A Comparative History of Immigration: European and non-European Immigrants in France, 1918-1981

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Introduction

On the 4th of August 2012, shortly after midnight, in Aigues-Mortes, a small town in southern France, a man and his wife attacked a group of young French Muslims who were having dinner in a car park during the holy month of Ramadan. After shouting abuse at the young men, 'We don't need Arabs here. We are in France. This is our country', the couple opened fire on them. The young people, fearing for their lives, ran off to hide as the couple, armed with a rifle, chased them in their car and fired around ten shots. While the husband shot at the youths, his wife passed him the bullets to recharge his rifle while shouting, 'we are in France here. Run, run'. After 40 minutes of what some of the victims described as a manhunt, the local police managed to arrest the couple. One of the youths was injured but luckily no one died. Only two days after the attack, the couple appeared in court and were convicted of acts of armed violence and incitement to racial hatred. The husband received four years in prison, his wife, too.

Some would say the harshness of the sentence reflects the severity of the crime. After all, the couple shot a group of unarmed young people and chased them with a gun for around forty minutes. But French authorities have not always shown such promptitude and harshness when dealing with racist crimes. In fact, in the same town of Aigues-Mortes, almost 100 years before those events, a group of Italian workers was savagely attacked by French people.[1] On 16 August 1893, groups of French villagers and workers, claiming that Italian workers took French jobs, launched violent attacks against the local Italian community. At the end of the attacks, which lasted two days, between five and ten Italians had died, and hundreds had been injured. After these terrible events, the French authorities launched an investigation. A diplomatic row even erupted between France and Italy, with the latter accusing the French government of organising the killings of Italian workers. The trial finally took place in late 1893, six months after the events, with both Italian and French people

being accused of criminal acts. After the end of the trial, the jury chose to clear all the accused and released them from prison immediately. It is impossible not to draw a parallel between these two stories as they happened in the same town one hundred years apart, and roughly for the same reason, namely racism and hatred of foreigners. These two stories are interesting for many reasons. They tell us much about the history of foreigners in France and how they are perceived by some French people as well as their treatment by French authorities. Within the context of this article, they are interesting at two levels. Firstly, the French authorities' response to the two events: in 2012, the accused were put on trial and sent to prison within hours of the attacks. In 1893, it took six months to take the accused to court, and all were cleared. Secondly, and this is what is of most interest here: the ethnic backgrounds of the victims; in the most recent case, they have North-African origins; in the case of 1893, the victims were Italian.

The question here is: would such a crime as happened in 1893 against Italian nationals happen today in France? In other words, would Italians be set upon by French nationals for taking French jobs today? The answer is most probably negative. How about North-Africans and other non-European migrants? Could they be attacked by French people? Well, as the Aigues-Mortes event of August 2012 has just shown, the answer here is sadly yes, even if cases such as these are rare. The parallel between Italians and other Europeans who began to arrive in France en masse in the late 19th century and early 20th century and the large waves of non-European immigrants who came after 1945 is easy to make. It is easy because one can see many similarities between how immigrants, both European and non-European, were treated and how 'problematic' their presence in France may be considered. As this paper demonstrates, the way French society and authorities have treated foreigners depends largely on the economic and political context.

