

Writing Contemporary Algerian History in French Historiography: Charles-Robert Ageron between Objectivity and Colonial Legacy



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Abstract:

This study seeks to address one of the contemporary models of the French historical school, represented by the works of the French historian Charles-Robert Ageron (1923–2008), through the presentation and analysis of selected examples of his academic production dealing with contemporary Algerian history. Ageron occupied a prominent scholarly position among historians of colonial history, not only in France but also at the global level.

This paper aims to highlight the foundations and objectives of the French historical school in its treatment of contemporary Algerian history, while attempting to evaluate one of its contemporary historians through the analysis of selected samples of his historical writings and the identification of manifestations of objectivity and subjectivity in his approach to this history.

Keywords: Contemporary Algerian History; Charles-Robert Ageron; French Historical School; May 8, 1945 Massacres; Algerian National Movement; Algerian Revolution.

Introduction

Whenever writings on contemporary Algerian history and the academic production available in universities and libraries are discussed, attention is directed toward historians of the national historical school with its patriotic orientation, as well as historians of the French colonial

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school, a considerable part of whose work was closely associated with the colonial context. However, despite its ideological background, the latter school is not devoid of models that attempted to approach Algerian history with a degree of scientific objectivity, relatively transcending traditional colonial theses.

The study of contemporary Algerian history, particularly the history of the War of Liberation, raises complex epistemological and methodological problems. Such studies are often received with a degree of suspicion and caution, especially when they involve French writings. Conversely, Algerian researchers tend to place confidence in national historical production, based on the assumption that national belonging guarantees historical credibility. This, in turn, raises the issue of the relationship between objectivity and affiliation in historical writing.

Within this context, the present study aims to offer a historical approach to one of the models of the French colonial historical school, namely Dr. Charles-Robert Ageron (1923–2008), through presenting samples of academic works that addressed contemporary Algerian history. The paper seeks to analyze his writings related to contemporary Algerian history, with a particular focus on highlighting manifestations of objectivity and subjectivity in his theses, in light of his methodological affiliation with the French historical school.

The study proceeds from the following central problem:
To what extent did Charles-Robert Ageron succeed in transcending traditional colonial approaches and providing a historical reading characterized by objectivity with regard to contemporary Algerian history?

From this central problem emerge several subsidiary questions, most notably:

- What are the approaches of the French colonial school in the study of contemporary Algerian history?
- Where does the value and scholarly weight of the writings of the French historian Charles-Robert Ageron on contemporary Algerian history lie?
- Did Ageron follow the path of the French colonial school in its treatment of contemporary Algerian history?

1. The French Historical School: Approaches to Algerian History

Europe, and the West in general, witnessed the emergence of a number of schools, including those related to history according to modern standards. These schools were founded on transcending the

classical narrative mode of historical writing based on tracing political and military events, toward more diverse approaches in terms of topics and tools, with an expanded scope of interest encompassing economic, social, and cultural structures. This transformation was reflected in French writings on Algerian history.

It is observed that French interest in Algerian history was not constant but passed through different stages, varying in the nature of authors, objectives of writing, sources, and the degree of proximity to or distance from the colonial perspective. This interest was also linked to transformations within the French historical school itself, which was initially influenced by positivism, and later witnessed the emergence of the Annales School, which introduced a new critical vision for historical writing, although it was not entirely immune from the influences of the colonial period in some of its applications and studies.¹

1.1 The French Historical School and the Stages of Its Interest in Algerian History

A number of researchers agree that French writing on Algeria can be divided—according to its historical development—into three major stages, differing in the nature of producers, the content of writing, and its functions.

a. The First Stage: Pre-1830 (Exploratory and Preparatory Writings)

