim party that accepted Europeans. It is quite simply Algerian.’ Perhaps it was the only truly Algerian party, he concluded, and its originality reflected that of the Algerian nation.\textsuperscript{47}

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Algerians continued to climb the PCA’s ranks. The Party’s fourth congress, held at the Algiers suburb of Maison-Carrée on 17-19 April 1947, called for ‘a free, united and democratic Algeria’. The political bureau now included nine Algerians and eight Europeans; the central committee consisted of twenty three Algerians and twenty five Europeans. There was a change in the fortunes of individual leaders: Larbi Bouhali was elected as first secretary, Caballero as second and Ouzegane demoted to third.\textsuperscript{48}

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Paul Caballero: Le comité central du parti communiste adopte un projet de statut de l’Algérie, Liberté, 13 March 1947, 1; Harbi: Vie (see FN 41), 77.

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Liberté, 10 April 1947; translation from French; bold in original.

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Khatib: 1er juillet 1956 (see FN 24), 12-13.
After much debate the second Constituent Assembly had adopted a *statut organique* or organic law that was finally passed in the French National Assembly on 20 September 1947; the Communists had initially supported the bill as a step forward but abstained in the final vote. The organic law established an Algerian Assembly of 120 members with the power to vote on budgetary matters and modify laws applicable to Algeria. But it was still based on the premise of separate ethnically-based electoral colleges; its double electoral college gave equal representation to the European minority and Algerian majority. Nonetheless, at the elections for the Algerian Assembly that October, the MTLD gained a striking victory. In response, the French government began a crackdown on nationalists. By the time of the Algerian Assembly elections in April 1948, more than one-third of all MTLD candidates were in prison. During the elections armed forces were on hand to intimidate voters, and ballot boxes went missing. Election reform was shown to be a fraud.49

The PCA demanded that the April 1948 results be annulled, yet it continued to advocate electoral participation in the belief that this provided an effective forum for publicizing its views, despite the inadequacies of the electoral system. An article in *Liberté* describing ‘Things seen in South Africa’ suggested that, judging by the harsh conditions of underground mine work, the prison-like conditions of mining compounds and the absence of black political representatives, South African blacks were far worse off than Algerians. At least Algerians had some political representation; in South Africa only whites were in Parliament.50

By contrast, disillusionment with electoral fraud led to a rethink within the ranks of the MTLD. Thus, Ben Bella, disenchanted with what he saw as the MTLD’s ineffectual approach, joined the clandestine *Organisation spéciale*. This had been launched in 1947 by Hocine Aït Ahmed, who came from a well-to-do Kabyle family, and it was strongest in the east. Like the underground PPA, the *Organisation spéciale* was dedicated to the goal of independence; unlike the PPA, it was prepared to use any means necessary to achieve

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49 Ruedy: Modern Algeria (see FN 12), 150-152; Horne: Savage War (see FN 42), 39, 69-70; William H. Lewis: The Decline of Algeria’s FLN, *Middle East Journal*, 20, 2, Spring 1966, 161-172, 163; Rey-Goldziegier: Aux origins (see FN 8), 360; Heggoy: Insurgency (see FN 42), 30-32, 36; Khatib: 1er juillet 1956 (see FN 24), 20; Sivan: Communisme et Nationalisme (see FN 8), 178; Liberté, 22, 29 May, 5 June 1947.

50 Liberté, 22 April 1948, 1; Choses vues en Afrique du Sud: Nus et affamés, des centaines de milliers d'esclaves travaillent à extraire l'or et les diamants sous la férule de Smuts, le “boy” des hommes d'affaires, Liberté, 6 March 1947, 5.
this. Indicative of its approach was its armed raid on Oran's main post office to obtain funds. By 1949 Ben Bella and Aït Ahmed were its leading figures.\textsuperscript{51}

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The MTLD became rapidly factionalized; its organic notion of unity proved unstable. On one side was a faction whose politics reflected an urban communist-influenced popular front approach, on another side, an Arabophone faction sympathetic to Islamic reformism, and on a third side, a Francophone faction sympathetic to republican ideals. If ethnic tension within the PCA revolved around the Algerian-European division, within the nationalist movement the Arab-Berber division was a source of antagonism. Ideological and ethnic tensions arose over both an Islamic as opposed to a secular approach and an Arab as opposed to an Algerian movement encompassing Berbers. This was often known as the Berber crisis in that many Berbers objected to what they felt was Arab dominance of the movement. But the issue was more complex. Sadek Hadjerès, for example, wanted space to discuss the Berber question as well as issues of social justice; for him the dispute concerned the lack of democracy within the movement, which made it impossible to hold discussions. The MTLD's politics were further complicated by the division between those advocating legal political struggle, who pointed in warning to the Sétif massacre, and those advocating a more militant approach, who pointed to the failure of meaningful electoral reform. On top of these tensions was the personality cult developing around Messali.\textsuperscript{52}

