



The June 7th 1962 Algiers University's Library arson: a bigger crime behind the fire

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Abstract

The June 7th 1962 Algiers' University fire will stand as one the last and most heinous crimes France perpetrated during its 132 years of colonization of Algeria. On this day, and after the ceasefire was signed between the F.L.N. (Front de Liberation National) and the French government on March 19th 1962; the O.A.S. (Organisation de l'Armée Secrete) set fire to the library burning over 250 000 items in its bid to practice the "burned land" politics. This arson was quite predictable as April and May saw similar warning shots. We try to prove through this poster that beside the arson and the O.A.S.; the French government was, to say the least passive, in its response to the fire .More importantly; we think that he fire was a very convenient manner to "transfer "very valuable material in a very troubled time. It is proved through the different documents that the library housed very valuable material (incunabula and manuscripts) that were not found after the fire .We will try to show the officials passive role in fighting the fire and the trail that makes us think the losses were more qualitative than quantitative.

The library

On the other hand, the library holdings were not well documented especially in the last years before independence .They were estimated at roughly 600 000 items on the last statistics (1961-1962) and the following table shows the increase through the years:

Years	Number of volumes	Periodicals	Theses
1897-1898	34000	730 titles	5700
1910-1911	179680	-	22410
1919-1920	233394	-	159788
1930-31	290583	-	194879
1938-1939	352307	-	214319
1941-1942	373975	-	200197
1947-1948	400000	-	-
1957-1958	486361	-	243591
1958-1959	500000	-	-
1961-1962	+ 500 000, ~ 600 000	-	-

The fire circumstances

After the April and May explosions which should have made security tighter, this action was more than expected. Why ? Many clues and testimonies by people from the library made that obvious. We will cite:

The library personnel was called on a workshop to Paris during June 1962

The head librarian was asked to vacate the apartment he had inside the library itself by library staff which were known to be OAS sympathizers.

More than that the testimony of a librarian after the fire : " Those who committed this crime knew exactly what they did : they put phosphorus bombs where the most important documents were housed : the reading room which burned down completely and the adjoining storage room where the standard reference books were located".

The firefighters (which had only one fire hose...) steered their fire hoses toward the part non-consumed by the fire and this under the fallacious reason " not to allow the fire to spread " [sic].Some knowledgeable people even said that the damages caused by water were more important than that of the fire..... All this militates in favor of an active collusion of the army which was at that time in charge.

The loss by the numbers

After the fire, many newspapers came up with imaginary numbers regarding the loss of books which in some case bordered on the 600 000 books which would have meant the library was burned down to the last item. Beyond the sensationalism of some titles, the actual head librarian came up, after a careful investigation, to the exact number of 252 258 books lost which could be broken down to : 8870 volumes of monographies - 88872 volumes of thesis - 180000 volumes of periodicals

The real motives behind the fire

Beyond the fact that the fire that was described as the culmination of a long trail of crimes France perpetrated in Algeria during its 132 years of colonization, there is still the unknown whereabouts of the rare materials the library housed. What led us to conclude that was the quasi inexistence of clues as to where any prospective material was and even if it existed.

In 1940, in a letter received from the ministry of instruction, the head librarian is asked, among other things, to report about the fate of the "manuscripts and books stored away". The fact that a high ranking official inquire about material in a troubled period such as the early forties means for us there was a materials that was housed by the library. Besides that, as bizarre as that may sound, the only catalogue that was not found after the fire is the manuscript's!!!!

The first head of the National Library declared that on the eve of independence a batch of very valuable materials numbering in the 3000 items was seized just moment before it was to be shipped to the Metropolis thanks to an anonymous denunciation. The only housing in the library that was not allowed to Algerian warehouseman was that of the manuscripts and rare books .Mr. Khodjat and Mr. Khendek, the oldest Algerian warehousemen were asked to leave the library two months before the fire. In 1888, the Paoli report in its breaking down of the library classes speaks of a fifth class which was the manuscripts



The library before the fire



The June 7th 1962 fire seen from the outside



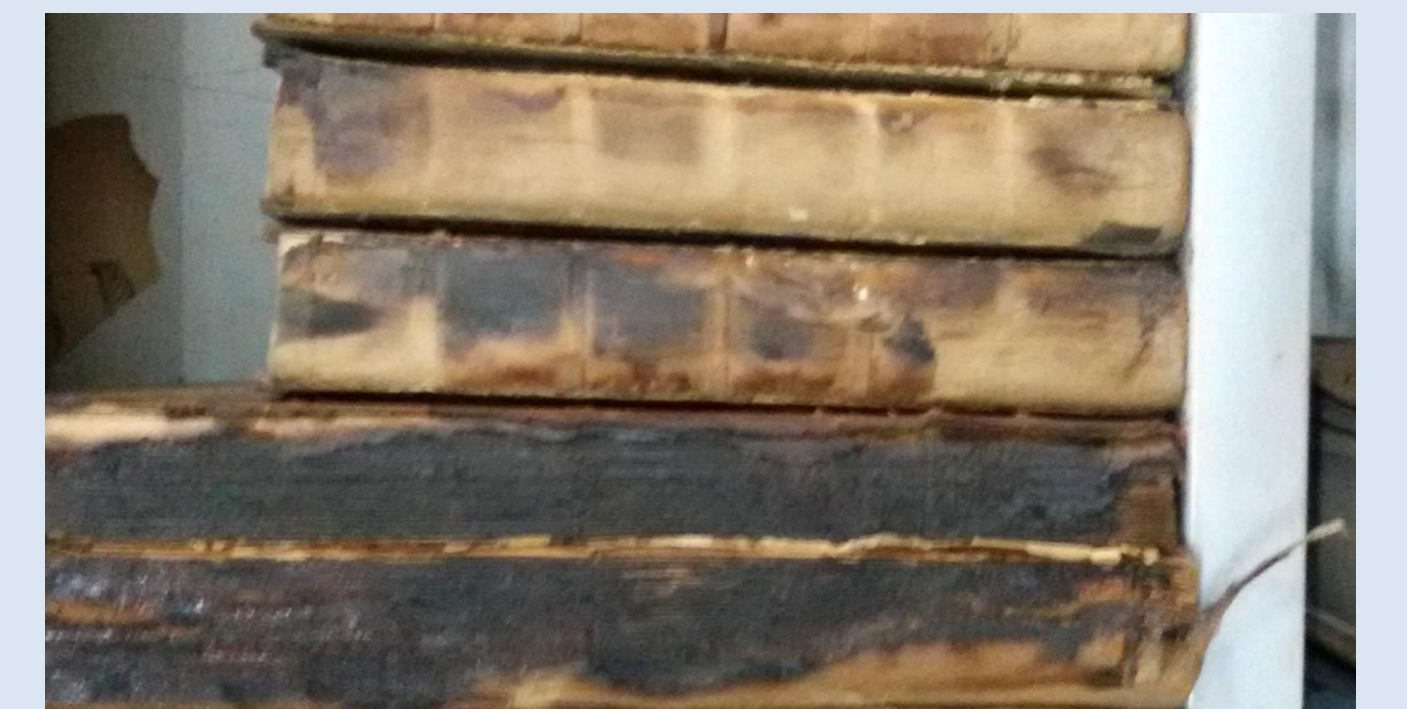
The library after the fire



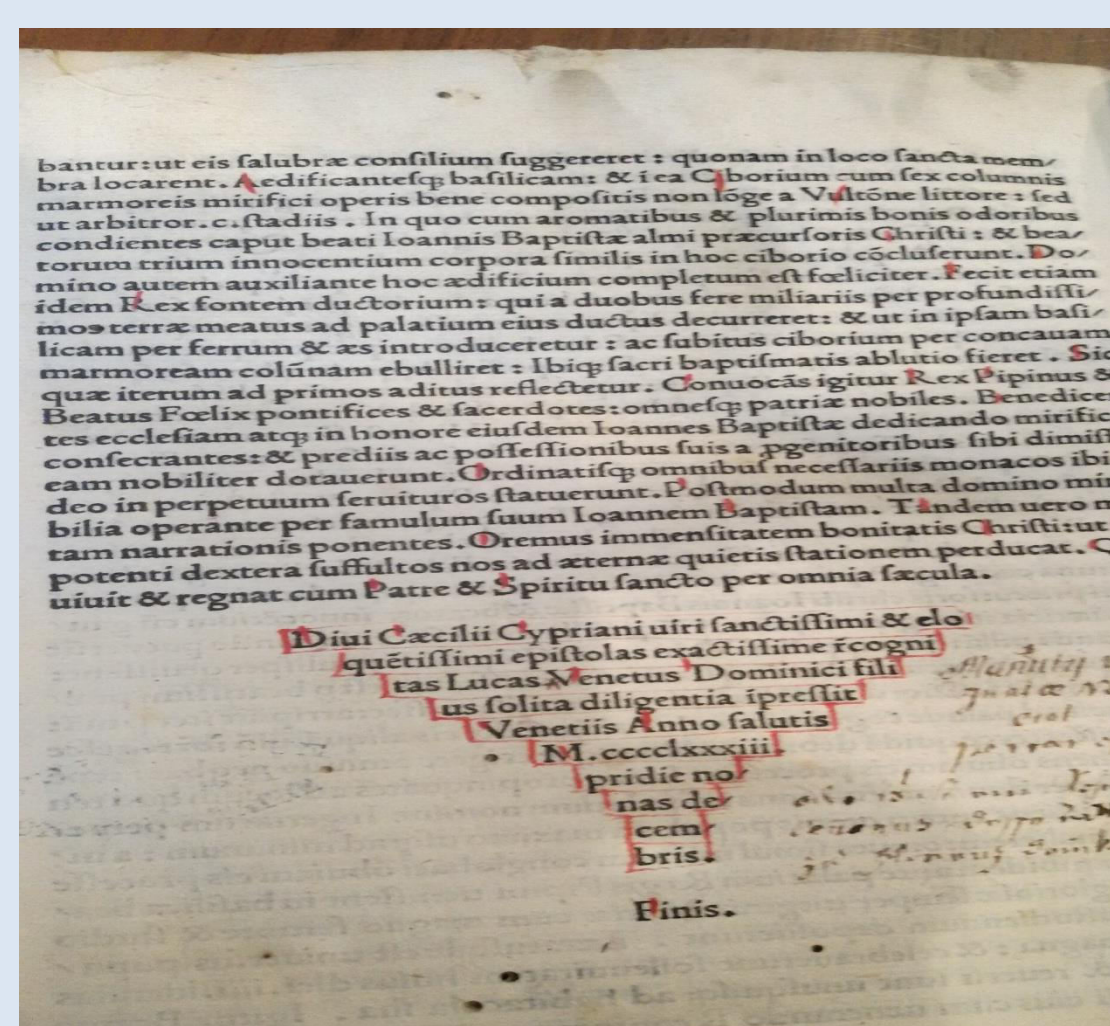
The library's roof after the fire



Some treasures that escaped the fire



The loss of invaluable material



This incunabulum dated on 1483 titled "Divi Caecili Cypriani viri Fanctiffimi et elo quetissimi epistolae exactiffime rocogni tasivcasl " authored by Tharcus Caeculius Cyprianus



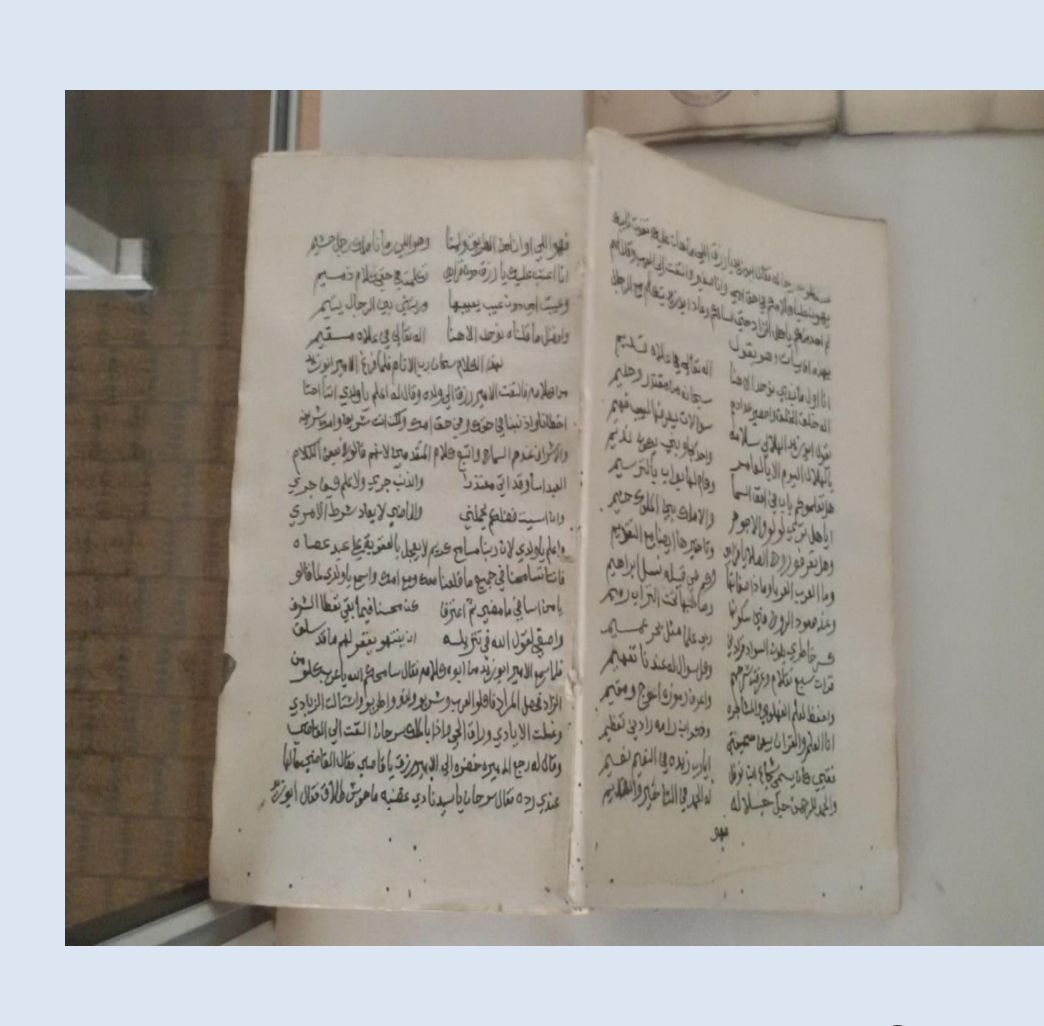
Its cover in quite good condition despite some burning



A leather bound manuscript



An Avicenna book about medicine and dated 1593



Or these manuscripts

Acknowledgement

This poster would not have seen the light without the benevolent help of ABDELLAH ABDI the actual head of the University of Algiers I Library

Conclusion:

The June 7th 1962 Algiers University's Library arson is the last crime committed by France during its 132 years of presence in Algeria. Beyond the act itself that could be described as "bookicide", there are hints that it was rather a decoy to hide an even bigger crime. A crime that materialized in the theft of valuable materials (among others Incunabula and old manuscripts) which were stashed away and discreetly transferred in a troubled period where lawlessness was preponderant .These material belong to the Algiers' University and should be returned not only as their rightful place but also as a gesture from France to " really " end a war that has taken a heavy toll on both countries .