This stage represents the period preceding the French occupation of Algeria in 1830. The specificity of this phase lies in the diversity of the authors' backgrounds, as most writings consisted of memoirs by monks or Christian priests who came to Algeria in the context of ransoming captives, or reports and accounts by consuls, governmental envoys, and even spies in preparation for the military campaign against Algeria. Among the most prominent was the spy Boutin, who produced detailed reports on the city of Algiers, its fortifications, and its ports, which were later exploited in planning the invasion. This stage also included travel accounts by individuals who settled in Algeria for scientific and exploratory purposes and recorded their daily observations and notes.²

b. The Second Stage: 1830–1880 (Writings of Colonial Justification and Consolidation)

This stage coincided with the first fifty years of French occupation. It was characterized by an expansion in the volume of writing on Algeria, though it remained largely linked to colonial authority in the form of memoirs, official reports, and oral narratives written by military officers and some civilian translators, particularly those supported by the military

administration. This stage was known among French historians as the old Algerian historical school. These writings were marked by a colonial tendency and the glorification of Western civilization, aiming to collect and study Algerian heritage—especially its religious aspects—in order to enable colonial authorities to control Algeria.³

c. The Third Stage: Since the 1880s (Institutionalized Writing)

From the 1880s onward, French writing on Algeria entered a new phase in terms of content and the nature of historians. It was characterized by the writings of university professors and specialized researchers who received support and assistance from higher schools and institutes established in Algeria since 1880. The establishment of the University of Algiers, the role of historical and archaeological societies, as well as the organization of conferences and the publication of specialized journals, played an important role in this stage, which aimed to serve the settler-colonial project by presenting an image of Algeria that distanced Algerians from awareness of their past and diverted their attention toward the future.⁴

With the beginning of the twentieth century, especially as this phase coincided with the celebration of the centenary of the French occupation of Algeria, studies multiplied that largely focused on glorifying colonialism and highlighting its supposed merits, thereby conferring legitimacy upon it. The colonial administration mobilized vast resources to produce an enormous volume of studies and research that attempted to present colonialism as a transition from the era of Ottoman despotism to an era of freedom and democracy brought by the French.⁵

1.2. Motives Behind French Interest in Algerian History

The initial lack of precise French knowledge about the reality and history of Algeria led them—despite their preoccupation with the military campaign and occupation operations—to turn simultaneously toward research in three main fields: the publication of ancient sources related to Algeria; the establishment of scientific committees and the granting of permits to individuals to conduct research, collection, and identification of historical artifacts in the country, as well as the formation of specialized associations; and the creation of newspapers and journals to preserve historical discoveries and to care for and introduce them to interested audiences.⁶

As a result, many French researchers addressed Algerian history in all its periods and political, economic, social, cultural, and civilizational dimensions. Bibliographical works also appeared that attempted to

catalogue this production and introduce it, such as the studies of Georges Yver (*The Conquest and Occupation of Algeria*) and Xavier Yacono (*Algeria since 1830*). However, this scholarly activity was not detached from the context of occupation; rather, it was closely linked— to a significant extent— to explicit colonial functions that transformed historical knowledge into an instrument of domination.⁷

Theorists of settler colonialism realized that subjugating and taming the Algerian people required combining material annihilation through punitive and deterrent extermination operations with the erasure of all their cultural, spiritual, and political symbols. This could only be achieved through the appropriation of their history and the distortion of their civilizational past. The premises of French historical research in Algeria were therefore not purely scientific or scholarly. Instead, they established a historical method and perspective based on imposing a new historical condition—colonial power—and emphasizing that the French were a civilized people ruling backward populations, while portraying the indigenous inhabitants as merely scattered groups lacking a shared heritage.⁸

The main motives behind French interest in Algerian history can be summarized as follows:

- **The motive of domination and occupation**, which could only be achieved through the collection of written and unwritten sources, their examination, evaluation, and the extraction of results. For this purpose, the French also exploited what Algerian authors had written. Examples include the works of al-‘Antari and Ibn al-Mubarak on the history of Constantine, as well as translations and publications by Ibn Abi Shannab and al-Hafnawi, among others, encouraged by Governor-General Jonnart and a number of French researchers.⁹

- **The desire to understand a Muslim people** that had fallen under the control of European Christian civilization, through translation, printing, and Orientalist studies, in addition to the scientific curiosity of certain travelers and researchers.