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The MTLD's factional wrangling facilitated the PCA's expansion. By the end of 1948 the Party counted some 12,000-15,000 members, most of whom were Algerian. According to one report, the Party had five times the number of members than it had had in 1939, and three times the number of late 1946.\textsuperscript{53} The Party's growth was also helped by the PCF's diminishing involvement, signalled by the departure of Henriette and Raymond Neveu, Jean Papeau and Théodore Mallet in early 1949. This left the PCA freer to develop its own positions, and its discourse became more militant. At its fifth congress on 26-29 May 1949 in Oran, it demanded national liberation, with Bouhali arguing that 'in our country ... without distinction of race or religion, we communists want to build a democratic Algerian


\textsuperscript{52} Harbi: Vie (see FN 41), 113-116; Ruedy: Modern Algeria (see FN 12), 153-154; interview with Sadek Hadjerès, Paris, 24 March 2011.

\textsuperscript{53} Sivan: Communisme et nationalisme (see FN 8), 168, FN 24.
The underground *Organisation spéciale* was also growing, albeit on a smaller scale. Over its first two years it attracted some 1,000 to 1,500 fighters. But in March 1950 it was decimated by a police crackdown that led to the arrest of 363 members and the imprisonment of 197. Those members not picked up by the police fled to Egypt or France or to the Aurès, to form the underground *maquis*; Ben Bella, escaping from prison, ended up in Cairo. The attack on the *Organisation spéciale* split the MTLD. The majority of the central committee, with Messali’s support, declared the *Organisation spéciale* dissolved; for them, its destruction signalled the futility of revolutionary methods.55

The PCA continued to benefit from the MTLD's disarray and from the middle-class UDMA's declining membership; it offered a measuring rod against which young radicalized Algerians could discuss and evaluate the MTLD. The Party was extremely active in trade unions and in the campaigns against repression and for peace. The first quarter of 1950 saw escalating strikes, in which Communist trade union leaders played important roles. The Party had influence in the ports, which experienced a series of strikes in late 1949 and early 1950. By then, dockers' strikes were 'endemic'.56 The *Confédération générale du travail* events organized for 1 May were, in the words of the British Consul General, 'mainly attended by ignorant native elements', while Europeans took the day as a holiday. 'The greater part of the Communist following in this country is to be found among the native element of the population', reported the British Consul General in May 1950. In late July 1950 the PCA's central committee resolved that the national liberation struggle must be the first concern of every Communist and that it was the duty of each Communist to rally all Algerian patriots, irrespective of origin or religion, to the struggle.57

But the Party's strength, not surprisingly, lay in urban areas. Over the past several years it had been paying more attention to the land question, appointing a secretary to oversee

54 Khatib: 1er juillet (see FN 24), 14; Sivan: Communisme et nationalisme (see FN 8), 178; Ageron: Histoire de l’Algérie (see FN 10), 600.

55 Harbi: Vie (see FN 41), 113-116; Ruedy: Modern Algeria (see FN 12), 153-154.

56 Bi-monthly political summary, January-February, March-April 1950, 2, Algeria: Monthly political summary, May 1950, TNA FO 371:80610; Khatib: 1er juillet (see FN 24), 15; interview with Hadjerès (see FN 52).

57 Algeria: Bi-monthly political summary, 5 May 1950, 1-2, TNA FO 371:80610.
rural membership. Recruitment drives took place around Tlemcen and in the Aurès and, later, in the area south of Orléansville, Kabylia, the Tell, and the eastern part of the southern territories. Village groups were formed – a cross between a communist cell and a section of the Party's peripheral organizations – with local people in charge of propaganda and recruitment. Nonetheless, rural groups counted perhaps one thousand members in all; the Party's rural strongholds were around Tlemcen and Orléansville. Peasant communities may well have been interested in the Party's positions on land and rural development, but conservative Muslims looked askance at the Party's call for the right to vote for Muslim women. The PCA had more success making inroads in urban Algerian civil society than it did in rural areas.

