

# Not on the French radar? Situating Algeria in Labour's map of solidarity at the Modern Records Centre (1954-1965)

Mélanie Torrent

Université de Picardie Jules Verne, CORPUS UR 4295, France, and Institute of Commonwealth Studies, United Kingdom

Correspondence: [melanie.torrent@u-picardie.fr](mailto:melanie.torrent@u-picardie.fr)

Twitter/X: [@TorrentMel](https://twitter.com/TorrentMel)

Bluesky: [@meltorrent](https://bsky.app/profile/meltorrent)

ORCID: [0000-0003-2271-0452](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2271-0452)

**Editorial review:** This article has been subject to an editorial review process.



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## Abstract

*The war of Algerian independence (1954-1962) generated intense debates – and sometimes action – in the British left at a time when Britain itself was facing the end of its empire. Many individuals and several movements and parties were thus involved in the war, giving support to independence movements, protesting against torture, or simply debating the consequences of the Algerian war for Europe, the western world and the future of socialism. Focusing on the papers of Labour MPs, the records of the TUC and of several socialist and Trotskyist groups and individuals, this article shows that the Modern Records Centre holds key collections to understand the ways in which the Algerian war influenced conceptions of socialism in Britain. This is particularly true when they are read against the grain of French surveillance files and situated within a broader, transnational archive. The article therefore also reflects on archives as a site and as a source for understanding processes of domination and means of liberation, for both the colonies and the metropolises, and for the writing of transnational histories of solidarity.*

**Keywords:** decolonisation; Algeria; transnational activism; Labour; Trotskyism; TUC.

## Introduction

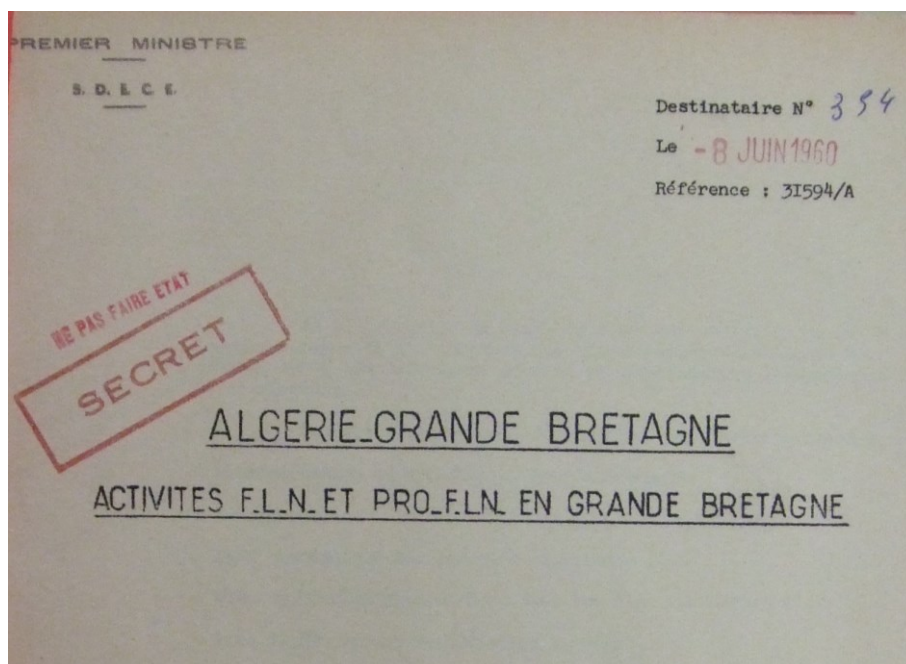
The 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the foundation of the Modern Records Centre (MRC) occurred by happy coincidence as I was completing a long-overdue manuscript on the British left and the war of Algerian independence and reflecting on the wealth and limits of the sources I had worked with in the last ten years or so. In Britain, the archives of individuals, movements and parties that were involved in the war – giving support to independence movements, protesting against torture, or simply debating the consequences of the Algerian war for Europe, the western world and the future of socialism – are held across the country: in Aberystwyth, Birmingham, Bradford, Cambridge, Cardiff, Durham, Hull, London, Manchester, Oxford and, of course, Coventry. Thinking back to the material held at the MRC, I realised that its collections related to Algeria have one point in common. None of the individuals, parties or organisations that they belong to feature in a document that was particularly useful in the early stages of my research: a 29-page volume produced in 1960 by the French intelligence services about the aid given during the previous year to the main Algerian nationalist movement, the National Front for Liberation (*Front de libération nationale*, FLN), by British people and by people and organisations located in Britain. This is, admittedly, true of others: Eirene White, for instance, who gave support to the FLN's rival, the Algerian National Movement (*Mouvement national algérien*, MNA), and whose papers are held at the National Library of Wales in Aberystwyth, does not feature. In the research process, however, what was also striking was the volume of the MRC collections related to Algeria, as well as the variety of opinions and institutional cultures they reflect.