- **The religious motive**, based on the notion that the occupation of Algeria came after a religious struggle lasting three centuries aimed at the Romanization of North Africa and the triumph of Christianity, with Algeria serving as a gateway for its dissemination.

Some view this religious motive as having particular significance in driving France toward the study of Algerian history. According to this view, the French objective was to understand the nature of Islam and the extent of Algerians' attachment to it, thereby facilitating the identification of points of strength and weakness in order to combat the Algerian Muslim population, within what is referred to as cultural-religious colonialism.¹⁰

Based on the foregoing, French interest in Algerian history was neither singular nor constant. Rather, its motives were multiple and its functions varied according to historical periods and the development of research institutions. From this perspective, the present study moves on to analyze a model of contemporary French historical writing, represented by the works of the historian Charles-Robert Ageron, in order to examine the extent of his proximity to objectivity or his continued confinement within the boundaries of the colonial perspective in addressing contemporary Algerian history.

2. Contemporary Algerian History in French Historiography: The Case of Charles-Robert Ageron

Based on the preceding discussion, it becomes clear that French writing on Algeria was, to a large extent, linked to colonial functions. However, the transformations experienced by the French historical field after the Second World War produced historians who attempted to reread the colonial experience through a relatively critical approach. Within this context, the works of Charles-Robert Ageron emerge as a model that allows for an examination of the limits of objectivity within French writing on contemporary Algerian history, and for determining the extent to which the colonial legacy persisted or declined in the interpretation of major events in Algerian history.

2.1. Academic Formation and Career of Charles-Robert Ageron

Charles-Robert Ageron (1923–2008) is considered one of the most prominent historians of French colonial history. He was born in the French city of Lyon in 1923. He experienced German domination and participated in the resistance in 1944, after which he was sent in 1945 to Algeria to perform national military service.¹¹

His stay in Algeria coincided with the May 8, 1945 massacres.¹² It appears that these massacres profoundly influenced Ageron's commitment to the historical project with which he had been associated since his youth, under the influence of the ideas of certain left-wing Catholic historians, such as Henri-Irénée and André Mandouze.¹³

Ageron pursued his higher education at the Sorbonne, obtained the agrégation in 1947, and was subsequently assigned to teach history at Lycée Bugeaud in Algiers (currently Emir Abdelkader High School), where he remained for ten years. During this period, he began his research on the history of French colonialism in Algeria.¹⁴

After returning to France in 1957, he taught at Lycée Lakanal de Sceaux, then joined the Sorbonne as a lecturer. From 1964 onward, his scholarly activity expanded through the publication of articles on contemporary Algerian history. His doctoral dissertation, supervised by the historian Charles-André Julien and entitled *Les Algériens musulmans et la France (1871–1919)*, was published in 1968.¹⁵

Ageron was later appointed professor at the University of Tours, then moved in 1981 to Paris 12 University (Paris Créteil), where he supervised doctoral dissertations specializing in colonial history within the framework of the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (EHESS). He also contributed to the formation of research groups interested in Maghrebi history and the history of the French colonial empire, and organized projects, lectures, and conferences addressing issues such as the Rif War, the colonial movement, and the Algerian Revolution.¹⁶

2.2. Fields of Ageron's Scholarly Production on Contemporary Algerian History

Ageron's scholarly production was marked by both abundance and diversity. He authored more than twenty books on contemporary Algerian history and colonial policies in the Maghreb, in addition to publishing dozens of articles and studies in specialized academic journals inside and outside France. His interests covered a wide range of issues, including the structure of settler colonialism, the status of Algerian Muslims within the colonial system, the development of the national movement, and the positions of French public opinion regarding the Algerian Revolution.¹⁷

In addition to his books, Ageron published one hundred and thirty (130) research papers and articles in collective works and in the most prominent historical journals in France and abroad, including the following:

- Charles-Robert Ageron, *La politique kabyle sous le Second Empire*, **Revue française d'histoire d'outre-mer**, vol. 53, nos. 190–191, first and second quarters, 1966.

