The May 1967 massacre in Guadeloupe: Trauma, nationalism and decolonization

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Abstract

On 26 May 1967, French police opened fire on striking workers in Pointe-à-Pitre, Guadeloupe, sparking a major uprising across the city. According to officials at the time, eight Guadeloupeans were killed during the unrest, and many more were injured. However, a state cover-up means we may never know the true death toll. The French government blamed the violence on a clandestine independence movement (GONG) and tried nineteen activists before the French Court of State Security for threatening the territorial integrity of the French Republic. Fifty years later, the massacre has received little acknowledgement outside Guadeloupe. This paper will argue that a clearer understanding of the May 1967 massacre and its legacy demonstrates that Guadeloupe is not an anomaly, disconnected from twentieth-century decolonization. Instead, this event highlights the failures of nationalist movements in Guadeloupe and draws links to other struggles for self-determination in the Caribbean and Algeria, situating Guadeloupe within the wider narrative of global decolonization.

Keywords

Decolonization, nationalism, Caribbean, French history, colonial violence, trauma

Introduction

On 26 May 1967, in the Guadeloupean town of Pointe-à-Pitre, French police opened fire on striking workers, triggering two days of protests and violence. In the forty-eight hours that

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followed, many Guadeloupeans were killed or injured. Officially, eight people died during the clashes between protestors and the police, but this figure remains disputed. Despite a lack of evidence, the French government accused the independence movement GONG (Groupe d'organisation nationale de la Guadeloupe) [Guadeloupean National Organization Group] of organising the unrest. In a trial at the French Court of State Security, nineteen anticolonial activists were charged with treason. Although intellectuals Aimé Césaire and Jean-Paul Sartre spoke in support of the Guadeloupean defendants, six of them were found guilty. This massacre and the subsequent repression of nationalists has had a lasting traumatic impact on Guadeloupe and its relationship with France.

The historiography of decolonization overwhelmingly focuses on those colonies that became independent. Benjamin Stora (1998), Martin Thomas (2015), and Caroline Elkins (2022) have highlighted the violence that frequently accompanied the end of empire. Non-independent territories like Guadeloupe are often absent from debates about nationalism, race, and colonial violence during twentieth century decolonization because they have not become conventional sovereign states. However, they are just as much a part of this global experience and can enrich our understanding of the postcolonial world, challenging preconceptions about nationalism and identity. As Frederick Cooper (2005: 24–25) reminds us, historians too often approach the twentieth century assuming that the demise of empires was inevitable. Including non-sovereign states in our history of decolonization acts as a useful reminder that independence was not predetermined. This article answers recent calls to historicise decolonization and to recognise the ways in which it remains unfinished (Thomas and Thompson 2018). We must deprovincialize non-sovereign territories like Guadeloupe and include them in our global perspective of decolonization.

The article will focus on the colonial massacre, known as ‘Mai 67’, which has gained little scholarly attention outside Guadeloupe. Over the course of three days, civil unrest and

police violence left more than a hundred people hospitalised (Sainton and Gama 2011: 119). A cover-up by officials at the time means we may never know the exact death toll (Sainton 2017). Using archival sources, memoirs, eyewitness accounts, newspaper reports and the findings of the recent independent commission of inquiry (Stora et al. 2016), this article will explore the local background of 'Mai 67', the impact on Guadeloupe's relationship with France, as well as the wider regional and global context of the massacre.[1]

'Mai 67' is a difficult subject to research due to the fear and stigma still surrounding the incident. Inconsistencies exist in the official reports and certain archives remain closed. Oral history can, to some extent, overcome the gaps in the official record. Before the 2016 Stora Report, 'Mai 67' had only been examined in detail by Guadeloupean historians and activists, predominantly using eyewitness accounts (Combé et al. 2008; Tomiche 2008; J.-P. Sainton and Gama 2011; J.-P. Sainton 2012). Indeed, if it were not for the efforts of Guadeloupean activists and the pioneering work of historian Jean-Pierre Sainton, official attempts to erase the memory of 'Mai 67' may have succeeded (Sainton 2017). The Stora Report largely focused on the written archives, presenting the government perspective of events, though it did include certain previously published witness reports. This was the first historical commission to scrutinise France's colonial history, yet the publication of the report provoked little debate and reflection within France. In addition to these sources, this article makes use of interviews with eyewitnesses and activists, conducted by the author in 2017 at the time of the fiftieth anniversary of the massacre.[2]

Writing on the eve of this momentous anniversary, Julien Mérion (2017) presents a useful political analysis of the massacre, situating it within the context of the Cuban Revolution and the Caribbean region in the 1960s. This article will go further by situating 'Mai 67' within the framework of French and global decolonization, as well as other nationalist struggles of the 1960s. It will reflect on the significance of 'Mai 67' and GONG in relation to other colonial

massacres and independence movements. Unlike previous studies, it examines whether ‘Mai 67’ was a potential turning point in Guadeloupean decolonization.

This article will argue that, though ‘Mai 67’ has been overlooked by historians of French decolonization and colonial violence, it is revealing of the psychological crisis suffered by the French state following the loss of Algeria. France was prepared to maintain control of the French Antilles at any cost. In the 1960s, the French state increasingly criminalized nationalist activity in the overseas departments.[3] After an earlier uprising in March 1967 in Guadeloupe, the French state had placed the nationalist organization GONG under heightened surveillance. In the aftermath of the May massacre, the government used the incident as an excuse to arrest and neutralize the nascent nationalist movement. French authorities evidently feared that GONG had the potential to harness discontent in Guadeloupe, as the FLN (Front de libération nationale) had done in Algeria.