**United fronts...**

In November 1950 the PCA's central committee approached the MTLD and UDMA with a proposal for a *Charte d'unité et d'action* [Charter of union and action], the aim of which would be the formation of a national democratic front to fight for independence – an Algerian democratic republic with its own constitution, parliament and government. But the logic of unity was not readily apparent to nationalists. As but one example, local MTLD leaders in Philippeville saw little sense in unity with groups that were not representative of their community when they themselves had much popular support.

The PCA's unity appeals were not limited to joint activity over Algerian conditions. As part of the international communist network, the Party followed and reported on liberation struggles across the colonial world, especially those in Vietnam, Morocco and Tunisia. Vietnam had been occupied by Japan during the Second World War, and France saw its return as a point of honour that was central to its plans for the French Union. But caught between the spiralling Cold War and the deepening anti-colonial movement, French re-occupation was heavily contested, and by 1950 France was already suffering military setbacks. The PCA had appealed to the MTLD and UDMA in October 1949 and March 1950 for a joint stand against war in Vietnam. The UDMA never responded and the MTLD refused. Some nationalists even criticized the Party for turning their attention away from Algeria. It had more success organizing dockworkers in the ports of Oran to refuse to handle ships en route to Vietnam, a refusal that cost the workers dearly in view of the mounting repression.

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58 Sivan: Communisme et nationalisme (see FN 8), 169, 171-172.
59 Khatib: 1er juillet (see FN 24), 18-19; Harbi: Vie (see FN 41), 87.
60 Martin Shipway: Decolonization and its impact: A comparative approach to the end of the colonial
Yet the grinding repression made some type of united action necessary, if not inevitable. 'A few words of solidarity' in support of popular struggles in Vietnam, Morocco, and Tunisia, or 'the word "independence" used in a speech or an article' were enough to be charged, tried and condemned for undermining state security. More and more activists were thrown into prison. Some withdrew from politics; others threw themselves into a frenzy of activity, told by their leaders, both Communists and nationalists, to focus on the struggle against repression. Political trials became the order of the day. The trial of Abane Ramdane and co-accused began on 25 January 1951 at Bougie. February saw the start of the trial of those charged with the Oran post office raid.

Over time the PCA's appeals for united action finally bore some fruit. Joint collaboration on amnesty committees and shared experiences of imprisonment helped to dispel some of the nationalists' suspicions. In March 1951 activists in Tébessa launched a committee against repression and appealed to the three main political organizations for some type of unity. On 11 June another political trial, this time of 128 persons, began in Bône.

Legislative elections were scheduled for 17 June, during the trial of the 128. The elections were marred by massive fraud. The next month representatives of the PCA, MTLD, UDMA and the oulemas met in Algiers to launch the Front Algérien pour la défense et le respect des libertés [Algerian Front for the defence and the respect of liberties]. The committee launching the Algerian Front gave as its rationale the consistent mockery since 1948 of Algerian rights, especially the right of Algerians to vote and express their opinions. It called for the annulment of the 17 June elections, denounced the falsification of electoral results and police use of torture and demanded an end to repression. Its programme called for freedom to vote in the second college, freedom of belief, opinion, press and meetings, the release of all political prisoners, the lifting of the repressive measures imposed on Messali Hadj, and the end of administrative interference in Muslim religious affairs. It was, reported Liberté, 'the first decisive step on the path to unity for national independence'.

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62 Alleg et al.: Guerre d'Algérie, vol. 1 (see FN 61), 326-327, 357.
63 Quoted in: Khatib: 1er juillet (see FN 41), 29, translation from French; Communiqué du comité d'initiative pour la formation d'un front algérien pour la défense et le respect de la liberté (25 juillet 1951), in: Collot / Henry (ed.): Mouvement National, 289-290; Sivan: Communisme et nationalisme (see FN 8), 185; Alleg et al.: Guerre d'Algérie (see FN 61), vol. 1, 277-278.

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The Algerian Front's first general assembly took place on 5 August. It appealed to all Algerians irrespective of opinion, race or religion to support its aims in publicizing the lack of political rights for Algerians. Its mandate was narrow in order not to restrict the freedom of any of the participating groups in their activities outside the front. The plan was to form committees and subcommittees around the country, which were to hold meetings and send resolutions to relevant political authorities, and to launch a press campaign in both Algeria and France, to publicize Algerian political conditions.  

