

2018**Elaine Mokhtefi, 'Algiers: Third World Capital.
Freedom Fighters, Revolutionaries, Black Panthers'
(Excerpts)****Citation:**

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Summary:

The author of the book from which the below excerpts are taken, Elaine Mokhtefi née Klein, is a US American of Jewish origin born in 1928 in New York. She became politically involved there in the late 1940s. In 1951, she moved to Paris, where she worked as a translator for various anti-racist and anti-colonial movements. It was in the French capital that she met Algerian independence activists and became involved with the Front de Libération Nationale (FLN), which was founded in November 1954 and started Algeria's independence war. She participated in the 1958 All-African People's Conference in Ghana (for which see also the entry on Frantz Fanon's FLN speech). In 1960-1962, she worked in New York for the FLN. FLN representatives stationed in the United States sought to contact US politicians and officials, and in New York successfully lobbied at the United Nations headquarters during its war against France, as Matthew Connelly showed in *A Diplomatic Revolution: Algeria's Fight for Independence and the Origins of the Post-Cold War Era* (2002). Moreover, already at this time the FLN was deeply involved with various other anticolonial liberation movements, as Mokhtefi's fascinating book illustrates. When Algeria became independent, in 1962, she moved there. She worked in various official capacities, inter alia for the Algeria Press Service. And due to her New York experience and command of English, she often was asked to work with representatives of foreign independence movements, including the US Black Panther Party (BPP), whose presence in Algeria in 1969 and its effect on the BPP's take on the Arab-Israeli conflict has been studied in Michael Fischbach's *Black Power and Palestine: Transnational Countries of Color* (2018). Many such movements were assisted by the Algerian government, which saw itself as a player in multiple overlapping anticolonial and postcolonial frameworks, including African unity, Arab unity, Afro-Asianism, and Third Worldism, as Jeffrey Byrnes has shown in his *Mecca of Revolution: Algeria, Decolonization, and the Third World Order* (2016). Mokhtefi was for political reasons forced to leave Algeria in 1974, accompanied by her Algerian husband, the former FLN member Mokhtar Mokhtefi. They settled in Paris, and in 1994 moved to

New York.

Original Language:

English

Contents:

Transcript - English

[In New York] The Algerian [UN] Office became more than the home for a single independence campaign. Activists from other liberation movements, who wanted to learn how to work with the UN, were sent to us for training. The first to arrive was the representative of an Angolan group, the Union of Peoples of Angola (which in 1962 became the Angolan National Liberation Front), whose president was Roberto Holden. I remember this envoy as, at first, a totally inexperienced young man, overwhelmed by his responsibilities; he sweated and stuttered constantly.

Algeria's initial support of the group was the result of an Algerian delegation's meetings with Patrice Lumumba and Holden Roberto in Accra in 1958, at the first All-African People's Conference. The delegation was headed by Franz Fanon, who also travelled to Leopoldville for meetings with Lumumba during his short time as premier of the new independent Congo.

In Conakry in early 1960, as I made my rounds to organize West African tours for the WAY congress to be held that summer in Accra, I was contacted by a small group of Angolans who had formed an organization called MPLA (Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola) unknown at the time to the outside world. We met in a bare, thatched-roof hut on the outskirts of the Guinean capital, the group's first foothold in Africa. Here I found a handful of silent men around their spokesman, who asked me to press their case abroad. Armed activity inside Angola had not yet begun, but the Portuguese dictator António Salazar had outlawed the new organization and arrested some of its leaders. The group provided me with documents in French and Portuguese that I translated and distributed to the UN delegations.

In the summer following that meeting, during the WAY congress in Accra, an MPLA delegate arrived, an impressive young man whom Mohammed [Guellal, her then partner] and I took under our wing, much to Fanon's annoyance. ("They're Communists," he said.) Once independent, Algeria began backing and training the MPLA in addition to liberation movements in the Portuguese colonies of Mozambique, Guinea-Bissau, and Cape Verde.

[...]