In this short piece, I focus on three main groups in turn: the two Coventry Labour MPs, Richard Crossman (Coventry East, 1945-1974) and Maurice Edelman (Coventry West, 1945-1950 and Coventry North, 1950-1974 – later Coventry North West, 1974-1975); the Trades Union Congress; and the Revolutionary Socialist League and two of its members, Jimmy Deane (who was its first general secretary) and Ken Tarbuck (who joined in 1957 shortly after its creation, before moving to the International Group in 1961). I show that the MRC collections have been valuable for me precisely because they hold the papers of those above, or under, the French official radar, before offering some brief remarks on their importance for the teaching of transnational, connected history.

## On the Aadar: A 29-page 'guide' to FLN and pro-FLN activities in Britain

The French intelligence report of 1959-1960 was an extremely valuable initial guide because it identified who had an interest in, or connections with, the dominant Algerian nationalist movement in the war of independence.

*Figure 1: Report of the French intelligence service (SDECE, Service de documentation extérieure et de contre-espionnage) on Algeria-Britain / FLN and Pro-FLN activities in Britain, France, Archives du ministère des Affaires étrangères, 29QO/44, 8 June 1960. (MRC Collections)*



Within the Labour movement, some Labour Party members – particularly men – feature prominently, notably Tony Benn, Michael Foot and Fenner Brockway. The French authorities knew of their support for Mohamed Messaoud Kellou, the FLN man in London since 1957. Among Labour MPs, Jennie Lee is also mentioned. Barbara Castle, who was more involved with Algeria, is not; but she does appear in other reports and was very much, therefore, on the French radar. Also prominent are individuals on the British government's own radar for alleged sympathies with Communism, including the historian Thomas Hodgkin and the journalist Basil Davidson (with surveillance files at the British National Archives complementing the information contained in French files). Clergymen committed to liberation also feature, such as Cannon John Collins of the emerging Anti-Apartheid Movement and the Reverend Michael Scott, who actively opposed the French nuclear tests in the Sahara (**Skinner, 2023**), was then based in Accra where he was in touch with the FLN, and whose biography in the French report's appendix is by far the longest. There are also several Conservative or Liberal figures, partly because of the timing – 1959 was World Refugee

Year, which Conservative members had helped launch – and partly because of the assessment that the French authorities had come to make, in 1959, of British activities in support of Algerian independence movements: what material aid there was to Algeria was in donations of various kinds to the Algerian refugees in Tunisia and Morocco, via organisations like Oxfam or the UK Committee for Algerian Refugees, a predominantly but not exclusively Labour organisation set up a few months earlier. Reporting in the mainstream press was also of concern, particularly from Middle East and North Africa specialist Nevill Barbour in *The Observer*.

All these individuals and groups are central to several of the key themes I have been investigating: Labour's divisions over the means and shape of Algerian independence, and the impact of transnational connections on conceptions of solidarity, with Algerians but also with French opponents of the war. They have also led me to the argument that even if aid from British Labour was limited, it did have an impact on the international campaign of Algerian nationalist movements and, as importantly, it influenced how men and women in the Labour movement assessed the objectives, means and consequences of colonial liberation.

But all these points could only really be made once the MRC collections were brought in. Not surprisingly, surveillance files do not provide the full story; and so we return to why the MRC matters.