But to practice unity proved far more difficult than to call for it. The Algerian Front's first difficulty occurred over the issue of electoral participation when the PCA refused to support the nationalist boycott of the departmental elections scheduled for October 1951. The PCA’s central committee had apparently decided to support the boycott at the insistence of Bachir Hadj Ali and Ahmed Akkache, who wanted to maintain the front’s unity. However, the PCF, concerned that such an anti-colonialist action would have jeopardized its own united front activities in France, sent Léon Feix back to Algeria to convince the Party to participate. A new central committee meeting was called and sufficient numbers switched their position; clearly, the PCF was still able to exert psychological pressure over the PCA. By one account, Akkache was furious when the meeting ended and Bachir Hadj Ali had tears in his eyes. The PCF’s influence over the PCA merely confirmed nationalist perceptions that it was not really Algerian, but French. Nonetheless, when Ahmed Akkache presented the front's first balance sheet in January 1952, he could point to successes. Due to its pressure, the sentences meted out to strikers at Descartes had been reduced, the colonialist provocations in the Aurès had failed and hunger strikers in Oran and Orléansville had been helped. In the meantime, the PCA was continuing its amnesty campaign: November 1951 had seen the start of yet another political trial, that of the *Organisation spéciale* leaders – the trial of 56 – in Blida, and the PCA was demanding that the prisoners be released.

The PCA's sixth – and last – congress took place at Hussein-Dey on 21-24 February 1952, with the renowned French Communist André Marty in attendance. 'It is clear', stated Bouhali in his report to the congress, 'that our people's first concern is to live freely and

64 Programme d'action proposé par le Comité d'initiative et adopté par l'assemblée générale du 5 août 1951, 290-291; and: Résolution adoptée par l'assemblée générale de constitution du Front algérien le 5 août 1951, 291, both in: Collot / Henry: Mouvement National (see FN 22).

65 Sivan: Communisme et nationalisme (see FN 8), 192-193; interview with Hadjerès (see FN 52); Ahmed Akkache: Premier bilan du Front Algérien, Liberté, 3 January 1952, 1; Libérer les "56", Liberté, 10 January 1952, 1; Alleg et al.: Guerre d'Algérie (see FN 61), 357-361.

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In the wake of the Chinese revolution, the struggles in Vietnam, Morocco and Tunisia made it clear that colonized peoples were no longer willing to accept their oppression. Liberté's readers were well aware of these international struggles through its regular coverage of them. 'In the struggle for our country's liberation, which will be the work of all Algerians together, we communists have as our only ambition to be among the best combatants, in the first rank of all the patriots.' The Party called for national independence, and for bread, peace and land through united action on national territory; 'Agissons unis sur le sol national' (Let us act together on national territory) became a frequent refrain.

The Party had spent much time developing its political strategy. The struggle for a sovereign national assembly was critical. This national assembly would be elected on the basis of direct, universal suffrage 'by all Algerians without distinction of origin' through secret ballot. As a transitional step, the two principal ethnic groups of the Algerian people would have representation in proportion to their numerical importance – this emphasis on the Arab-Berber Muslim majority represented a significant revision of Thorez's original concept of the nation in formation. The national assembly would then draw up a constitution for a democratic Algerian republic. In the Party's view, it was in the mutual interests of the Algerian and French peoples that a future Algerian republic should establish economic and cultural relations with France that were free and based on equal rights. But the Party could only express its interests on this matter, not stipulate the relationship with France in advance.67

The sixth congress reinforced the Party's Algerianization. By now the ethnic composition of both the political bureau and the central committee had shifted considerably to reflect the growth in Algerian membership; the secretariat consisted of Bouhali, Hadj Ali, Caballero, Akkache and André Moine. Liberté published articles on racism in the Party, and the congress resolved to expel European members engaged in discriminatory practices – certainly some European members must have felt uncomfortable, even if others supported this initiative. The congress also resolved to reorganize the Party so that sections composed primarily of Algerians – whether in predominantly Algerian

neighbourhoods or in predominantly Algerian occupations, such as dockers, miners, tram workers or dustmen − received special support.\(^{68}\)

