

Memories of Nuclear Testing in the Algerian Sahara

Between 1960 and 1966, France conducted seventeen nuclear tests in the Algerian Sahara. French conscripts who were sent to work on the Saharan nuclear bases in the early phase of French nuclear testing thus avoided the Algerian War which raged further to the north until 1962.

Letters and photographs which date back to the time of France's first nuclear tests reveal that conscripts who were sent there developed an incongruous taste for Saharan ethnography. Decades after the tests however, the same conscripts allege that their exposure to low doses of ionising radiation justifies that they too be regarded as veterans. Indeed, some claim that the long-term effects of irradiation represent a greater national sacrifice than the risk of a quick death on the front. Those who speak of irradiation as a form of "friendly fire" hint at an even more ambiguous attitude towards the French state.

How can we explain these paradoxical war memories of non-combat? Of course, claiming veteran-hood is also the first step towards national recognition and state compensation. With this in mind, some scholars argue that the delay with which the memories of nuclear veterans have emerged means that their claims to veterancy are disingenuous. But I would also like to point to other historical explanations for the belated emergence of a nuclear veteran identity. These range from changes in military culture to anxieties about the transgenerational effects of radio-induced diseases.

In an attempt to understand how the experience of "nuclear veterans" has evolved, this paper draws on more than twenty interviews in addition to contemporary documents such as photographs, objects and letters. The main challenge for me has been to make sense of the experience of people who are still trying to make sense of it themselves. Although this challenge is especially acute in oral history, perhaps it is common to most human and social sciences.

Biography:

Chloë Mayoux holds a BA in European Studies from King's College London, a diploma in International Affairs and Strategy from Sciences Po Paris, and a Master's in Global and Imperial History from Oxford University. As a PhD student at the London School of Economics, her research explores the connections between African decolonisation and nuclear power.