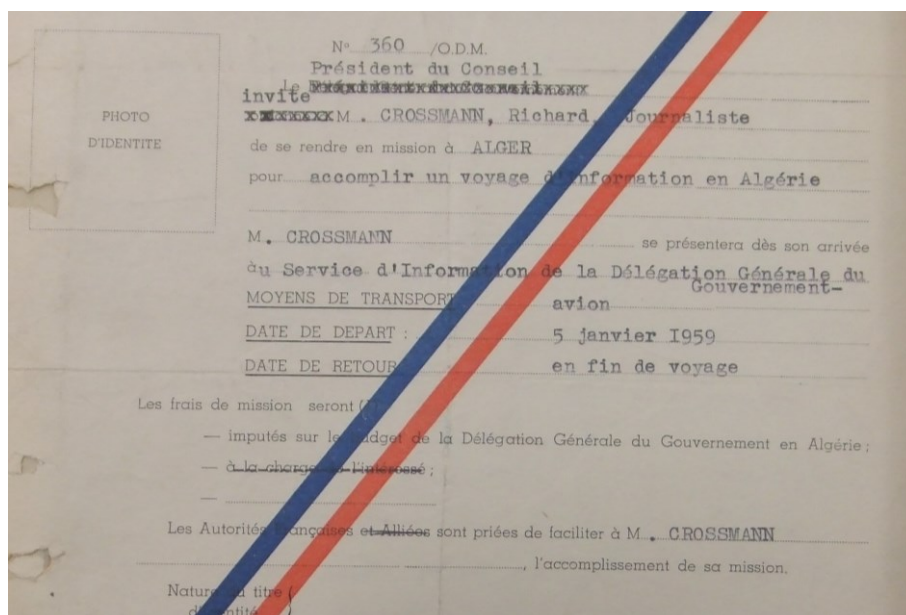
### **Above Board? The papers of Coventry's Labour MPs**

First, the papers of Maurice Edelman and Richard Crossman provide tangible insights into the tensions which the war in Algeria generated within the Labour Party, the importance given to Franco-British friendship, and the uneasiness – sometimes the sense of powerlessness – in the face of the use of force by French authorities and by Algerian nationalist forces. Edelman was known by the French authorities to be a dependable ally committed to high-level Franco-British cooperation and, most importantly, an admirer of de Gaulle, who had returned to power in 1958. What dominates his papers are numerous drafts for various publications on de Gaulle (including after 1962), as well as information leaflets produced by successive French governments in support of their actions in the empire (including in the Sahara).

As for Crossman, he had come to approach the Algerian question through the lens of the Jewish and Israeli questions, and feared the radicalism and violence of some in the FLN as much as the die-hardism of some of the French settlers. As importantly, he had travelled to Algeria in January 1959, on the invitation of the French government and escorted by the French army. His 'ordre de mission', to be found in his papers at the MRC,

gives a sense of the strict, monitored conditions in which he undertook this trip. His impressions of what he called the ‘Algerian Tragedy’ were published in the *New Statesman* on his return and were, therefore, readily available. He argued for a middle ground, showing concern for all Algerian residents including the European settlers and promoting negotiations between all parties. But the direct experience of Algeria seemed to affect him more profoundly than his articles, or his broadcasts (**MSS.154/4/BR/8**)<sup>i</sup> on the BBC Hebrew Service, suggest. What shows best the effect of his trip is a letter he wrote to Tony Benn, a staunch supporter of Algerian independence *and* the FLN (**MSS.154/3/POL/259**). Following a heated exchange at a meeting of the National Executive Committee of the Labour Party, Crossman wrote to Benn that he had ‘made [him] feel, almost for the first time, older, wearier, less high-principled and more humane’ than him, shedding light on other accounts of the meeting (the terser minutes of the NEC, and Benn’s published diaries, 1994). Crossman volunteered to ask the French authorities if they would allow Benn to see Algeria for himself (an offer unlikely to have been accepted by either party, although Benn’s papers, currently being catalogued by the British Library, may yield further details). This does not mean that Crossman approved of French policy – the British Consul in Algiers, Roderick Sarell, followed up on his conversations with Crossman to look more carefully at ‘the real mechanisms’ of regroupment camps and ‘psychological warfare’ in Algeria (**MSS.154/3/POL/183**). But the use of diplomatic and official channels, combined with the contents of private correspondence, rather confirms that Crossman was no direct threat to French policy.

Figure 2: *Laissez-passer* delivered to Richard Crossman for travel to Algiers, December 1958, Modern Records Centre, Richard Crossman Papers, MSS.154/3/POL/182. (MRC Collections)





## The Trades Union Congress: Underestimating transnational connections?

More surprising, perhaps, is the absence of the TUC from the French report. By 1960, the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) had approved the membership of the General Union of Algerian Workers (*Union Générale des travailleurs algériens*, UGTA), the Algerian trade union sympathetic to the FLN. The French authorities do mention Algerian trade union interest in TUC activities at times, but very much in passing. And yet, the record-keeping of the TUC gives us several original letters and telegrams from UGTA and FLN members, which are not generally found, or easily accessible. They are not as voluminous as correspondence coming from British territories, but there was clearly a steady attempt by Algerian unions to form contacts with the TUC, either directly, or through common contacts like Benn. The TUC archives hold several short notes from Mohamed Messaoud Kellou, in his capacity as the main representative of the FLN and of the Algerian Red Crescent in London, with two distinct letterheads.