[Following independence, in 1962] Several thousand foreigners, partisans of an independent Algeria, arrived from France, Tunisia, and Morocco during those first months of the new country. Many had worked with the FLN during the war as *porteurs de valises* (suitcase carriers), transporting people, arms and money for the revolution. There were men who had lit out or gone underground when they were called up for military service in France, even a few deserters from the French army. Many were highly trained: doctors, engineers, technicians, teachers, professors, lawyers. They were called *pieds-rouges*, a clever if unflattering term, placing them in opposition to the *pieds-noirs* who had fled the country. They were idealists who would build a new world; visionaries whose consciences told them they had to come.

In addition to these brave individuals, countries that had provided unswerving support for an independent Algeria during the war cooperated with the new government by sending specialists, above all medical teams: Yugoslavia, Cuba, China, Bulgaria, Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Soviet Union and others. They became indispensable in a place where the hospitals and clinics had not only emptied out of personnel in the months preceding independence but suffered from a lack of equipment and medicine. In addition, these teams had to face the language problem. How to convert French into the languages they spoke, even summarily? Algerian Arabic, the only idiom in which the majority of the population could explain their state of health, took more time and patience to understand. More than once I accompanied my friend Zohra Sellami and her brother, who was epileptic, to a Chinese clinic along the coast. We were astounded by the personnel's devotion to the job of giving the population back its health, the number of patience they handled daily, the quality of service, and their gentleness.

[...]

Algiers soon became a hub for liberation and antifascist organizations in the sixties. I came to know exiles from Spain and Portugal, opponents of the military dictators Franco and Salazar, as well as others from Brazil, Argentina, Venezuela, and Central America, political opponents as well as representatives of guerilla movements. Every imaginable liberation organization had an office in Algiers, from the National

Liberation Front of South Vietnam (the Vietcong) to the ANC, SWAPO, FRELIMO, the MPLA, student hijackers from Ethiopia, and Palestine liberation organizations.

A number of those organizations sought me out for translation and interpreting services, especially those with English-speaking backgrounds. When Oliver Tambo, founder of the ANC with Nelson Mandela; Joshua Nkomo, the trade-union leader and head of the Zimbabwe African People's Union, a father of his country; or Sam Nujoma, a father of his country of Namibia, arrived in Algiers, I was sure to get a phone call. The South Africans invented a name for me in one of their languages—something on the order of “lifesaver.”

When a group of seven Ethiopian students, young opponents of Haile Selassie's regime, arrived at my office at the Ministry of Information and stood around my desk, I felt moved to see a group comrades who had succeeded in a revolutionary act but were in danger of losing their way. They had hijacked a plane to Sudan whose authorities bundled them off to Algiers, a city for which they were unprepared. Their plan had been to make their way to East Germany or China. I helped them accreditation as well as translation, and introduced them to other English-speaking militants and refugees.

[...]

The reception the Black Panther Party received in Algiers was in line with the country's foreign policy at the time.

[...]

[T]he Cleavers [of the US Black Panther movement], whose son Maceo had been born in a Cuban-run hospital in inland Tissemsilt, in the midst of the [1969 Pan-African Cultural] festival bustle, set about finding living quarters. Algiers had a monstrous housing problem. Despite the departure of the French settler population, people had been pouring into the city from the countryside and occupying nearly anything resembling a housing unit. There had been practically no construction in the seven years since independence. An old friend, Ali Habib, came to the rescue with an empty house by the sea at Pointe Pescade, a few miles out of the city. It was a godsend, as other comrades were fast arriving, refugees from Cuba: former hijackers Byron Booth and Clinton (Rahim) Smith, James (Akili) Patterson, his wife Gwen, and their daughter Tanya.

The liberation movement representatives sought the Panthers out and close relationships followed, especially with those countries where English was the working language, such as Namibia, Zimbabwe, and South Africa, but also with the Portuguese colonies: Angola, Guinea-Bissau, Mozambique. Eldridge's appearance alongside Fatah's representative in Algiers during the Cultural Festival was picked up by the international press, with the *New York Times* quoting him: “We recognize the Jewish people have suffered, but this suffering should not be used to justify suffering by Arabs now.”

Contact with BPP headquarters in California was daily. Visiting delegations of Panther supporters began arriving in Algiers. Journalists seeking exclusive interviews also came to town; they ignored the country in which they found themselves and made a beeline to Eldridge.

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