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Across the national movement, further unity efforts were taking place. The potential for unity was signalled, firstly, by the fact that Communists as well as nationalists were reconceptualising the Algerian nation in a similar fashion. On the one hand, the growing numbers of Algerians in the PCA were pushing for a rethink on the nation in formation thesis. Communists such as Ahmed Inal, Abdelaziz Ben Miloud, André Akoun and Mokrane Ould Aoudia privately recognized the weight of the Arab-Berber population within the Algerian nation, but, loyal to the Party, defended Thorez's thesis in public. Similarly, the MTLD and UDMA envisioned an inclusive Algerian nation comprising all those who wished to belong to it, irrespective of race or religion. The MTLD, for example, condemned racism, the 'doctrine of the contempt of one man by another of different blood or colour.' Algerians of European descent who became Algerian citizens would have equal rights, it stressed. Likewise, it argued, 'liberatory nationalism' could never be based on 'a principle of action that was essentially religious in nature.' While the national movement aimed to liberate the Muslim religion from colonialism, it was not a religious organization seeking to convert men of different religions.\(^{69}\)

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The potential for unity was further indicated by a common interest in coordinating anti-colonial activity across the Maghreb. Thus, the MTLD and UDMA attempted to create a regional alliance of nationalist parties in Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco – albeit, an alliance that excluded Communists. But regional coordination was particularly difficult and remained limited in scope and activity.\(^{70}\)

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Yet within Algeria, unity could seem to be an impossible dream – the Algerian Front was proving fragile. Its second breakdown concerned the arrest of Messali Hadj in May 1952 and his deportation to Niort, France. The MTLD called a strike for 23 May to protest against Messali's deportation and police brutality towards Muslim demonstrators in Orléansville. The PCA and the Communist-aligned Confédération générale du

\(^{68}\) Sivan: Communisme et Nationalisme (see FN 8), 163, 215, 218, 220-224; Khatib: 1er juillet (see FN 41), 15-16; Heggy: Insurgency (see FN 42), 248. Railway workers and functionaries, by contrast, were primarily European in composition.

\(^{69}\) Harbi: Vie (see FN 41), 160; Principes directeurs de la lutte du mouvement national algérien (M.T.L.D., décembre 1951), in: Collot / Henry: Mouvement National (see FN 22), 300-304.

\(^{70}\) Création du Front d'unité et d'action des Partis nationaux maghrébins (2 février 1952), 292; and: Pacte nord-africain (2-2-1952), 292-293, both in: Collot / Henry: Mouvement National (see FN 22).
travail supported the strike, but not so the UDMA and the oulemas, who were concerned about retaliation. Popular support was uneven. European workers, even those organized by the Communists, generally failed to come out in support of Algerian rights. Nonetheless, the MTLD continued to signal the need for a united front, arguing that the Algerian Front had not lived up to popular hopes and had, to some extent, devalued unity as a method of struggle. The MTLD hoped, however, that the front could be revived and that the Algerian national movement could learn from its North African brothers in Tunisia and Morocco. Despite such appeals, the Algerian Front lapsed into inactivity.

Despite this setback, in late 1953 the PCA and MTLD signalled their desire for a new national front. In key respects their views on the demise of the Algerian Front and the pressing need for unity converged. On 1 November 1953 the PCA central committee appealed for a national democratic Algerian front. Political parties as such could not achieve the end of colonialism, it argued, only a united people could. The Algerian Front had yielded some successes, despite the limitations of its very confined programme and the lack of clear political perspectives. The PCA, therefore, proposed the launch of a national democratic front on the basis of a minimum programme that included:

- General amnesty for all victims of colonial repression, including the release of all progressive prisoners, the end of all racially discriminatory measures and the termination of Messali’s exile;
- Respect for all democratic liberties recognized by the French constitution and application of the progressive measures of the Statute of Algeria, including suppression of mixed communes and southern territories;
- Support for the economic and social demands of the popular masses, including urban and rural workers, peasants, artisans, small traders, former combatants, and the unemployed;
- Education for all children and official status as well as teaching of the Arabic language;
- Withdrawal of Algeria from the Atlantic Pact;
- Repatriation of Algerian troops from Vietnam and no further use of Algerians in imperialist wars;

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71 Sivan: Communisme et nationalisme (see FN 8), 184-186, 192-195; Khatib: 1er juillet (see FN 41), 28-30; Harbi: Vie (see FN 41), 90-91, dates the elections in which the PCA participated against the nationalists’ wishes as April 1951, which was before the Front’s formation. In May 1953 primarily Algerian Communists supported demonstrations for increased rights for Algerians. Sivan: Communisme et nationalisme (see FN 8), 210, 213-216.