Figure 3: Mohamed Messaoud Kellou to General Secretary of the TUC, 10 January 1959, TUC Papers, 292/964.1. (MRC Collections)

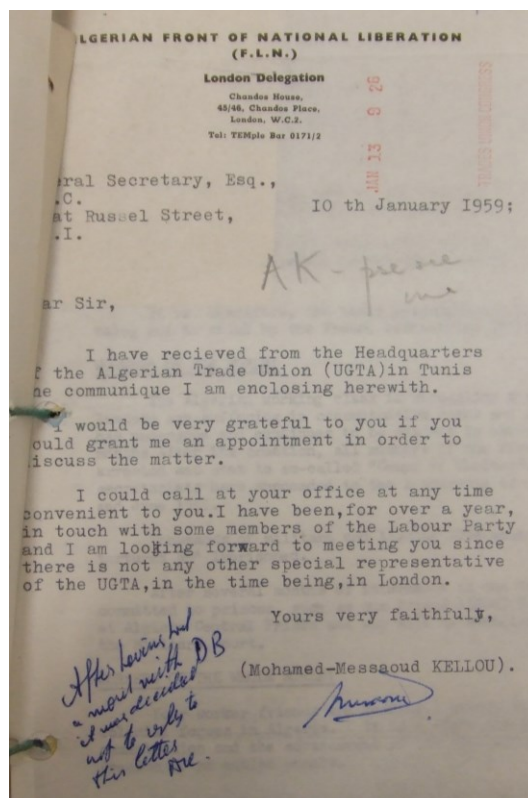
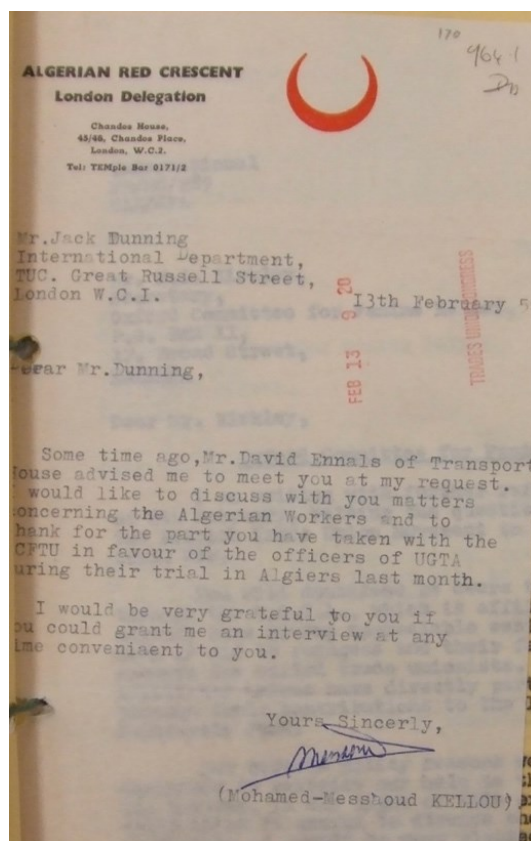
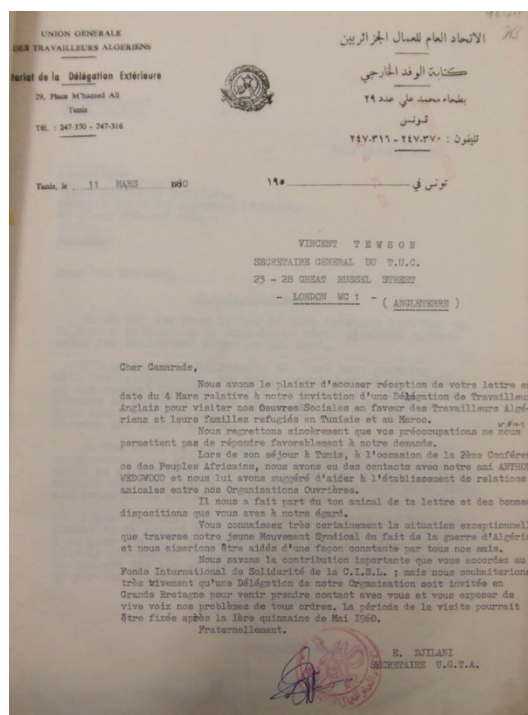