Secondly, clear parallels exist with other colonial massacres, such as in Algeria in 1945 and in Madagascar in 1947 (Mérion 2017: 92–96). ‘Mai 67’ was caused by long-standing social and economic issues, and triggered by racial tensions during a strike, resembling outbreaks of violence in other colonial settings (Thomas and Curless 2017: 1–2). Although Guadeloupe was technically no longer a colony, following departmentalization in 1946, the state response to unrest demonstrates it was still treated as such by France. The brutal response of law enforcement to striking construction workers in May 1967 was noticeably more severe than the police response to unrest in Paris the following year. ‘Mai 67’ has had a lasting traumatic effect on Guadeloupe and, like colonial violence elsewhere, has both galvanized and hampered pro-independence activists.

Finally, it will be suggested that this massacre in Guadeloupe did not prompt a broader call for independence due to the fear engendered by continued repression, the splintering of the nationalist movement just as it was gaining ground, and the weak sense of national unity across

Guadeloupe at the time. ‘Mai 67’ demonstrates that Guadeloupe is not an anomaly, disconnected from twentieth century decolonization. Instead, this event highlights the failures of nationalists in Guadeloupe and demonstrates links to other decolonization struggles in the Caribbean and in Algeria, situating Guadeloupe within the narrative of global decolonization.

Incomplete departmentalization

Since the abolition of slavery in the French Antilles in 1848, civil and political rights had been gradually extended to Black Antilleans, but these rights were continually denied through violence, electoral corruption, and racial segregation (Larcher 2015: 137–38). The departmentalization law of 1946 appeared finally to offer Antillean citizens equality, giving Guadeloupe and Martinique, as well as La Réunion and French Guiana, equal status to the metropolitan departments of France. Departmentalization integrated these colonies into the French Republic meaning that, in theory, all new French laws would be applied in these ‘départements d’outre-mer’ (DOMs). The move was widely popular across the French Antilles and welcomed as a solution to major social and economic issues. Nonetheless, certain prominent political figures voiced opposition to the proposed law: Guadeloupean socialists Paul Valentino and Joseph Pitat expressed fears about the future of the Antilles under departmentalization if it brought greater assimilation and Gallicisation (Valentino 1946: 751-752).

Disappointment and conflict over the policy of departmentalization began almost as soon as the law was passed, particularly regarding the slow pace of implementation. The 1946 law stipulated that all French laws not in effect in the DOMs should be applied by 1st January 1947. Legal equality was initially delayed until July 1947, and this was then further postponed until January 1948 (Direction des Affaires Politiques 1946). These deferrals caused increasing anger among citizens in the DOMs. Once granted equal status through departmentalization,

both the political elite and the general public were outraged that as French citizens they were not treated equally (Césaire 1948: 2486). However, complete integration with metropolitan France was never fully implemented, and key social measures like the minimum wage and social security benefits remained lower in the Antilles for decades (Bonilla 2015: 23).

Discontent about the perceived failings of departmentalization deepened in the 1950s. In Guadeloupe, much of the conflict centred around the sugarcane industry. High levels of inflation and wage stagnation left sugarcane workers with a lower standard of living than before the Second World War (Schnakenbourg 2015: 61). Widespread industrial action disrupted sugar production throughout the 1950s, and strikes were frequently suppressed with violence. The St Valentine's Day massacre in Le Moule is a stark example of this continued colonial repression. In February 1952, the CRS – the French riot police – opened fire on striking sugarcane workers, killing four. The victims included Constance Dulac, a mother of six, who had been sheltering from the gunfire in a courtyard (Bulletin d'information et de réflexion des patriotes mouliens 1987). Integration with metropolitan France had originally been viewed as a way to circumvent the power of the local 'békés', the wealthy white oligarchy, descendants of slave plantation owners. However, as the quality of life for many Antilleans worsened following departmentalization, France was increasingly seen as the source, rather than the solution, of colonial oppression (Childers 2016: 115).

In response to the failures of departmentalization, Antillean student organizations in metropolitan France increasingly advocated greater local autonomy (Daily 2014: 347). That the most vocal Antillean anti-colonial movements developed in Paris was both a strength and a weakness for nationalists. It facilitated strong links with other anticolonial movements, such as the FEANF (Fédération des étudiants d'Afrique noire en France) (P. Sainton 2008: 190). However, it also resulted in a divide in lifestyle and experience between students in Paris and workers in Guadeloupe, a gap which some anticolonial groups found difficult to bridge.

Antillean activists were further hindered by the increasing criminalization of nationalist activity in the DOMs following the 'Décembre 59' uprising in Martinique. The uprising began after a traffic incident between a Black Martinican and a white metropolitan on 20 December 1959 in the capital, Fort-de-France. It escalated into three nights of violent clashes between protestors and the police, resulting in the deaths of three young men. This 'popular rebellion' was spontaneous and not organised or orchestrated by any political group (Stora et al. 2016: 24). However, occurring less than a year after Castro had taken control in Cuba, 'Décembre 59' frightened French authorities and prompted them to take measures to repress further protests. Changes to the constitution in 1960 allowed for the arrest of anyone seen to threaten 'l'intégrité du territoire national' ['the territorial integrity'] of the French Republic (JORF June 1960: 5109). A decree in October 1960 gave the prefects of the overseas departments greater powers of surveillance and deportation of civil servants (JORF October 1960: 9483). Martinican Frantz Fanon was greatly disappointed that a widespread revolution did not take place after the 1959 uprising (Juminer 1962: 127). Those who took more radical action, such as Édouard Glissant who co-founded the FAGA, le Front des Antillais et Guyanais pour l'autonomie [the Antillean-Guianese Front for Autonomy], often found themselves exiled from their place of birth (Dash 1995: 13). French determination to supress Antillean nationalists was exposed when eighteen members of OJAM, l'Organisation de la jeunesse anticolonialiste de la Martinique [the Anticolonial Martinican Youth Organisation], were arrested for treason after publicly declaring 'La Martinique aux martiniquais'. Five received prison sentences, demonstrating how quickly French authorities were prepared to stifle any hint of nationalism in the wake of the 1959 uprising (Farrugia 1981: 138-42).