- Charles-Robert Ageron, *L'Opinion française devant la guerre d'Algérie*, **Revue française d'histoire d'outre-mer**, vol. 63, no. 231, second quarter, 1976.
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His other works were published by Professor Gilbert Meynier through Éditions Bouchène in 2005. In the introduction to these publications, Gilbert Meynier stated: “I have recently encountered a true historian—honest, sincere, and trustworthy, yet at the same time cautious in his writings.” This description reflects the nature of Ageron’s work, especially given that his intellectual formation took place during an anti-imperialist period, and that he was among the few historians in France specializing in the history of North Africa.¹⁹

The writings of Charles-Robert Ageron initially focused on the history of French colonialism, before later turning toward the history of decolonization. Within this context, he published studies on the May 8, 1945 massacres and the Algerian Révolution. In this study, we seek to address his most important positions and works on contemporary Algerian history in terms of content and evaluation.

Among his most widely circulated and influential works is his book *Les Algériens musulmans et la France (1871–1919)*, in which he examined the nature of the relationship between Algerian Muslim society and colonial authority during the period of the Third Republic. He revealed the conflict that took place between the indigenous population on the one hand and the settlers supported by the French administration on the other. This work has been considered an important reference in the study of French colonial policy, and some Algerian researchers praised its documentation and its relative integrity in presentation and analysis.

Dr. Mahfoud Kaddache highlighted the objectivity of this book, its integrity, and its freedom from ideological bias, which enhanced its credibility. He regarded it as “a faithful portrayal” of the conflict between

Algerian Muslim society and the settlers supported by the French administration, which employed various tools to destroy Algerian social organizations, tighten restrictions on Islam by suspending Islamic courts and encouraging Christianization, undermine educational institutions, and repress Algerians through the Code de l'Indigénat and punitive courts.

Given the importance of this book, the National Center for Studies and Research on the National Movement and the 1954 Revolution, translated and published it in 2007. Prior to that, Dr. Mohamed El-Arabi Ould Khalifa had translated chapters ten and eleven and published them in a separate volume.²⁰

Charles-Robert Ageron possessed extensive knowledge of contemporary Algerian history, to which he devoted forty years of his life through teaching in several French universities and training two generations of specialized historians. His other major work, *Histoire de l'Algérie contemporaine*, is considered one of his most significant contributions, as it presented an account of Algeria's trajectory from the pre-1830 period to independence. Its first edition was published in 1964, in a context close to the period of independence, which gives this work particular importance, as it appeared at a time when colonial narratives were still influential in French consciousness. Ageron thus attempted to offer a broader and less justificatory historical vision than many previous writings.²¹

2.3. The May 8, 1945 Massacres in Ageron's Writings

The May 8, 1945 massacres constitute one of the major turning points in contemporary Algerian history, due to the profound political and social shock they produced and the transformation they generated in the trajectory of the national movement toward a rupture with the project of assimilation and colonialism. Ageron addressed these events in his article entitled:

"Les troubles du Nord-Constantinois en mai 1945," Vingtième Siècle. Revue d'histoire, no. 4, October 1984.²²

Ageron divided his article into the following sections:

- The prehistory of the events (*La préhistoire des événements*);
- Highly divergent interpretations (*Des explications fort diverses*);
- How many victims? (*Combien de morts?*).