Figure 4: Mohamed Messaoud Kellou to General Secretary of the TUC, 13 February 1959, TUC Papers, 292/964.2. (MRC Collections)



But if the TUC signed several declarations and letters, it often did so when prompted by the ICFTU, by individual British unions (such as the National Union of Seamen or the Electrical Trades Union) and by the UGTA itself, whose letters did not always meet with a positive reply (or with one at all). And while the TUC considered training for Algerian workers, it was on a very small scale, and with fluency in English (or lack of, rather) mentioned recurrently as a problem. The translation services of the TUC were put to use in the correspondence but they also highlighted, therefore, the need for intermediaries on several occasions.

Figure 5: E. Djilani to Sir Vincent Tewson, 11 March 1960, TUC Papers, 292/964.1/2. (MRC Collections)



The TUC's files at the MRC suggest three reasons why the organisation was not a source of particular French concern: when it came to Algeria, the TUC consulted with French unions; it also consulted with the Foreign Office, which helped host other North African trade unionists as part of a larger cultural diplomatic drive to woo newly independent nations; and, consequently, it remained very cautious on contacts with Algerian representatives – in early 1959 no action was taken, as the handwritten note on Kellou's letter indicates, regarding his request for a meeting. In the files, Algeria is found in the series on North Africa but also on France and French unions, with the latter prism dominating many of the discussions. As noted in Roger Seifert's contribution to this Special Issue, the TUC's caution towards nationalist movements in Britain's own territories and the persistent paternalism, even belief in racialism, of many was observably strong. The fact that the TUC continued to receive documentation from the FLN's rival body, the MNA, for quite some time, much after such documentation ceased to appear in the archives of bodies like the Movement for Colonial Freedom or even the Fabian Commonwealth Bureau, suggests that the TUC's cautious attitude towards the FLN and armed struggle was a known fact (simultaneously, such caution also explains why the MNA found it difficult to capitalise on support in Britain after 1957, when action against the war, against torture and for independence became more organised and more vocal).



## **British Trotskyist Groups: Deceptively marginal?**

One of the reasons why I visited the MRC early on in my research was to find out more about the activities of British Trotskyists and particularly the RSL and Jimmy Deane, who were identified in various accounts, memoirs and interviews, as having given direct assistance to the FLN's manufacturing of weapons in a transnational network involving Dutch and Moroccan locations. I returned to their files on several occasions, as I soon realised a broader understanding of both the place of Algeria in the left and of the fabric of Trotskyism in Britain was first needed. They are also more difficult to navigate than the TUC files, with clearly less of a machine and fewer funds devoted to record-keeping by the producers. Notes kept by members suggest that quite a few decisions were made at RSL meetings without necessarily being recorded, or over the phone. Several members were strapped for cash, and it is not always possible to determine to what extent the activities of a branch at specific times slowed (right) down, or were simply not recorded. Some correspondence, particularly on splits between and within the various Trotskyist groups, is particularly detailed, but some letters are also very elusive, with initials being preferred to full names, and with people going by several names. It is a known fact that Michel Raptis, the Greek leader of the Fourth International was known as 'Pablo' and 'Gabe', used in many of the letters; but not everyone is as well-known, and some of the initials remain elusive.

As mentioned above, one of the (many) reasons that drew me to the MRC archives is that witness accounts and interviews mention that British workers – and Jimmy Deane in particular – provided direct aid to the FLN, via the Fourth International, by participating in arms production in Morocco, with warehouses also located in Holland, where the Fourth International under Pablo had established itself. But concrete evidence of this is hard to come by in the files. Pablo and his Dutch colleague, Sal Santen, were tried in 1960 for their involvement, as well as for printing counterfeit money and, more generally, for aiding the FLN – the need for secrecy and the police raid had an impact on what sources remain and what they yield. There is, however, one original letter that mentions it as explicitly as I have found on paper: 'Maybe as I remember you [sic] our stay in Morocco', wrote Dutchman Wim de Bruin to Deane in mid-October 1962, 'you will know who is writing to you now' (**MSS.325/22/A62 (98)**). Their stay in Morocco is – unfortunately – not dated, but it is clearly before the end of the war; and it is also perhaps precisely because independence was celebrated in Algeria in July that their Moroccan venture could be mentioned.