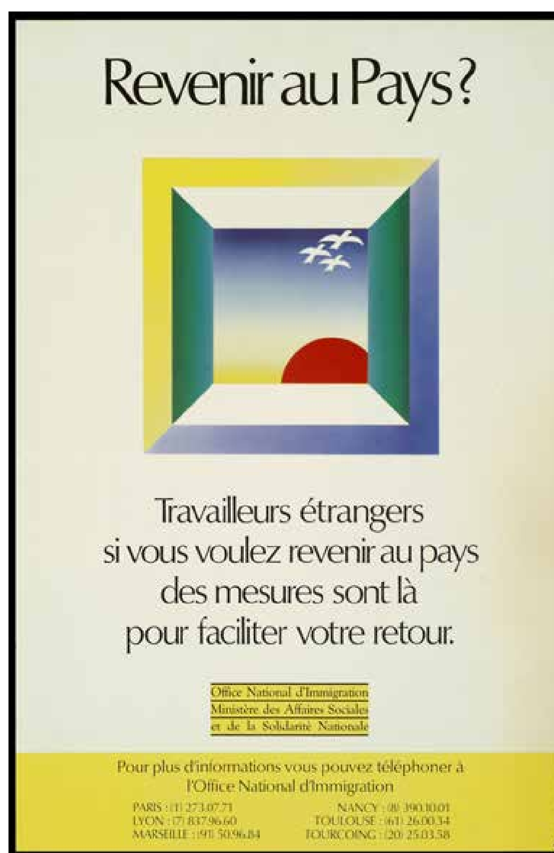

Fig 1 The office national d'immigration (ONI) was created in 1945. ©Génériques

The first part of this article will focus on the history of immigration between 1918 and the 1950s and briefly show who these immigrants were, why they came to France and some of the chal-

lenges they faced. The second part will consider how non-European immigrants, who came to France mainly from the African continent after World War Two, were received and perceived. Finally, it will present some of the similarities and differences, between these two waves of immigration. The aim here is to allow for a longer-term understanding of what immigrant communities, from within and outside Europe, experienced and how they were perceived in France.

European immigration 1918-1950s

Of all West European countries, France has perhaps one of the longest histories of immigration. Starting with the large waves of immigrants predating the Middle Ages up to the more recent mass arrivals of economic migrants from Europe, Africa and Asia, those migratory movements are part of France's history. Historians agree that the large waves of immigration, those that have shaped French society into what it is today – where one third of French people (20 million) are thought to have foreign origins – began in earnest in the first half of the 20th century, mainly after World War One when hundreds of thousands of Poles, Italians, Belgians, Spaniards and other Europeans migrated to France. With 2.7 million foreigners living on its soil in 1931 (almost 7 percent of its population), France was by then the second most important country in the world for immigration after the United States of America. So who were those migrants? Why did they come to France? And how did the French government treat them?

In 1920, France had a population of around 39 million. By comparison, fifty years before, in 1870, it had 38.5 million. This means that its population only grew by 500,000 over a period of fifty years. It might be tempting to think that the war which had just ended and killed almost 1.7 million French people was responsible. Certainly it was, but only in part. In fact, a deeper chronic problem affected French society at the time, and had in fact affected it for since the end of the 18th century: a chronic shortage of births.[2] This low birth rate had a dramatic effect on the growth of France's population and on its economy. As the historian Elino Accampo explains, 'In 1789, France had a larger population than Britain, Germany or Italy, standing at 27.5 million inhabitants. But by 1914 [i.e. within 125 years], it had only grown by 45 percent (to 40 million); Italy had grown by 225 percent (to 36 million); Britain 450 percent (to 45 million) and Germany 340 percent (to 68 million).' Thus, after the Great War France faced a demographic crisis and a serious labour shortage which threatened the growth of its economy. Indeed, in the 1920s the country faced an unprecedented economic and industrial boom which required more and more workers, especially blue-collar workers.

That is why after the war, in order to help resolve the chronic labour shortage it faced, French industrialists and business owners actively recruited foreign workers. The majority of immigrant workers came from Belgium, Italy, Poland, Spain but also Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Yugoslavia Russia etc. There was also a small number of North-African workers (around 1000).

It is important to note that economic immigrants were not the only foreigners in France during the interwar period. Political immigrants also came to France: Russians who fled the Bolshevik Revolution (in fact a large community of Jews had already migrated from the Russian empire before 1914, largely for political reasons as they faced antisemitism and persecutions at home), Italians who fled fascism, Germans who fled Nazism (including German Jews), Armenians, Spaniards who left Spain after the end of the Civil War in 1939 etc.