At the outset of the article, Ageron posed the following questions: How should one explain and judge what is commonly referred to in Algeria as the “colonial genocide of May 1945” (*génocide colonialiste de mai 45*) and what is described in France as the “disturbances of the North Constantinois”? Should these events be described as a “colonial provocation” (*provocation colonialiste*) or as an “attempted insurrection” (*tentative insurrectionnelle*)?²³

In order to answer these questions, Ageron reviewed differing viewpoints expressed by French and Algerian historians regarding the massacres. He began with the position of his mentor, Charles-André Julien, who described the events as a revolutionary insurrectionary movement.²⁴ This characterization, however, remains open to interpretation on two levels. On the one hand, it may be understood as focusing on the act of rebellion itself as a direct confrontation with France, without delving deeply into the trajectory of the national movement and the political and organizational accumulations that paved the way for the explosion. On the other hand, it can be argued that Julien—while acknowledging the political nature of the events—did not present the massacres as an inevitable outcome of the colonial structure and its repressive mechanisms, but rather framed them within a balance between action and reaction. Ultimately, this interpretation proves insufficient to uncover the deeper causes that led to the tragedy.

Ageron then referred to the position of Roger Le Tourneau in his book *Political Evolution of Muslim North Africa*, in which the events were interpreted as an expression of “hatred” or “savage resentment” on the part of the indigenous population toward the French settlers in Algeria. This interpretation tends toward psychological and moral reductionism, excluding the colonial context of exclusion, marginalization, and repression, while ignoring the political and social factors that fueled the rise of national consciousness. These comparisons ultimately reveal divergences within French historiography itself: between a tendency that recognizes a political dimension to the events but remains constrained by the limits of the colonial perspective, and another tendency that reduces them to psychological or moral explanations, stripping them of their historical roots. This confirms that many of these readings failed to reach a level capable of explaining the true causes of the massacres as a direct result of the logic and mechanisms of colonialism.

As for Ageron's own position regarding these events, it may be summarized in three points. First, despite the questions he raised, he did not decisively determine the nature of what occurred, nor did he conclusively establish whether it constituted a conspiracy or a revolutionary movement, or definitively identify the party responsible for initiating it. Second, he did not provide a detailed depiction of the extent of the brutality of the repression accompanying the massacres, which rendered his account closer to cautious analysis than to explicit condemnation. Third, Ageron addressed the issue of the number of victims with a degree of reservation. While he did not accept the figure recognized by French authorities, estimated at 15,000 dead, he also did not explicitly adopt the figures circulating in Algerian national memory (45,000 martyrs). He supported his position by comparison with the events of August 20, 1955 in the same region (the North Constantinois), citing statements by Governor-General Soustelle indicating that 1,273 Algerians were killed in a single day compared to 71 Europeans. From this, he concluded that it was implausible—after fifteen days of bloody repression involving multiple forces and repeated aerial interventions—that the death toll could be limited to the official figure, suggesting instead that the number of victims was far higher than that declared by the French Ministry of the Interior.²⁵

When Ageron's approach is compared with Algerian approaches, such as that of Abou El Kacem Saadallah, the divergence in premises and conclusions becomes evident. Saadallah links the events of May 8, 1945 to the broader evolution of the Algerian national movement, considering them a decisive moment that exposed the limits of French promises of reform and deepened the rift between Algeria and France. He also emphasizes that contradictions among French narratives and the diversity of their political and ideological backgrounds contributed to obscuring historical truth.²⁶ In the same vein, several national studies emphasize the structural colonial dimension of the events, portraying them as organized repression aimed at breaking the rise of the national movement. Ageron, by contrast, despite his relative acknowledgment of widespread repression and the limitations of the official narrative, remained committed to a cautious interpretive style that balanced different accounts and avoided definitive judgments. This reflects, on the one hand, an academic documentary tendency, and on the other hand, the limits of the French historical school in addressing an event of profound sensitivity in Algerian collective memory.

2.4. Objectivity, Methodological Constraints, and Colonial Legacies in Ageron's Writings

A reading of Ageron's works reveals that they combine an interpretive tendency seeking a degree of scientific objectivity with a clear presence of the legacy of the French historical school that emerged within a colonial context. This explains the interweaving of elements of fairness and restraint in his writings.

Some researchers have regarded Ageron as a "school" in the study of contemporary Algerian history, given his influence in training generations of scholars who later worked on Algerian history, both French and Algerian. Several of his students and colleagues expressed appreciation for him, emphasizing his attentiveness to mentoring researchers and his openness toward Algerian students within the French university system.

In this context, reference may be made to the testimony of Professor Abdelhamid Zouzzou, whose doctoral dissertation was supervised by Ageron and defended at Paris 12 University in 1992. In his testimony, he stated: "I hereby affirm Professor Ageron's inclination and affection for Algerians, particularly students, and his welcoming attitude toward those who sought his supervision and scholarly guidance."²⁷

This testimony is corroborated by Ageron's own words in the introduction to his book *Histoire de l'Algérie contemporaine*, in which he wrote: "When Lyautey said that good governance requires love first, may I add that in order to attempt understanding and to speak about the history of a people, one must first love them."²⁸

Despite the fact that Ageron's works combine an interpretive tendency striving for a degree of scientific objectivity, his use of certain terms reveals his methodological affiliation with the older French historical school. In many of his works, he consistently employed the term "the Algerian War" rather than "the Algerian Revolution," a choice common in French literature but one that carries epistemological and political implications, as it influences the representation and interpretation of the event.

Certain conceptual usages in his writings also reflect an older colonial discourse, such as describing the Islamic expansion as a "conquest," using expressions such as "Turkish domination," or referring to Mediterranean corsairs as "pirates." These terms, although prevalent in parts of French historiography,²⁹ raise methodological issues because

they are not entirely neutral and carry evaluative connotations that may affect historical interpretation.³⁰

Conclusion

Based on the discussion of contemporary Algerian history in the writings of the French historian Charles-Robert Ageron, the main conclusions of this study may be summarized as follows:

- A substantial portion of the studies produced by the French historical school, particularly in its early stages, was devoted to justifying colonial presence and conferring legitimacy upon it by highlighting its “advantages” and glorifying its achievements. This tendency was especially evident during the centenary celebrations of the French occupation, when official resources were mobilized to produce a vast body of publications aimed at entrenching the discourse of the French “civilizing mission” and presenting colonialism as a transition toward modernity and democracy.

- Despite the colonial context of the French historical school, French writings cannot be excluded from research on contemporary Algerian history, as they constitute important documentary and analytical material, particularly in topics benefiting from the French researcher’s proximity to archives and academic institutions. Within this framework, Charles-Robert Ageron emerges as one of the historians who made significant contributions to the study of contemporary Algerian history through his books and scholarly articles. He addressed issues related to colonial policies, the structure of Algerian society, and the evolution of the national movement, while also engaging with topics that remained for a long time marginal in Algerian historiography, particularly those related to the political history of the War of Liberation.

- It can be argued that Ageron was a French historian who was institutionally and methodologically affiliated with the colonial/positivist French historical school, yet within it he represented a moderate critical tendency that approached more objective perspectives than classical colonial writing, while remaining tied to its general conceptual framework.

- Ageron’s works should neither be rejected wholesale nor accepted uncritically. Rather, they should be read within a comparative critical methodology that balances documents and

context, and subjects concepts and terminology to deconstruction and verification. This study also affirms that Algerian and French writings can be complementary in constructing broader historical knowledge, provided there is awareness of the background of each discourse and the adoption of historical critical tools that allow for benefiting from scholarly data while simultaneously exposing points of bias or partiality. Consequently, the rewriting of contemporary Algerian history remains an open task that requires further in-depth studies, expanded use of multiple archives, and the development of approaches that combine scientific objectivity with sensitivity to national historical memory.

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