

## How the Algerian War shaped French cities

The Algerian War of Independence, which coincided with a turning point in France's urban history, had a significant influence on the future of French cities. Metropolitics explores the role of conflict in their development.

The second half of the 1950s was a crucial period of change in the history of French urban policy: it was at this time that urban renewal, slum clearance and the construction of large social housing estates began. And yet these policies were implemented while the country was at war – even if the colonial conflict in Algeria was never officially designated as such. Recent research has shown that this context of war was a decisive factor in the orientation of these public policies, which would indelibly mark the appearance and population of French cities, as well as the administrative practices involved in managing these urban areas. To commemorate the 50th anniversary of the end of the conflict, Metropolitics explores in this series of articles the Algerian origins of modern French cities, which are so often forgotten as a result of limited crossover between the disciplines of urban studies and the history of the Algerian War.

The war led to considerable levels of migration from Algeria to mainland France, which raised the question of how to accommodate these migrant populations. As the conflict came to an end, the French government had to find solutions to house its repatriated citizens, whose experience would be different from those of other population groups: while the arrival in 1962 of 600,000 pieds-noirs [1] – which led in no small part to the radical modification of certain French cities – incited intense home-building operations, a large proportion of the 90,000 harkis [2] evacuated to France were for a long time housed in isolated areas. The war also led to an increase in the numbers of “French Muslims from Algeria” (as the French administration called them following the statute of 1945 that gave them French citizenship), whose presence in mainland France concerned the public

authorities. They were the targets of the forced enrolment policies of the two major – and rival – separatist parties, namely the FLN (Front de libération nationale, or National Liberation Front) and the MNA (Mouvement national algérien, or National Algerian Movement). Controlling these groups was therefore an important police objective during the war; this meant controlling the places where they lived, which were both concentrated and segregated. Areas of Algerian housing in mainland France thus became the subject of specific measures implemented by the various forces of order.

For the French administration, these strategies sought to simultaneously dismantle what appeared to be rear bases for the FLN, control the populations concerned, and educate these populations or “integrate” them into mainland life. Numerous urban planning and housing policies were put into place to meet this triple objective: the clearance of bidonvilles (shanty towns), the renovation of former slum neighbourhoods, the creation of cités de transit (temporary settlements) for families, the construction of workers’ hostels for single migrants, and the drafting of de facto rules for the allocation of social housing in large purpose-built estates. In implementing these urban policies, priorities in terms of policing and urban and social projects were intimately linked. During this period, military history converged with the history of urban planning and that of social policy, and not only created the conditions necessary for the implementation of such policies, but also influenced the policies themselves.

The Algerian conflict also explains the observable continuities between colonial and mainland practices in terms of settlement patterns and the way in which certain population groups were controlled. Moreover, one of the major developments in recent research lies in the uncovering of this link. For example, the bidonville clearance operations in colonial cities and mainland cities would appear to have a common (colonial) ancestry that goes back to experiences in the 1930s, if not further still. This recycling of practices was possible as a result of administrative structures that were inspired by one another, as well as the circulation of colonial civil servants, who were recruited as

expert advisors for the implementation of policies intended to control and educate Algerians recently arrived on the mainland. Indeed, many of those responsible for social, urban and policing policies in mainland France during and after the war began their careers in the colonial administration. The two most emblematic cases are without doubt Maurice Papon, who was appointed prefect of police (head of the Paris police, with many responsibilities currently held by the city mayor) in 1958, after heading the prefecture of Constantine; and Paul Delouvrier, who, prior to supervising the planning and development of the Paris region (and the creation of the new towns programme in France) from 1961 onwards, implemented the Constantine Plan (in his capacity as delegate-general of the government in Algeria from 1958 to 1961), intended to organise the development of Algeria, including the creation of “new villages”.

The long-term influence of the Algerian War of Independence on urban policy in mainland France is the second major development in recent research: it was primarily because the bidonvilles in mainland France were populated by Algerians that action was taken to eradicate them; furthermore, policing priorities had an influence on the way their inhabitants were rehoused. Moreover, the practices devised at this time to deal with bidonvilles continued to be applied after the war: the demolition of the Portuguese shanty towns at Champs-sur-Marne (in the eastern suburbs of Paris) utilised the very same methods. Similarly, the notion of maximum quotas for certain population groups in social housing schemes, originally applied to Algerians, continued to be used by social landlords and applied to all immigrant populations. Measures put in place to house Algerians – the cités de transit and workers’ hostels – which promoted acculturation, a school of thought that also characterised colonial settlement policies, would also continue long after the end of the war. In light of this, it is therefore clear that French housing policies targeting immigrant populations today are strongly marked by the context of their creation – namely the Algerian War. At a time when this conflict is being commemorated in French cities, with the installation of plaques and the renaming of streets and squares, it seems apt to take stock of this heritage.