But the economic crisis that hit France in the early 1930s swiftly put a stop to immigration. Between 1931 and 1936, half a million foreigners were asked to leave or were forcibly sent back back to their home countries, and among those who managed to stay in France many faced antisemitism, racism and humiliations, particularly Jews.[3] For example, in 1932, the French parliament passed a law that limited the number of foreign workers in French companies. Six years later, as the threat of war against Germany looked more and more realistic the French government operated a crackdown on foreigners by publishing a decree that authorised the internment of foreigners that threatened public order and national security. It also allowed for the denaturalisation of freshly-acquired citizenships if holders were found to be unworthy to be French. Paradoxically, at the same time, east-European and Spanish refugees arrived in France in increasing numbers. Some historians argue that xenophobia and the antisemitism in France at the time was closely linked to the recent influx of foreigners, including Jews, and the threat they represented culturally, economically and politically to French natives.[4]

During World War Two and the occupation of France by Germany, the authorities (both French and German) targeted foreigners; mainly foreign Jews but also Spanish Republicans and other 'undesirable' elements. Foreigners were not free to work, they had to register in municipal offices and were not allowed to move about freely, nor leave the country without a permit. In the most extreme cases, they were interned, sent to labour camps or deported to concentration camps. After the war, while immigration had been steadily decreasing since the early 1930s and France was in great need of foreign workers to help rebuild the country, the French government changed its immigration policies.

Non-European immigrants 1950s-1970s

After World War II, the birth rate in France was on the increase, but France's economic growth was so important that foreign immigrant workers had to be called upon once again. Whereas before 1945 industry and business owners recruited their own foreign workers directly by sending special envoys to recruit workers in their home countries, after 1945 the French government took charge of the recruitment of foreign workers. The ordinance of 2 November 1945 established a national body (the *Office national d 'immigration*; National Office of Immigration) that signed labour recruitment agreements with various countries. Although officially there were no ethnic quotas in place, it was agreed that the National Office of Immigration should discourage agree-

Fig 2 Massacre des Italiens à Aigues-Mortes, 1893. By G. Stern

ments with non-European countries and favour those with other European countries as they were deemed 'culturally compatible'. That was how the French government organised for hundreds of thousands of Italian, Spanish and Portuguese workers to come to France in the 1950s. But while France preferred European migrants, economic growth in parts of southern Europe and the levelling off of living standards in some member states of the European Economic Community began to occur, fewer and fewer Italians were prepared to migrate to France towards the end of the 1950s. At the same time, the French economy grew considerably and needed more and more foreign workers to do the work some French people refused to do, such as mining, steelmaking, construction work and other such demanding work. As fewer Europeans were prepared to migrate to France, the latter turned to its colonies and former colonies in North and sub-Saharan Africa.

While before 1945 there had been few North-African African workers in France (few remained on French soil permanently, most returned home after earning enough money), after 1945 the

French government organised for special envoys to go to North African and sub-Saharan towns and villages to recruit workers, in particular young, single male workers who could be recruited and sent back to their home countries according to labour and economic fluctuations. As a former colonial power, France could count on a large workforce across many continents including Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Vietnam, Mali, Senegal and the French territories of Guyana, Martinique and Guadeloupe, which provided France with the workers it so greatly needed. Those migrant workers were sent mainly to work in France's industrial centres as well as the Paris area. From the middle of the 1950s until the late 1970s, North Africans (especially Algerians and Moroccans) were the largest immigrant group in France. While the North African community comprised largely young male workers in the 1950s, who, so the French government assumed, would return home after having made some money in France, by the end of the 1960s it became clear that their stay in France would not be short-term. Indeed, as many decided to settle in France, they brought their families or started their own families. Most historians agree that the French government had not anticipated this state of affairs. After all, the accommodation the government provided for these immigrant workers was not meant to favour family reunification or marriage. The state-run housing agency called SONACOTRA (*Société nationale de construction de logements pour les travailleurs*), which in the 1950s was created to house immigrant workers, built hostels with very small rooms for single men. It was hoped that this type of accommodation would discourage family settlement and encourage the workers to go back to their home countries once they had earned some money.

