
This book tells a remarkable story about the swift making of a Jewish diamond industry in Palestine during World War II, under British tutelage. The creation of this industry was not, as might be expected, the result of labor migration or of communal trust that cut middlemen costs, although this is part of the story. Rather, David De Vries largely focuses on Jewish-Zionist entrepreneurship and how entrepreneurs not originally involved with the industry cooperated with British wartime interests and modes of production to mutual benefit. De Vries studies the development of a war-inspired diamond commodity chain starting in the Belgian Congo, passing through London’s De Beers diamond cartel, moving on to production in Palestine, and ending, often in the form of engagement rings, in the U.S. market. The polyphony of local and global narratives is this book’s main strength: De Vries’s shifting analysis of the industry’s commodity chains generates broad insights into the global context of local conflicts within the Zionist movement over the meaning and action of Zionist economic nationalism.

On the eve of World War II, German control over raw diamond supply and production in Belgium worried the British, who sought an alternative, temporary wartime center of production. British-ruled Palestine proved a suitable location in what De Vries terms “the logic of limited expansion.” Temporary relocation would not compete too heavily with or derail Belgium’s postwar return to diamond production. Simultaneously, Oved Ben-Ami, the pro-capital mayor of Netanya, a small Jewish town, sought an alternative mode of economic development that would challenge the dominance of Labor Zionism in Yishuv politics. Ben-Ami became a middleman who aided the British in establishing and managing the diamond industry in Palestine. Ultimately, he created a private fiefdom in a highly centralized, monopolistic diamond enterprise. Significantly, De Vries shows that such an arrangement between British government and a local entrepreneur was inspired by the earlier colonial experience of Frederick Albert Mathias, an economic advisor at the British Ministry of Economic Warfare in Sierra Leone.

The politics of workplace plays a prime role in the book’s narrative. Industrial innovation—the introduction of Taylorist methods of production instead of highly skilled artisanal work—accelerated manufacturing but reduced the bargaining position of labor. The industry, however, also attracted an aristocracy of well-paid workers whose unique esprit de corps helped them to endure long hours of strenuous effort. Nonetheless, Labor—and industry more broadly—experienced rapid business cycles and the insecurities of wartime supply and demand. Strikes were frequent, reflecting growing dissatisfaction with a regimented workplace, harsh working conditions, and diminishing purchasing power. They also manifested the broader competition between the Labor Zionists’ Histadrut and the politically right-wing and economically liberal Revisionist movement.

The diamond industry in Palestine suffered a major postwar setback, and the newly declared state of Israel played a central role in its recovery and restructuring. National interests, including the need to secure foreign currency and investment and to provide employment,
Raphaëlle Branche offers a sophisticated, creative, deeply compelling portrayal of the landscape of violence that characterized not only the Algerian war of independence but the hundred years leading up to it, and its aftermath. Irreducible to a simple mapping of deaths onto the land, this violence, as Branche so convincingly demonstrates, emerged out of social and political dynamics both local and transnational. The town of Lakhdaria, as Palestro is now known, serves as the stage on which Branche projects questions that resonate beyond the boundaries of the gorges and hills of Kabylia and beyond 1956.

Branche traces the deaths and mutilations of twenty of the twenty-one soldiers caught in an ambush in the mountains of Kabyla, as well as the fixation on the sole survivor. Correctly noting that the aftermath of this scene of violence resonated in France far more than in the Algeria whose war of independence enveloped it, she concludes her analysis with a nuanced reading of one monument in particular, tucked away in Droué. “This recent monument,” she contends, “attests too to the displacement of the Algerian War in French society: from the memorial margins, where it was cordoned off in the beginning, it has become the largest force in the veterans’ movement today” (p. 170). This shift of focus from World War I to World War II and ultimately to colonial wars (above all that in Algeria) indicates, she implies, not just a generational or temporal shift but a more complicated transformation in the reimagining of France after empire.

The work’s few flaws reflect little on the author. In an otherwise excellent section (part of a wider analysis of which the field stands in desperate need) connecting the war of independence with the Algerian civil war of the 1990s, Branche largely glosses over the decades immediately following Algerian independence. Although unfortunate, the reader can scarcely criticize Branche alone for the paucity of historical work on early national Algeria, and if such an expert work serves to highlight this gap, one may hope it will attract the attention of more historians. The title, however, does the book a disservice. Branche’s analysis extends far beyond the ambush itself, and over a much longer and more complicated transformation in the reimagining of Algeria and its aftermath. Irreducible to a simple mapping of violence actually means. In a 1969 journalist’s account, Branche underscores that “here again, as in 1956, ‘the massacre’ and ‘the ambush’ are used as synonyms. The ambiguity remains: is it the fact that these men were killed without real ability to defend themselves that constitutes the massacre, or is it the mutilations?” (p. 164). This is no mere rhetorical flourish or weakly deconstructive gesture, but instead a subtle reminder that the afterlives of violent events rarely correlate in a simple or unmediated way with the actual facts in question.

Branche’s discussion of memory addresses squarely one of the major issues in the study of the Algerian War’s aftermath in France: the delayed, vexed, and only partially disavowed, if at all, commemoration of the war as part of the emergence of post-imperial France. She concludes her analysis with a nuanced reading of one monument in particular, tucked away in Droué. “This recent monument,” she contends, “attests too to the displacement of the Algerian War in French society: from the memorial margins, where it was cordoned off in the beginning, it has become the largest force in the veterans’ movement today” (p. 170). This shift of focus from World War I to World War II and ultimately to colonial wars (above all that in Algeria) indicates, she implies, not just a generational or temporal shift but a more complicated transformation in the reimagining of France after empire.

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Indeed, that contribution deserves a wide readership. Branche’s text, convincingly researched, compellingly argued, and well written though it is, also benefits from its execution. Concisely worded, the text nevertheless also includes brief biographic sketches and a short lexicon. Although largely superfluous for American readers, these paratexts are an argument for translating the book into English. Its methodological import will appeal to scholars of colonial violence, while its sophistication, erudition, structure, and clear argument make it ideal for adoption in courses at any level.

Branche’s book addresses an important and wholly