

Charlotte Kiechel
PhD Candidate, History Department
Yale University
Charlotte.Kiechel@yale.edu

*“Your Algerian Gestapo”:
Holocaust Memory and France’s Antitorture Lobby, 1955-1962*

This paper unveils the central role that references to Nazi atrocities, in general, and the Jewish genocide, in particular, played during the antitorture movement of 1955-1962. In recent years, scholars of Holocaust memory have noted the impact that various signifiers, relating to the horrors of Nazi fascism, had in defining contemporaries’ responses to decolonization.¹ However, few have traced these signifiers’ development within the political landscape of Cold War Europe.² Even fewer have placed these early politicalized references to Nazi atrocities and the Holocaust at the center of their analysis.

This paper is the first to proceed in this manner. Drawing from the institutional records of the first antitorture organization in postwar Europe, as well as a wide range of unpublished sources, it makes three interventions.³ First, it describes the antitorture lobby’s emergence during the Algerian War and the diverse constituency it brought together.⁴ Second, it charts the central, if heterogeneous, role that evocations to human rights violations and the Holocaust played within members’ lobbying work.⁵ Third, it defines how antitorture lobbyists – in mobilizing historical analogies in face of empire and atrocity – developed a new form of political activism. This activism was above all based upon references to Nazi crimes and the threat of their *return*. In this paper, I define this new temporally-dynamic political engagement as constituting the “spectral politics of suffering.” When camp survivor Claude Bourdet described in 1955 the emergence of a Gestapo in Algeria, for example, he was reaffirming some of its early spectral logics.⁶

The question of what role historical analogies should play in our efforts to study the Nazi genocide of European Jewry, as well respond to contemporary American politics, is critical to the future of Holocaust Studies. It has divided some of the field’s most prominent scholars and supporters.⁷ This paper addresses this contemporary debate by returning to history: it describes the manifold ways in which references to concentration camps, the Gestapo, and the Jewish genocide shaped the antitorture movement of the midcentury. In their calls against empire, atrocity, and mass suffering abroad, antitorture lobbyists called upon the power of comparison.

¹ For two examples see: Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019); Quinn Slobodian, *Foreign Front: Third World Politics in Sixties West Germany* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012).

² Emma Kuby’s work is one of the few which charts the ambiguous role that references to Nazi atrocities, if not the Jewish genocide, played within France’s Cold War fight against concentration camps. Emma Kuby, *Political Survivors: The Resistance, the Cold War, and the Fight against Concentration Camps after 1945* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019)

³ The first antitorture organization was the Comité Maurice Audin, which was founded in November 1957 following the “disappearance” and then assumed murder of Maurice Audin (1932-1957). In addition to the Comité Maurice Audin’s records, I draw upon those of its institutional affiliates, such as the League of the Rights of Man and the Landy Center, as well as a wide range of newspapers and governmental reports.

⁴ Jewish Socialists, Algerian Communists, Catholic Marxists, secular Republicans – many of which had been personally impacted by the Nazis’ atrocities – were all represented in this midcentury fight against state-sponsored violence.

⁵ I describe how declarations of “human rights violations” remained largely separate from lobbyist’s references to Nazi crimes and the Jewish genocide. References to Nazis’ persecution of European Jewry stood as part of activists’ historically-grounded calls to action. Yet they occupied a largely peripheral role in comparison to activists’ references to more generalized Nazi atrocities.

⁶ Claude Bourdet, “Votre Gestapo d’Algérie,” *France-Observateur*, January 13, 1955.

⁷ Compare, for example, the statements of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) and that of hundreds of some of the most prominent Holocaust scholars. USHMM, “Statement Regarding the Museum’s Position on Holocaust Analogies,” June 24, 2019, ushmm.org; Omer Bartov, Doris Bergen, Andrea Orzoff, Timothy Snyder, and Anika Walke, et al., “An Open Letter to the Director of the US Holocaust Memorial Museum,” July 1, 2019, nybooks.com.