But just as more and more North-African as well as West African immigrants continued to arrive in France, the economic crisis of the 1970s and the accompanying economic difficulties that hit France turned immigration into a social and a political problem. Immigrants, at least from non-European countries, became a 'problem', and according to French public opinion, there were clearly too many of them. Hostility and racist attitudes towards North Africans, which already existed, became commonplace. Immigrants were regularly portrayed as a threat to French culture, identity and labour market. Some French people did

Fig 3 Poster denouncing the Stoléru law © Génériques

not hesitate to use hatred and racism for political ends. Jean-Marie Le Pen's National Front party, which was created in the early 1970s, portrayed North Africans as a threat to France's national identity and its labour market. One of the party's famous slogans at the time read, '1 million immigrants, 1 million French workers unemployed'.

In the interest of what it felt was the public good, the government decided to put a halt to immigration and created several immigration laws to restrict the numbers of immigrants entering the country. In 1974, the French government put a ban on all immigration; but only on non-European immigration. European immigrants were in fact still welcome. In 1977, another government initiative, known as the Stoléru law, offered money to immigrant workers (10,000 French francs) and their families if they agreed to return to their home countries.[5] In the early 1980s, the new left-wing French government removed some of the old policies that had restricted family reunification and racist attacks became less common. But hostility towards North African immigrants continued, with Jean-Marie Le Pen's openly racist party winning more and more votes in national and local elections, particularly after 1983.

Conclusion

To conclude, it is clear that immigration in France changed in terms of numbers but also in terms of the immigrants' ethnic backgrounds during the 20th century. Whereas one can clearly see that between 1918 and the late 1950s the majority of immigrants were Europeans, afterwards the majority of immigrants came from Non-Europeans countries. Secondly, it is also clear that the conditions in which immigration occurred was different before and after World War II. Whereas before 1945 the state did not intervene in the recruitment of foreign workers, after 1945, it sought to control the number of immigrants. Another conclusion is that at many points in French history, sections of the population and political elites have felt threatened by immigrants and have responded with hostility and violence. Before 1945, European immigrants were seen as problematic and threatening, in particular Italians who were victims of numerous and savage attacks before 1914 (for example Marseilles in 1881, and Lyon in 1894) but also foreign Jews, Poles and Spaniards. In the 1930s, within a context of global economic and financial difficulties, France sent tens of thousands of Polish workers back to Poland. During World War II, Spanish Republicans were interned in camps in France: 30,000 of them were deported to concentration camps in central Europe. As for foreign Jews, the primary target of the Vichy government, 70,000 were deported to concentration camps. However, as the face of immigration changed in France, non-European immigration, and North Africans in particular, represented a threat and became problematic. Thought of as an inassimilable minority, they are seen, as were foreign Jews or Italians before them, as a threat to France's labour market, its culture and identity. What is more, the particular context in which immigrants from the former colonies arrived in France –

it is important to note that France had just lost its colonial empire which for more than 130 years had contributed to France's nation-building – did not help. To be sure, every time France faced economic or social difficulties, immigration was no longer perceived as a temporary solution to an economic problem but as a more permanent social and political `problem' which needed to be remedied.

Notes

1 See Gérard Noiriel, *Le massacre des Italiens à Aigues-Mortes*, Paris, Fayard, 2010

2 Elinor A. Accampo, 'The Gendered Nature of Contraception in France: Neo-Malthusianism, 1900-1920', *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 34, 2, 2003:235-262

3 Statistique Générale de la France, *Résultats Statistiques du Recensement Général de la Population effectué le 8 mars 1936*, Tome I, 2e partie: 58

4 For more information on antisemitism and xenophobia in 1930s France see, Ralph Schor, L'Antisémitisme en France pendant les années trente: prélude à Vichy, Bruxelles: Editions Complexe, 1992; Michael M. Marrus and Robert O. Paxton, Vichy France and the Jews, New York: Basic Books, 1981; Vicky Caron, „Prelude to Vichy: France and the Jewish Refugees in the Era of Appeasement', *Journal of Contemporary History,* 20, 1, January 1985

5 Lionel Stoléru was junior minister in charge of manual labourers between 1974 and 1978