In addition to increasingly repressive policies, France sought to tackle youth unemployment, one of the key causes of unrest in the DOMs. The French government established the agency BUMIDOM, Bureau pour le développement des migrations dans les

départements d'outre- mer [Office for the Development of Migration in the Overseas Departments], to encourage and coordinate emigration from the overseas departments to mainland France. BUMIDOM failed to address the real economic issues affecting the Antilles, instead making the islands' economies even more dependent on the metropole. Furthermore, many Antilleans encountered significant difficulties, prejudice and racism in mainland France once they arrived (GRS 1973). At the same time as BUMIDOM encouraged young Antilleans to move to mainland France, 'métros' from the metropole, were encouraged to work in the growing French bureaucracy in Martinique and Guadeloupe (Dumont 2010: 90–92). They were offered pay incentives and other bonuses to facilitate the move. This caused increasing tension in Martinique and Guadeloupe, with Martinican intellectual and politician Aimé Césaire referring to these policies as 'génocide par substitution' (Césaire 1978). In the two decades following the Second World War, the promises of equality through departmentalization remained unfulfilled, while French policing of Antilleans divided and repressed those who dared to speak out.

The emergence of GONG

Guadeloupean nationalism grew out of this particular context of student activism in Paris. The first group to explicitly call for Guadeloupean independence was GONG, established in 1963. GONG's leader, Pierre Sainton, was a doctor whose nationalist beliefs had developed while he was a student in Paris. He was involved in several anticolonial international student organizations in the 1950s (P. Sainton 2008: 146–56). He had been president of the Paris branch of AGEG, Association générale des étudiants de la Guadeloupe [General Association of Guadeloupean Students], and was involved in Édouard Glissant's FAGA (Ibid.: 170-184). Sainton and other Guadeloupean members of the FAGA split from the organization to form a more radical, solely Guadeloupean nationalist movement. Unlike previous groups advocating

greater autonomy, GONG called for complete national independence from the French state (GONG 1964: 2). It was no coincidence that GONG was created just months after the disappearance of Albert Béville in the notorious 1962 plane crash in which several anticolonial activists from the DOMs died (Justice 1962: 1-2). Conspiracy theories about whether this was a targeted attack on radical Antillean politicians were further fuelled by the suppression of the official report on the crash, which remained a state secret until 2012 (Stora 2016: 83). Sainton described Béville as the 'père spirituel' ['spiritual father'] of GONG and it was Béville's death that prompted the split from the FAGA (Sainton 2008: 193).

However, there was also a strong global dynamic at work, most notably through GONG's connections to Algeria, Cuba and Vietnam. GONG attracted students, Guadeloupean workers based in mainland France, and conscientious objectors who had refused to serve in the Algerian War. The organization also drew support from veterans, like Ken Kelly, the editor of GONG's journal, who were greatly affected by their experiences of French brutality in Algeria (Kelly, interview with author 2017). GONG was a Marxist organization which had Maoist leanings and sought inspiration from the Cuban Revolution and the war in Vietnam (GONG 1964: 11). Like other youth and student protest movements in the 1960s, GONG focused on the Vietnam War as the embodiment of a revolutionary struggle against imperialism (GONG 1967: 20-23).

Furthermore, the leaders of GONG were acutely aware of the risks of working openly, having witnessed the swift imprisonment of the Martinican group OJAM (P. Sainton 2008: 194). As a result, GONG sought to emulate Algerian and Vietnamese revolutionary tactics, creating cells of activists in the main French cities and operating covertly. The group focused mostly on propaganda, smuggling nationalist material into Guadeloupe (Ibid.: 207-17). They sought to increase anticolonial awareness and sentiment among the workers in Guadeloupe and advocated the creation of a progressive coalition which could launch an armed national

revolution (GONG 1964: 5-8). GONG was in direct contact with political figures in China, Belgium, Guinea, Albania, Egypt, Vietnam and, most significantly, Algeria (Makouke 2017: 148). The government of the newly independent Algeria assisted in the creation of several GONG cadres (Ibid.). This highlights the global reach of GONG, who used their international connections to get around restrictions imposed upon them by the French state.

Building on these global links, GONG became more active in the Caribbean region in 1966, with members attending the Tricontinental Conference in Havana and successfully pushing through their resolution for 'le droit de la Guadeloupe à son indépendance nationale' (GONG 1966: 18) ['Guadeloupe's right to national independence']. This was a significant success for GONG, gaining legitimacy and recognition for their cause on an international stage. This resolution was controversial among the Left in Guadeloupe, as many sought a greater degree of autonomy while retaining ties to France. Outright independence was a contentious and radical standpoint, even for anticolonial politicians and activists. The PCG (Parti communiste guadeloupéen) [Guadeloupean Communist Party], for example, dominated Guadeloupean politics in the 1960s and pursued a pro-autonomy, rather than pro-independence, approach. The PCG declared that the Tricontinental resolution did not correspond to 'la réalité de notre lutte' (PCG 1966: 1) ['the reality of our struggle']. The divisions among left-wing activists impeded the development of a united nationalist front in Guadeloupe, and the security services were able to exploit these disputes to further undermine GONG. Thus, recognition at the Tricontinental Conference did not directly translate into support from the Guadeloupean Left.

GONG's presence at the Tricontinental Conference was of further significance due to the impact of the Cuban Revolution in Guadeloupe. In the 1960s, over half the population of Guadeloupe was under twenty and Cuba was hugely influential in this young society (Cazes 1970: 384). Connections to Cuba were reinforced through family ties from inter-Caribbean

migration, through the popularity of Cuban music and dance, and, most significantly, through the romanticization of the Cuban revolution by a disenfranchised youth seeking to challenge authority (Mérion 2017: 63–80). The security services greatly feared the power of an organization like GONG to harness the pro-Cuban sentiment among this important segment of the Guadeloupean population. This view was shared by the Prefect of Guadeloupe who perceived the enthusiasm generated by the Tricontinental Conference, combined with the geographical proximity to Cuba and the growing agitation in Guadeloupe, to be 'une menace directe contre les départements français de la Caraïbe et contre leur statut national' (Bolotte 2000: 513-554) ['a direct threat to the French departments of the Caribbean and to their national status'. Cuba clearly held symbolic importance for GONG, as their Guadeloupean flag resembled the Cuban flag, with green rather than blue stripes. Nonetheless, Mérion (2017: 70-71) suggests that it was only after the Tricontinental Conference that Cuba became more central to GONG's message.

Therefore, GONG developed out of the post-war student activism networks in Paris, building on discontent at the incomplete and inadequate implementation of departmentalization. Its approach was shaped by the experiences of other anticolonial groups from the DOMs, pushing GONG underground to avoid police repression and detention. GONG's creation and evolution must also be appreciated within the global context in which it operated. International conflicts and connections, especially in Algeria, Vietnam and Cuba, inspired and assisted GONG activists, as well as increasing the scrutiny of French intelligence services.

1967: Guadeloupe at breaking point

Discontent in Guadeloupe intensified in 1967, when the social and economic climate was particularly volatile. Hurricane Ines had devastated the islands the year before, killing thirty-

three, causing millions of francs in damage and exacerbating issues of poverty and unemployment (Feuillard 1966: 3649). Furthermore, growing numbers of sugar workers had moved to the new urban areas developing around Pointe-à-Pitre, looking for work in the expanding construction sector. With insufficient housing to cope with this demographic change, slum areas developed on the outskirts of the city. Tensions ran high during the legislative elections of March 1967 amidst accusations of electoral fraud and corruption (L'Étincelle March 1967: 1). GONG intensified its activity in Guadeloupe in the run-up to the election, organising a boycott campaign.

Exacerbated by this fraught atmosphere over electoral fraud, a racist incident in Basse-Terre later that month sparked two days of major unrest. A white shop owner, Vladimir Srnsky, reportedly set his dog on Raphael Balzinc, a Black cobbler who was disabled, and who had been sitting outside Srnsky's shoe shop (PCG March 1967: 1). Srnsky was rumoured to have used a racist slur when encouraging his dog to attack Balzinc (J.-P. Sainton and Gama 2011: 62).[4] A crowd gathered outside the shop to confront Srnsky, who drew particular resentment due to his role as an electoral agent for the Gaullist party, the UNR, l'Union pour la nouvelle République [The Union for the New Republic] (Justice March 1967: 1-2). Anger grew as rumours of the incident spread across the city, spurring demonstrators to set alight Srnsky's car and push it into the sea (France-Antilles March 1967: 1). Unrest continued the following day, fuelled by the inequality and discrimination made more visible by the growing numbers of white metropolitans living and working in Guadeloupe. Reports also suggested some young protestors were targeting white metropolitans and stopping their cars (Stora 2016: 58). In the aftermath of these incidents, French intelligence services became increasingly concerned about GONG's activities in Guadeloupe and placed all known members under higher surveillance (Gévaudan 1967). Indeed, the Stora Report established a direct link between the March

uprising, after which two surveillance officers were sent from Paris to Guadeloupe to monitor GONG, and the scapegoating of the organization in May (Stora 2016: 58–64).

This increasing discontent in Guadeloupe was further demonstrated when, on 1 May, at a march in Capesterre, protestors held banners with slogans like 'La Guadeloupe aux Guadeloupéens' ['Guadeloupe for Guadeloupeans'], 'A bas le colonialism' ['Down with colonialism'], and 'Vive la révolution guadeloupéenne' (J.-P. Sainton and Gama 2011: 79). Several members of GONG participated including Pierre Sainton, who gave a speech at the march. Sainton (2008: 224) noted that while nationalist and internationalist slogans proliferated, the most pressing issue for those marching was the dire situation facing young Guadeloupeans. This demonstration was also the first time GONG member Jacques Nestor was identified and photographed by the police (Stora 2016: 62). Nestor was a charismatic young activist who lived in the slum area of Pointe-à-Pitre and was popular among the workers and fishermen of the city (Chaltouné 1973: 1-2). Though police and news reports suggested he was one of the leaders of GONG, he had in fact only recently become involved in the organization (Kelly 2017). From this moment, Nestor was singled out as a troublemaker by the police, who were concerned about his popularity and ability to galvanize the youth.

It is evident that unrest was building, particularly among young Guadeloupeans who were increasingly disillusioned with their experiences of unemployment, poverty, inequality and racism. Clear parallels exist between the racial tensions which sparked the Basse-Terre disturbances in March, and those which would fuel the Pointe-à-Pitre uprising in May. In both instances, the overt racism of a white man in a position of power angered young, Black Guadeloupeans who had become increasingly marginalised and impoverished in post-departmentalization Guadeloupe. Moreover, a direct link can be drawn between the two, given that the same squadron of military police was called to deal with both incidents (Stora 2016:

59). Most significantly, the protests in March and on 1 May persuaded the intelligence services that GONG needed to be investigated and, if possible, neutralized.

The 'Mai 67' massacre

With the authorities on high alert and racial tensions at breaking point, a peaceful strike in Pointe-à-Pitre triggered several nights of violence. On 26 May 1967, a group of striking construction workers gathered in the city centre outside the Chamber of Commerce awaiting the resolution of a pay dispute. Rumour spread among the crowd that Georges Brizard, one of the construction bosses, had directed a racist comment at the workers. The crowd, of around one to two thousand people, began to get angry, throwing stones and conch shells at the police (Stora 2016: 59). The CRS riot police were then given the order to shoot to clear the crowd (Chéron 1967). Jacques Nestor was the first Guadeloupean to be killed and he appears to have been deliberately targeted (PCG June 1967: 2; Jarvis, interview with author 2017). A state of violence and civil unrest ensued, and eyewitnesses described Pointe-à-Pitre as a warzone with looting, shootings and torture (J Coudrieu, interview with author 2017; Jean-Baptiste 1985: 118-19). Like many other urban rebellions of the 1960s, young disenfranchised and often unemployed men from the slum areas of the city were prominent in confronting the police, but they also attacked other symbols of authority, particularly buildings (Stora 2016: 60-61).

The repressive response from the state meant that passers-by, not involved in protesting, were also targeted by the police. Solange Yvon Coudrieu, a sports teacher, was out trying to buy a gift for Mother's Day (S Coudrieu, interview with author 2017). He was shot without warning by the police with a 'dum-dum' bullet which blew apart his right leg. Jacques Jarvis (2017), a young courier, was on his way home from work when he was shot at by police. He escaped with a bullet wound to his arm by hiding in an unfilled grave. He never spoke of what

had happened to his parents. These accounts suggest that agents of law enforcement were indiscriminate and brutal in their attempts to regain control of the city streets.

Some Guadeloupeans resisted police violence by assisting those wounded or by engaging in clashes with the police. Witnesses described a sense of revolution in Pointe-à-Pitre over the three days. Young people from the run-down outskirts of the city joined the confrontations with the police with naïve enthusiasm and shouts of 'Let's join the revolution', not expecting the extreme response (Déglas and Tomiche 2008: 23). In our interview, Jarvis (2017) recalled, 'on avait des leaders comme Che Guevara, comme Castro, Ho Chi Minh, Mao, on lisait beaucoup Mao… et pour nous… on était sous une forme de revolution, mais mal préparé' ['we had leaders like Che Guevara, like Castro, Ho Chi Minh, Mao, we read a lot of Mao… and for us… we were in a kind of revolution, but badly prepared']. Indeed, protestors were ill-equipped to mount any significant form of organized rebellion due to the spontaneous nature of the unrest, a scarcity of equipment and weapons, and the lack of leadership. Furthermore, national sentiment remained relatively weak in Guadeloupe and when news spread to the countryside, people regarded it as a city affair. This was, perhaps, partly due to rural Guadeloupeans not experiencing the same daily reminder of stark and visible inequality. In the city, an avenue abruptly divided the middle-class neighbourhood from the slums (Jarvis 2017). According to Jean-Pierre Sainton and Raymond Gama (2011: 237-39) class consciousness was weak among most workers at this time. They characterize 'Mai 67' as a spontaneous, urban popular uprising, highlighting 'la rupture sociologique' ['the sociological rupture'] between the city and countryside (Ibid.). This city-country divide prevented unrest developing into an island-wide insurrection. It seems likely that, despite high levels of discontent in Guadeloupe in 1967, the lack of leadership and the undeveloped nature of the nationalist movement meant that this potential turning point could not be exploited.

At the same time, in Pointe-à-Pitre, many citizens were discouraged from participating in the uprising due to fear of police tactics, which included torture. Marcelle Delphine (1985), a nurse at the city hospital, observed police entering the hospital and arresting anyone who looked like they had been injured in the protests. Nurses and doctors managed to hide some protestors to protect them from the police. Ambulance drivers reported that the police were even shooting at medical vehicles (J Coudrieu 2017). Eyewitnesses also described acts of violence by demonstrators towards the white inhabitants of the city, which were picked up and focused on in many news reports at the time (Le Monde 1967; France-Antilles 1967: 7). Evidently, the violent response of law enforcement was a significant deterrent in preventing more Guadeloupeans from taking part in the protests.

GONG held responsible

The French government manipulated the situation by blaming the escalation of violence on GONG militants (Gévaudan 1967). Even before order was restored on 28 May, the authorities rounded up anyone suspected of being a member of GONG in both Guadeloupe and Paris. Ken Kelly, the editor of GONG's journal, was arrested in July 1967, despite living in Paris at the time of the unrest (Kelly, interview with author 2017). He and other imprisoned Guadeloupeans went on hunger strike in protest. Anticolonial activists who were not members of GONG were also arrested, such Henri and Félix Rodes, journalists from *Le Progrès Social* (Service departemental des renseignements generaux 1964). These arrests, combined with the brutality of 'Mai 67', solidified an atmosphere of fear in Guadeloupe, where most Guadeloupeans were afraid even to tell their families that they had been involved in or affected by the clashes with the police. Sainton and Gama (2011: 21-22) have highlighted the traumatic impact of 'Mai 67' and its aftermath on the collective consciousness of Guadeloupeans. They argue that this trauma brought back collective memories, passed down the generations, of the brutal re-enslavement

of many Afro-Guadeloupeans in 1802 during the reoccupation of Guadeloupe by Napoleonic France.

The bloodshed of ‘Mai 67’ also built on a legacy of recurring colonial violence. Violent repression of dissent continued after emancipation and was used regularly to discourage challenges to the status quo. In the early twentieth century, the police frequently opened fire on demonstrators, for example: Saint-François in 1900 (3 killed); Saint-François in 1910 (5 killed); Capesterre in 1910 (9 killed); Petit-Canal in 1925 (5 killed); Lamentin and Abymes in 1930 (3 killed); Marie-Galante in 1936 (2 killed); Basse-Terre and Port-Louis in 1943 (2 killed); Le Moule in 1952 (4 killed) (Schnakenbourg 2015: 81; Mérion 2017: 97). In all of these cases, the protests involved striking sugar labourers in a dispute with plantation and factory owners. ‘Mai 67’ continued this long history of state violence used to maintain order, and it strongly evoked the memory of this violence. For some, like Ken Kelly (2017), the experience of colonial violence contributed to the development of nationalist beliefs. As a child, Kelly witnessed the shooting of demonstrators in Le Moule. Kelly felt inspired by a communist leader who sought refuge in their home during the protest. Similarly, Solange Yvon Coudrieu (2017) became an advocate of independence after he was shot by the police, despite not being interested in nationalism before 1967. Yet, for others, the repetition of violence provoked terror and silencing.

The covering-up of the ‘Mai 67’ massacre began immediately, with inconsistencies in official reports, particularly as to when the first shots were fired (Bolotte 1967: 1-2). French officials announced that eight people had died during the clashes with police (Gévaudan 1967). Witnesses and historians have cast doubt on this figure given the level of violence across the three days, the rumours of disappearances, and the fear which stopped families of the dead and missing from reporting it to the authorities. In 1985, the Secretary of State for the overseas departments and territories, Georges Lemoine, suggested that the death toll was eighty-seven,

though it is unclear what he based this figure on (Stora 2016: 70). The 2016 Stora Report contended that they could not identify any more than the eight deaths listed in official accounts, and that it was impossible to establish for certain how many people died. The report argued that, although it was difficult to establish who was individually responsible, 'Mai 67' was 'un massacre au cours d'une manifestation, ordonné sciemment sur le terrain et approuvé par le gouvernement sous la présidence du général de Gaulle' (Ibid.: 72) ['a massacre during a protest, knowingly ordered on the ground and approved by the government under the presidency of General de Gaulle'].

The state's oppressive response to protests was greatly influenced by the close links between events in Guadeloupe and the recent Algerian War. The CRS riot police and the military police were the same forces as those deployed in Algeria. In Guadeloupe, they brought with them colonial racist attitudes and a feeling of humiliation from defeat in the Algerian War (S Coudrieu 2017). The Prefect of Guadeloupe at the time, Pierre Bolotte, had previously served in the colonial administration in Algeria. Struggles for independence across North Africa had also had a significant impact on Guadeloupean society since 1950, and this came to the forefront during the 'Mai 67' uprising. The construction boss who sparked the anger among the protestors was a white Algerian 'pied-noir' (Jarvis 2017). The migration of white Algerians to the French Antilles in the 1950s and 1960s disrupted social and racial hierarchies and caused considerable social conflict. Antilleans complained about incidents of racism and the ease with which some 'pied-noirs' established businesses in the Caribbean (L'Etincelle June 1963: 1; Justice November 1963: 2). In both the unrest in March and the uprising in May 1967, the racism which provoked Guadeloupeans into action, was emblematic of these disrupted racial hierarchies since departmentalization. The racist comments also harked back to the particular dynamics of racism within plantation society during the era of slavery. Evidently, developments in Guadeloupe were closely connected to decolonization in the rest of the French colonial empire. The state

response to ‘Mai 67’ reveals French officials feared GONG could replicate the success of the FLN in Algeria, and so they responded in a similarly repressive manner.

The 1968 trial of the nineteen ‘patriotes’

Following the arrests of suspected GONG members, the matter became an issue of national security. Nineteen Guadeloupeans were put on trial in 1968 for threatening the territorial integrity of the French Republic (Collectif des patriotes guadeloupéens 2008: 5). The pro-independence activist Louis Théodore was tried in absentia, as he was in hiding and had evaded arrest. The trial of the Guadeloupean ‘patriotes’ in 1968 gained much media coverage in France (Méteye 1968; Le Monde 25-26 February 1968: 17). Student protestors gathered in Paris demanding the fair treatment of the imprisoned activists (Le Monde 20 February 1968). This came just a few months before the turbulent civil unrest of May 68 in France. The trial lasted from 19 February to 1 March 1968 and the defendants were all men aged between twenty-six and forty-six, from a range of professions: teachers, students, lawyers, doctors, journalists, and mechanics (COGASOD 1969: 15).

The importance of the trial for France’s relationship with the Antilles was highlighted by the presence of Aimé Césaire. Césaire spoke in favour of the defendants, arguing ‘Que les Antilles soient des colonies de fait, il n'y a à cela aucun doute’ (Ibid.: 293) [‘there is no doubt that the French Antilles are de facto colonies’]. Jean-Paul Sartre also testified at the trial in support of the nineteen Guadeloupeans. He argued ‘ce procès… prouve, exactement… que nos amis guadeloupéens… n’ont pas les mêmes droits que les Français de France et que, par conséquent, ils ne sont pas français’ (Ibid.: 351) [‘this trial… proves, precisely… that our Guadeloupean friends… do not have the same rights as French people from France and that, consequently, they are not French’]. Several witnesses referred to a plot against GONG, maintaining that the French Government was trying to undermine GONG’s legitimacy and find

an excuse to suppress the organization (Ibid.: 121–23). While the prosecution offered evidence that members of GONG had distributed pro-independence propaganda material, they were unable to provide any proof linking GONG to the violence in Pointe-à-Pitre the previous year. Ultimately, six men, including GONG's leader Pierre Sainton, were given suspended sentences of three to four years in prison for the 'dangerous threat' they posed to the French Republic, and the other thirteen were acquitted (Ibid.: 449).

The systematic repression by the French government was one of the most significant factors in restricting nationalist activity in Guadeloupe. After the arrests in May 1967, GONG fractured as a movement, with so many key members in prison. The remaining activists were divided over how to move forward, with some opting for Maoist-style literacy and political education campaigns among agricultural workers, while others continued to focus on promoting a revolutionary nationalist uprising (Bonilla 2015: 28-9). 'Mai 67' had provided a good excuse for French authorities to crack down on the nascent nationalist movement in Guadeloupe, though other nationalist groups did emerge in the 1970s and 1980s. Nevertheless, the massacre has become symbolic in Guadeloupean nationalist rhetoric. Many of the nationalist groups in the 1970s and 1980s had either been directly affected by the massacre or regarded it as a key moment in their political awakening. Luc Reinette, who in 1981 founded the Mouvement pour la Guadeloupe indépendante [Popular Movement for Guadeloupean Independence], was a student in Paris at the time of the massacre (Reinette, interview with author 2017). He argued that 'Mai 67' was the catalyst for the development of his nationalist beliefs, symbolising the Guadeloupean nationalist struggle against repressive French colonialism (Ibid.). During the 1980s, Reinette was accused of involvement in several bombings and was imprisoned in Basse-Terre, Guadeloupe. He famously managed to escape and avoid capture by hiding out in the forest for three years. He was extradited to France after attempting to seek political asylum in St Vincent and was sentenced to thirty years in prison, but was pardoned by François Mitterrand

after two years (Bonnot and Guillerm 2016: 139). Evidently, 'Mai 67' cast a long shadow over Guadeloupean nationalism for many decades. It appears likely that the trial and imprisonment of GONG members and other anticolonial activists was a significant deterrent, acting as a warning to others of what would happen if they campaigned for Guadeloupean independence.

'Mai 67' and national sentiment

Given that such instances of extreme colonial violence have, in other colonial settings, generated greater political unity and provided momentum for independence, it is worth considering why that did not occur in Guadeloupe. The 1919 Jallianwala Bagh massacre, for example, is often seen as a turning point in Indian nationalism, uniting opponents of British rule and hastening independence (Collett 2005: ix-xi). Also, Kim Wagner (2016: 224) argues that violence alienated the colonized population and created martyrs for nationalists, ultimately weakening colonial rule. Following 'Mai 67', Jacques Nestor did become a martyr figure for Guadeloupean nationalists and memorials to his death were held for several years after (Chaltouné 1973: 1-2). When analysing contemporary conflicts, scholars have several indicators to predict whether levels of violence and state instability will result in a regime change, including the level of grievances, the vulnerability of the state, and the resources available to facilitate mobilization (Buterbaugh et al. 2017: 483-89). If we apply this logic to Guadeloupe, whilst grievances were clearly significant, the French state ensured it had the military power to protect itself. Furthermore, protestors and nationalists lacked the resources to mount any serious threat to the government.

While it is true that colonial violence was employed to terrorize and alienate Guadeloupeans, it was then counterbalanced by the momentum of assimilation, which accelerated in the 1970s. In order to prevent independence movements from gaining ground, the French State combined the restrictive and repressive measures of the police and intelligence

services with a gradual extension of social rights to bring Martinique and Guadeloupe in line with metropolitan France. A 1970 government report acknowledged that this had been official policy since 1962 (Report April 1970). It is worth noting that emphasis was placed on achieving greater parity, not when departmentalization was first introduced in 1946, but later in 1962 after nationalism and general unrest increased. Some historians have suggested that this policy of increasing funding to Martinique and Guadeloupe to help with social welfare is the main reason independence has never been popular with most Antilleans (Pervillé 1994: 84-94). However, the improvement of social welfare only began in earnest after unrest had increased in the Antilles, in response to the rise in nationalism.

The sense of national sentiment that emerged from the collective trauma of 'Mai 67' was instead channelled into the trade unionist movement. In the 1970s, efforts to generate a Maoist-style populism developed into a 'new-wave syndicalism' which combined cultural nationalism, including promoting the creole language and traditional cultural practices, with labour activism (Bonilla 2015: 28-32). New trade unions, not affiliated to a metropolitan counterpart, sprang up, the most significant being the UGTG, l'Union générale des travailleurs de Guadeloupe [General Union of Guadeloupean Workers]. The UGTG has maintained a pro-independence stance since its creation in 1973, and remains the largest union in Guadeloupe, with over 7000 members from a population of 440 000 (Odin 2017: 150). The Union played a crucial role in the 2009 general strike which brought Guadeloupe to a standstill for 44 days. Although pro-independence activists formed part of the strike coalition, the 2009 strike involved a range of groups whose focus was to challenge 'Pwofitasyon' ['profiteering or exploitation'] rather than calling for independence. The LKP, Liyannaj Kont Pwofitasyon [Collective Against Profiteering], who spearheaded the strike used 'Mai 67' as a protest symbol against the French state. Reports and open letters from the LKP and the UGTG called for an enquiry into the massacre, likened the violence of 'Mai 67' to the brutality of slavery, and

presented the uprising as emblematic of Guadeloupeans' continued struggle against French colonialism (Domota 2009). References to 'Mai 67' appeared on t-shirts, banners and in songs at protest marches (La Médiathèque Caraïbe 2021). Sainton argues that the 2009 general strike was the first time 'Mai 67' became more openly known and discussed across Guadeloupe (Sainton 2017). In 1967, grievances centred around issues of unemployment, racism and poverty, but were not channelled towards independence. Instead, in the twenty-first century, 'Mai 67' has become a uniting symbol of Guadeloupean identity, used in negotiations with the French Government.

Conclusion

The protests during 'Mai 67' were not organized by GONG nationalists, nor did most Guadeloupeans involved openly advocate independence. The uprising was the product of years of inequality, poverty and frustration over the failures of departmentalization. The severe hurricane of 1966 and the increasing racial tensions following the events in March 1967 heightened these existing hostilities. The rumoured racist comment was enough to turn a peaceful strike into an enraged crowd of protestors. The violent response of the police escalated the situation and led to a massacre. The unrest provided a pretext for French authorities to clamp down on the nascent nationalist movement in Guadeloupe, but it also helped to inspire a new generation of nationalists who were more radical than their predecessors.

This closer analysis of 'Mai 67' reveals the real extent of French efforts to repress any suggestion of independence in Guadeloupe. The massacre occurred at a time when France was still struggling to come to terms with the loss of Southeast Asia and Algeria. 'Mai 67' and its aftermath illustrate the clear links between Guadeloupe and other decolonization struggles, both in the Caribbean and more widely, situating Guadeloupe within the narrative of global decolonization.

Crucially, ‘Mai 67’ highlights the continuing problems and dissatisfaction with departmentalization. Departmentalization in 1946 did not end debates about political status and independence in Guadeloupe. However, following ‘Mai 67’, the nationalist movement became increasingly radicalized and it became difficult to gain mainstream support for independence. As historians have further explored the elements of continuity between colonies and post-independence states, it is evident that non-independent territories like Guadeloupe add to this more nuanced understanding of decolonization and the post-colonial world. Guadeloupean history in the post-war years links far more closely to the history of decolonization in current independent states than has previously been suggested. There are many non-independent states around the world, particularly in the Caribbean, and decolonization cannot be understood properly unless they are included in our analysis.

In the context of other violent decolonization struggles, the fact that the 1967 massacre took place is, perhaps, sadly not surprising. What is striking is that, as colonial violence and cover-ups, such as the atrocities committed during the Algerian War and the Mau Mau Uprising, become common knowledge, ‘Mai 67’ continues to be ignored outside Guadeloupe. Even in 2016, when the findings of the Stora report were revealed, media coverage and interest was limited. Yet the fact that ‘Mai 67’ has resurfaced as a protest symbol since the 2009 general strike highlights its continued relevance for French-Guadeloupean relations today. Indeed, the fiftieth anniversary of the massacre prompted a series of events, commemorations, and documentary films (La Médiathèque Caraïbe 2021). ‘Mai 67’ became the central theme of that year’s carnival parades for groups like Akiyo and Voukoum. The 2017 appeal for eyewitness contributions to an oral history memory bank demonstrates the determination of Guadeloupeans to challenge attempts to supress their history and to make up for the deliberate gaps in the official record (Ibid.). Recently made available by the Médiathèque Caraïbe, this new collection

opens up possibilities for future research into the ways Guadeloupe remembers and memorialises the ‘Mai 67’ massacre fifty years on.

[1] The Commission, chaired by historian Benjamin Stora, was set up to investigate three controversial incidents in the French Antilles and French Guiana: the unrest in Fort-de-France, Martinique in December 1959; the 1962 plane crash in Deshaies, Guadeloupe which killed two influential anticolonial activists; and the events of May 1967 in Guadeloupe. The full report was published on 21 November 2016: https://en.calameo.com/read/000886379720261dabe09.

[2] These interviews were undertaken by the author in Guadeloupe in 2017 and included: Josselyne Coudrieu; Solange Yvon Coudrieu; Jacques Jarvis; Ken Kelly; and Luc Reinette. Since this article was first written, a new collection of eyewitness interviews has been compiled by the Médiathèque Caraïbe in Guadeloupe, following a call for contributions on the fiftieth anniversary of the massacre. The depository also includes music, film, tv and radio sources: http://www.lameca.org/publications-numeriques/interviews-audio/recueil-des-memoires-de-1967/.

[3] In 1946, Martinique, Guadeloupe, French Guiana and Réunion became overseas departments of France. Mayotte joined them as the fifth overseas department in 2011.

[4] I have chosen not to include the racist comment in the text. For context, the reported comment was ‘Dis bonjour au nègre’ [‘say hello to the n*****’]. The word ‘nègre’ can be translated as ‘black’ or ‘negro’, but it can also be a more offensive, racist slur, translated into English as ‘n*****’. Given the context here where its use is pejorative, I have translated accordingly, adhering to Daily’s (2014: 342–3) translation. See also Edwards (2009: 25–38).

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