Elsewhere, information is far more difficult to use, partly because Deane was also travelling to India for the Fourth International – and simply

because the documents are quite elliptic. One example among many is Pablo's letter to RSL's leader, Ted Grant, dated 15 April 1960: 'Dennis told you probably about the necessity to visit Jimmy and ask him some extra help for our Friends. All the I.S. [International Secretariat of the Fourth International] thinks that Jimmy must do it, and I hope that you shall intervene in the same sense, asking him to go there immediately. Some money can also come from this for your section.' (MSS.325/22/A60 (16)). By all accounts, such aid as took place in Morocco remained marginal, and the overall British contribution even more so. But one important point to make is that incoming and outgoing correspondence reveals much more than a list of actions – of marches, petitions, collections, for both French anti-war workers and Algerian nationalists. It shows that Algeria as a war of colonial liberation and as a potential revolution was the object of sustained discussions within the Labour movement, and within the European Labour movement, including in and on the fringes of the Labour Party. In this respect, the archives of Dutchman Sal Santen held at the International Institute of Social History complement in important ways the collections of the MRC. One instance of this is that they hold correspondence related to the making of *Free Algeria*, the journal of the British Friends of the Algerian Revolution (whose first issue included an endorsement by Michael Foot), to editorial discussions and to production work.

Figure 6: First issue of *Free Algeria*, Papers of the Socialist Party (formerly the Revolutionary Socialist League, Militant Tendency and Militant Labour), 601/R/12/9/1. (MRC Collections)



Labour MP John Baird, in regular contact with members of the RSL and given the public editorship of *Free Algeria*, does feature in the French report of 1959-1960 as a member of the UK Committee for Algerian

Refugees. Neither the French nor the British authorities saw him as a political heavyweight and therefore did not consider him much of a threat. But Fourth International correspondence sheds important light on what Baird and others wrote in relation to Algeria, how Labour figures were canvassed – successfully, like Foot, or not, like Basil Davidson. And the divisions of records – at the MRC at Warwick, at the IISH in Amsterdam and at La Contemporaine library at Nanterre University, on the outskirts of Paris – reflect the transnationalism of the network, its connections and missing links, its plurality of languages, and its resilience as well as (or despite) its lack of substantial funds.

### **Missing Links, Alternative Connections and the Experience of the Archive**

So, did the French authorities fail to identify British threats to their interests in 1959-1960? Probably not, and it would be difficult to suggest that any of the groups or individuals whose collections are mentioned above posed any substantial threat to French interests (which Benn, or other Labour figures such as Aneurin Bevan, or to a lesser extent Barbara Castle, did), or even to Franco-British cooperation. But it is the collections held at the MRC that make such conclusions possible, shedding key light on the extent and value of the information the French authorities had, and on the tensions within the broad labour movement in Britain. Simultaneously, the MRC collections also show that the events in Algeria generated a new interest in the possibilities offered by the overthrow of colonial rule and stimulated hopes of socialism. In a three-year period, between independence in July 1962 and the overthrow of Algeria's first president Ahmed Ben Bella in a coup in June 1965, what occurred in Algeria and more broadly in North Africa continued to matter. Deane's own files contain clippings of Algerian newspapers. British socialists investigated workers' *auto-gestion*, as part of a more general European interest in 'Third-Worldism' (Kalter, 2016), interrogated the meanings of independence, liberation and neo-colonial practices, and some emphasised the need to dismantle racial discrimination in Britain itself. The Algerian 'revolution' – including disputes about its definition and practice – retained an important place in the political training of some, as shown by the activities of the Young Socialists group of Hackney Central. So did evolutions in North Africa more broadly: Moroccan politics became a source of concern with the arrests of Moroccan socialists and the border conflict with Algeria during the Sand War of October 1963. Such questions were also raised in the TUC, within peace groups (as shown by the collections at the J.B. Priestley Library at the University of Bradford) and Labour anticolonial activists hoping to form a government and translate principles into policy (as shown by Castle's papers at the Bodleian Library,

for instance). But the files also show a reconfiguration of transnational networks (part actual, part wished for) that the men of the Fourth International took part in.