72 Déclaration du M.T.L.D. à propos de l’union des forces nationales algériennes, in: Collot / Henry: Mouvement National (see FN 22), 292-293.
Defence of peace.\textsuperscript{73}

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The MTLD responded on 10 December by calling for an Algerian national congress that would draw up a charter of the Algerian people. The MTLD put forward a programme of action similar in content to that of the PCA's, although more detailed. This was to be based on four fundamental principles: 1) that Algeria was a nation; 2) that Algeria should have the right to self-determination recognized by the UN Charter, which France had signed; 3) that a sovereign national assembly should be elected by all Algerians based on direct universal suffrage; and 4) that a democratic and social republican state should be formed. Yet when the PCA tried to pursue this, the MTLD stalled, arguing that it was precipitous to launch the Algerian national congress before the idea was popularized amongst the masses. The Algerian Front had failed, argued the MTLD, precisely because it was a top-down entente of political parties rather than a mass organization, and any union not based on a popular foundation would likewise fail.\textsuperscript{74}

...and fragmentation

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The next year the MTLD ruptured, precluding further development of this agenda. In spring 1953 the MTLD had resolved, with controversy, to allow the Organisation spéciale to regroup. Factions had crystallized around the central committee or 'centralists', on the one side, and Messali and his followers – the Messalistes – on the other. In March 1954 a tiny group of Organisation spéciale members and sympathizers formed the Comité révolutionnaire pour l'unité et l'action with the aim of reconciling the divided MTLD. In June 1954 Messali's supporters declared their exiled leader president for life of the MTLD and authorized the dissolution of the central committee. This led to a major rupture; centralists and Messalistes vied for control of the organization, a rivalry culminating in murders. Two months later, in August, the central committee responded to the Messalistes by expelling Messali and his followers.\textsuperscript{75}

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By mid-1954, the Comité révolutionnaire had 22 members, mostly young men with

\textsuperscript{73} Appel solennel du Comité central du Parti communiste algérien pour un Front national démocratique algérien (1\textsuperscript{er} novembre 1953), in: Collet / Henry: Mouvement National (see FN 22), 319-324, especially 322-323; Khatib: 1\textsuperscript{er} juillet (see FN 41), 110.

\textsuperscript{74} Appel du Comité central du M.T.L.D. pour un Congres national algérien (10 décembre 1953), 324-330, especially 329; and: Réponse du M.T.L.D. à une lettre du P.C.A. à propos du Congres national algérien, 331, both in: Collot / Henry: Mouvement National (see FN 22).

\textsuperscript{75} Ruedy: Modern Algeria (see FN 12), 153-154; Harbi: Vie (see FN 41), 93-137.
elementary or secondary school education who came from small towns or villages. Unable to put an end to the MTLD's endless internal strife, its plan was to launch a guerrilla struggle and build a broad national liberation front. But the group was infiltrated by a police mole; while it planned armed struggle, so the French state and its colonial authorities were planning their own moves. The group soon dissolved itself. As one of its leaders put it, it had been formed to prevent a split, and it had failed.\(^{76}\)

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On 5 July the PCA called for an assembly of all anti-colonialists, irrespective of opinion, class, religion or origin. The intention was to form a national front that would take into account the experience of the Algerian Front. Noting the disarray and confusion caused by the MTLD's split, it claimed that the immediate cause of the split lay in Messali's refusal to convene a national congress, which the centralists had proposed. From the Party's perspective the problem was how to build unity in the face of this split.\(^{77}\) Political amnesty remained the centre of its activity. It continued to demand democratic rights: respect for democratic liberties, the vote for Muslim women, the application of all progressive legal dispositions concerning the use of Arabic, the suppression of regimes of communes mixtes, solidarity with the people of Tunisia and Morocco and peace in Vietnam and the return of Algerian troops.\(^{78}\)

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By September 1954 the PCA had further developed its thinking on independence. The Party outlined three fundamental principles as the basis for its strategy and tactics: firstly, that communists oppose all forms of national oppression, secondly, that communists support the right of peoples to dispose of themselves freely, including the right to separation, thirdly, that separation is not positive in all cases - the right to divorce does not imply the obligation to divorce. Following these principles, it argued that the form of national independence should be decided by a democratic election based on universal franchise for a sovereign national assembly; in this assembly ethnic groups should have proportionate representation. The assembly would then draw up a constitution, and hereupon the Algerian people could freely determine their relationship with France. The concept of the nation in formation laid the basis for Algerians of European origin to become full citizens in an independent Algeria, but if they opted to remain French, they would live in Algeria as French citizens, just as Algerian citizens lived in France.

