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Casa (from *Open House* series) | 2006 | José Bechara

1

WHEN NOT EVEN THE DEAD SEE THE END OF A WAR

Fátima da Cruz Rodrigues

In *Soliloquios en Inglaterra* (Soliloquies in England) and *Soliloquios Posteriores* (Later Soliloquies) (1), written between 1914 and 1921, the Spanish philosopher George Santayana said that “only the dead saw the end of the war”. In truth, not everything that wars have destroyed, created, ravaged, and desecrated comes to an end when they are over. Among the many remains, wreckage and legacies that



WHEN NOT EVEN
THE DEAD SEE
THE END OF A WAR

wars leave, and which inevitably contaminate several subsequent generations, sometimes even the dead see no end.

Maurice Audin is an example. He was arrested and reported missing in June 1957, in the middle of the 'Battle of Algiers'. Last September, the French President Emmanuel Macron acknowledged on behalf of the French Republic that Audin was tortured and executed – or tortured to death – by French soldiers who had arrested him at his home. According to Macron, this acknowledgement “[should open the way to a better understanding of our past, to a greater clarity concerning the wounds of our history, and to a new will to reconcile the memories of the French and Algerian peoples](#)”. Hopefully, all of this will happen, and quickly. For now, this recognition opens a new front in the war of memories between the many protagonists who experienced the French colonial presence in Algeria, as well as those who, even though they didn't live through it, enter the fray as heirs of that past.

Maurice Audin disappeared on 11th June 1957 in Algeria, where independence movements fought for liberation from French rule in a war that lasted from 1954 until 1962. He was a mathematician, 25 years old, married, father of three children, a communist and anti-colonialist militant. French forces suspected Audin of harbouring members of armed pro-independence cells. A few days after his arrest, Josette Audin, his wife, was told that her husband had escaped whilst being transferred and had disappeared without a trace. In July of the same year, she filed a criminal complaint for murder. In 1958 an investigation concluded that Audin had not escaped but had rather been killed by French Paratroopers.

2

Five years after Maurice Audin's disappearance the war ended, Algeria became independent and an amnesty for crimes committed in the name of the conflict was declared. Josette Audin and her three children felt forced to go and live in France: everything indicated that they did not belong to the new Algeria that was being born.

61 years elapsed between the day Josette Audin last saw her husband and the day that Emmanuel Macron went to her house to deliver a letter acknowledging the French State's responsibility for the torture and death of her husband. Between these two moments, so distant and distinct from each other, there have been many others that are inseparable from them. I will highlight only a few here:



WHEN NOT EVEN
THE DEAD SEE
THE END OF A WAR

1957: Josette Audin files a criminal complaint against X for the murder of her husband.

1958: The historian Pierre Vidal-Naquet invalidates the escape story about Maurice Audin. Henri Alleg, also detained by French forces, writes about witnessing Audin being tortured in his book *La Question* (The Question).

1962: End of the War and Algerian independence; Evian agreements and amnesty for crimes committed in the conflict.

2007: Josette Audin writes to the French President Nicolas Sarkozy asking him to help find out what happened to her husband. She gets no response.

2008: Michèle Audin, daughter of Maurice and Josette Audin, receives a letter from President Nicolas Sarkozy awarding her the *Legion d'Honneur* for her work in mathematics.

2009: Michèle Audin refuses the award because the President did not respond to her mother.

2012: President François Hollande pays tribute to Maurice Audin next to the monument that is dedicated to him in Algiers.

2014: A recording of a French general emerges. Talking about the disappearance of Maurice Audin, the general, by then dead, is heard declaring: "[we killed him. \[...\] we stabbed him to make it look like the Arabs killed him](#)". Rumours suggest that Audin's executioner is alive, is 82 years old, lives in Brittany and refuses to give any interviews. President François Hollande admits that Maurice Audin did not escape and that he was killed during his detention.

2018: On September 13, Emmanuel Macron acknowledges the French State's responsibility for the torture and murder of Maurice Audin by the French military in Algiers in 1957 during the Algerian war.

This acknowledgement may bring an end to a lie that has lasted for more than half a century, and in which I doubt anyone still believed. It has also revived a heated debate among those who contest the battle between lingering, multiple memories of this history. On one side of this debate are those who see Audin as an anti-colonialist and pro-independence figure. On the other side are those who, either out of nostalgia for a French Algeria, or because their lives were deeply wounded by Algerian independence, see him as a traitor, a murderer, a man who represents those responsible for the death or disappointment of many French and / or Algerian people. Other voices enter into this debate, such as those of orphans of others who were disappeared, tortured and massacred and who have not been recognised. It is a contentious debate, but one that is necessary and perhaps even healthy in order to bring the traumas that still haunt post-imperial France into the open.



WHEN NOT EVEN
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THE END OF A WAR

Audin disappeared in 1957. He saw neither the end of the war nor the independence of Algeria he so desired. Let us hope that the recognition of this crime can at least appease the seemingly irreconcilable memories about this part of French colonial presence in Algeria. Both sides must recognize that torture and death are never legitimate, however tempted we might be to think that they might be the only means to assure the end of a war.

(1) George Santayana, *Soliloquios en Inglaterra e Soliloquios Posteriores*. 2010. Madrid: Trotta.

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