Figure 7: Hackney Central Young Socialists to Jimmy Deane, 2 January 1963, Papers of Jimmy Deane, Correspondence, MSS.325/22/A63(2). (MRC Collections)

A63(2)

HACKNEY CENTRAL YOUNG SOCIALISTS

Mr. J. Deane,  
9, Grove Mansions,  
Stamford Grove, West,  
London, N.16.

Sec: Miss June Lester,  
2, Rendlesham House,  
Rendlesham Road,  
Clapton, E.5.

2nd January, 1963

Dear Jimmy,

Further to our conversation over the telephone last night this is to confirm that you will be coming to our branch on Friday 18th January at 8.00 p.m. to give us a talk on "Algeria".

See you then,

Yours fraternally,  
HACKNEY CENTRAL YOUNG SOCIALISTS

*[Handwritten Signature]*  
SECRETARY

Figure 8: North Paddington Young Socialists to Jimmy Deane, 2 June 1963, Papers of Jimmy Deane, Correspondence, MSS.325/22/A63(108). (MRC Collections)

North Paddington Young Socialists.

June the 2nd., 1963. 213 Kilburn Park Road,  
Paddington, N.W.6.

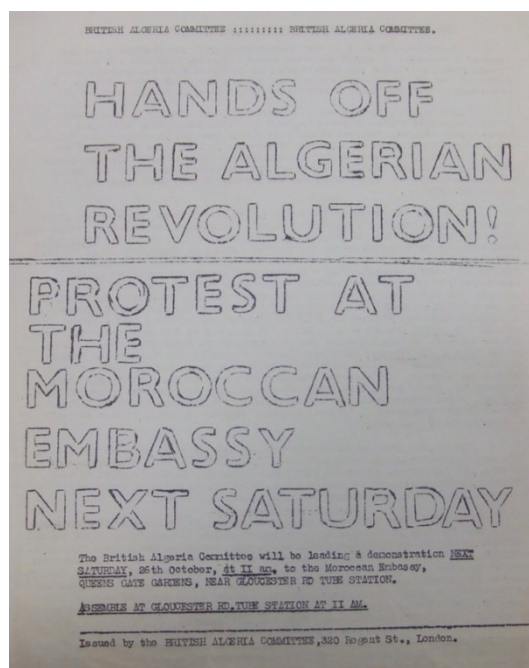
Dear Comrade Deane,

Keith Dickinson informs me that you would consider coming to one of our branch and giving a lecture on "Worker's Management". Is this agreeable? If so, the week we would hope to hear you is on Wednesday, July the 10th., 1963. If you find this O.K., ~~will~~ I will send you details ~~with~~ of the time and place a week or so before the above date. I enclose a stamped and addressed envelope for your convenience and speedy reply. Thanks in advance.

Yours Fraternally,  
Alec McKay, (Secretary)  
*Alec McKay*

*[Handwritten Initials]*

Figure 9: Leaflet for a protest on 26 October 1963, MRC, Papers of the Socialist Party (formerly the Revolutionary Socialist League, Militant Tendency and Militant Labour), 601/R/25/5. (MRC Collections)



Beyond this, what do the MRC archives on Algeria tell us about the writing and teaching of history and the need to pursue the task of liberation? Whether there are lessons for the contemporary Labour movement to learn – something our panel was asked on the day of the conference – is an arduous question. What stands out for me most, on reflection, is first a guideline. In the 1950s and 1960s, British solidarity with the Algerian people struggling for self-determination could only have true meaning as part of a global assault (intellectual and behavioural, individual and collective) on the structures of empire, which included denouncing exactions done outside the metropolitan territory (in Kenya and Cyprus, notably) and fighting racism and discrimination at home. But it is also a quandary. As Crossman put it in his letter to Benn, mentioned above: ‘The principle is nothing. What matters is the application of it’ It does not have to read like an injunction for inaction, but it does highlight the complicated task of making policy without compromising ideals and principles. And so we return to the value of the archive, as a site and as a source for understanding processes of domination and means of liberation.

As institutions, records centres hold a vital ‘social and political dimension’, not only because they facilitate the writing of history, but because they have ‘a direct role in the political processes through which the state is built, works or is contested’ (Beerli & El Qadim, 2024: 16). On the ends of empire and the true meaning of liberation, the slow, partial and sometimes falsely revealing opening of state archives matters not just to historians, who might revise previous interpretations, but to a wide range of people because archives are evidence – for Kenyan veterans in the case



of Britain, or the families of those who ‘disappeared’ during the war in Algeria (**Branche, 2020; Morin, 2020**). Recent research on the processes by which new archives have come to light warns against facile conclusions. Britain’s ‘migrated archives’, for instance, can also be a way of obscuring what really happened, of painting a positive picture of the state without actually giving away much new information (**Lienebaugh, 2022**). And as Tim Livsey has noted, ‘there is the danger of pathologizing and othering postcolonial African archives as uniquely problematic, by judging them according to standards of archiving devised in the western world, to which western countries like Britain have nevertheless not adhered’ (**Livsey, 2022: 109**). One important dimension of the ‘migrated archives’ is that they too show discontinuities, ruptures, absences in the British (and other European) state archives. As Todd Shepard writes, one important question is ‘how historical production and archives participate in defining what national sovereignty means post-decolonisation’ (**Shepard, 2017**).

One consequence of this has been a renewed interest in the transnational networks and internationalist ambitions of socialism, and in the definition and place of ‘European socialism’ (**Béliard & Kirk, 2023; Di Donato & Fulla, 2023**). For the Trotskyist groups above in particular, action had a strong transnational dimension, and both the documents and the collections need to be seen in this light. The fact that they can be fragmentary is also a safeguard against generalising and obscuring. Looking at movements of ideas and peoples, Leslie James has shown that large databases can provide impressive interactive visual maps but that these can ‘override the non-linear ways that some networks develop, and most importantly, they hide the crucial power dynamics that are always at work in deciding what things move and how they move’ (**James, 2016**). Instead, the incentive – and the only avenue, really with part of the collections – is ‘to go deeper in the analysis of each fragment, and wider in search of the connections between one fragment and actual, potential, or absent others’, something which Kate Skinner also sees as ‘particularly pertinent to the study of subversive political activities across national borders’ (**Skinner, 2020: 392**); or, to borrow the words of Florence Bernault, to acknowledge that ‘the power of incongruous oddities comes precisely from their intrusive, irritating lack of wholesomeness’ (**Bernault, 2015: 274**).

Using the MRC collections has certainly made me more mindful of the importance for historians of looking for absences and missing fragments, and to weave them into their writing without downplaying them. This is essential if we take seriously two questions raised in a recent chapter by Raphaëlle Branche, comparing British, Dutch and French ends of empire: ‘How do historical narratives of this past resonate with the issues that these countries currently face? What can be done so that these narratives, developed in the former metropolises, do not contribute to a reactivation

of colonial domination, through scholarly or symbolic questions?’ (Branche, 2022). While I have not been able to use the MRC with students, the experience of the collections at Warwick that relate to Algeria has strengthened my conviction (not an original one, admittedly) that teaching in the archives, with the physical documents, is invaluable. During a seminar session held at the *Archives départementales de la Somme* in Amiens, one of our students was immediately struck by the quality of the paper on which various documents were produced, and reflected in their work on how it influenced their interpretation of the message, how it focused their attention on the production, use, selection and conservation of the source. Witnessing this unprompted realisation really brought home Antoinette Burton’s comment that ‘the material spaces of archives exert tremendous and largely unspoken influences on their users, producing knowledges and insights which in turn impact the narratives they craft and the histories they write’ (Burton, 2005: 9-10). The documents pictured above only reflect some of the variety of the fabric of British mobilisation. But they also show the importance of the materiality of the archive and, consequently, of records centres as spaces for teaching, as much as researching. Fragmentary documents are particularly precious because they show what research can be: a stimulating if sometimes frustrating task, and above all, a collaborative experience. This is certainly one of the reasons why the MRC@50 is cause for celebration.

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Mélanie Torrent is Professor of British and Commonwealth history at the Université de Picardie Jules Verne (Amiens) and Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of Commonwealth Studies (London). She became a junior member of the Institut universitaire de France in 2016. Her research focuses on the connected ends of the British and French empires, and their impact on state and society in the (former) metropolises. Her most recent book, resulting from her research with the IUF, is *Algerian Independence and the British Left: Resistance and Solidarities in a Decolonizing World* (Bloomsbury, 2024).



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**To cite this article:**

Torrent, M., 2024. Not on the French radar? Situating Algeria in Labour's map of solidarity at the Modern Records Centre (1954-1965). *Exchanges: The Interdisciplinary Research Journal*, 11(4), 99-116. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.31273/eirj.v11i4.1599>.

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