\(^{76}\) Collot / Henry: Mouvement National (see FN 22), 332-340; Harbi: Vie (see FN 41), 125.

\(^{77}\) Boualem Khalfa: Que devient le problème de l'union après la scission au M.T.L.D.?, Liberté, 9 September 1954.

\(^{78}\) Les travaux de la session du comité central de notre parti, Liberté, 8 July 1954, 2.
To achieve these ends, the Party rejected the 'all or nothing' approach. Thus, it fought for reforms as well as independence, seeking to implement the rights that were in principle allowed by the present French constitution. This included suppression of the regimes in mixed communes and in the southern territories, freedom of the Muslim religion, recognition of Arabic as an official language as well as a language of instruction, and the right to vote for Muslim women. Instead of an actual Algerian assembly, the PCA proposed the election of a representative assembly to meet with French representatives to discuss future Algerian institutions and future relations between the two countries. It called for bread, peace and land and a united struggle on national soil in which each group could also fight for its own interests. It argued for multiple methods of struggle, including petitions, demonstrations, short and prolonged strikes, or all of these combined. Electoral campaigns were also a type of struggle despite the restrictions on them, thus its decision to participate in elections in spite of the abstention of the nationalist parties. The level or intensity of struggle would develop along with the political maturity of the proletariat and the national movement and might involve compromise with the adversary. This would be positive if it helped to advance the struggle, but otherwise it should be rejected.79

It is striking that armed struggle was not mentioned, but that would have put the Party at risk of further repression. Yet, the idea of armed struggle was in the air. Liberté provided regular coverage of the war in Vietnam. With the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu, its reports drew the lessons of the Vietnam victory for the Algerian struggle. 'Here is the "secret" of the victories of the popular Vietnamese army', it reported, quoting Vietminh leaders proclaiming that 'the people are our forest...the people love the army'. Likewise, Larbi Bouhali stressed that the Vietnamese victory was due to its united struggle on national soil.80 Thus even though the PCA itself was not considering armed struggle – and indeed hoped to avoid bloodshed – it nonetheless disseminated positive views about guerrilla war.

79 La politique nationale du Parti Communiste Algérien (deuxième partie), Liberté, 9 September 1954, 2.
Conclusion

Over the nine years from the time of the Sétif massacre, the PCA had travelled a tremendous distance. Part of the explanation for this is demographic. The Party resolved to indigenize at a moment of anti-colonial ferment. It offered a vision of a future society that embraced socioeconomic and political concerns and thus attracted radicalized young Algerians who were dissatisfied with nationalist politics. In turn, this demographic change – its successful indigenization – enabled the PCA to respond to the rapidly evolving events of the late 1940s and early 1950s.

By November 1954, when the newly-formed Front de Libération Nationale (FLN) launched armed struggle, the PCA had developed a programme of democratic rights based on respect for individual liberty, organizational pluralism – within the capitalist system – and the collective rights to national self-determination as well as freedom from class exploitation. Its stance on individual rights and organizational pluralism flowed directly from its contestation with a repressive colonial regime in the quest for national self-determination and class emancipation. This was not the only possible response to repression: the PCA’s emphasis on organizational pluralism put it at odds with the notion of unity as fusion that was gaining ground within sections of the nationalist movement and that would be embraced by the FLN. Despite its disagreements with the FLN on this issue, the PCA supported the armed struggle.

Colonial power was based on the use of direct force to undermine individual and collective efforts to transform the political status quo. While the Algerian people were overwhelmingly the victims of state repression, political activists were also direct targets, irrespective of their ethnicity, gender or religious beliefs. By seeking to embed itself in the anti-colonial struggle developing within Algerian civil society, the PCA was pushed into an antagonistic relationship with the colonial state. As a result of their political challenge to the regime, Communists were hounded, imprisoned and tortured. Their experiences in fighting that state compelled them to deepen their understanding of and commitment to democratic rights. They had first-hand experience of the denial of basic human rights in this struggle. Theirs was not solely a theoretical struggle; the development of their democratic ideas flowed out of their activism against a colonial state. Thus the concept of totalitarianism, however controversial in regards to the relationship of communist parties operating within communist states, is not a meaningful concept to explain the behaviour of communist parties working in opposition to state power.
Author: