

A Nation “Grows Up” Children and Youth in the Algerian Revolution

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There has long been a tendency to associate “children” with “revolution” in highly figurative ways. The phrase “children of the revolution” emerged in the early nineteenth century to refer to the entire generation growing up in post-revolution France.¹ In his 1835 play *Danton’s Death*, Georg Büchner coined the saying “the revolution devours its children” – the “children” in this case were grown men.² The Algerian Revolution had barely ended when it earned its own version of the children-revolution trope. On 30 June 1962, one day before the country voted for independence after 132 years of foreign rule, Algerian writer Assia Djebar published a novel about the Revolution entitled *Children of the New World*.³ True to the trope, *Children* hardly spoke about actual children. It was above all a story of women’s lives during the Revolution, and children, although present, were very much secondary to adult actors.⁴ The word “children,” here again, was a figure of speech – a symbol and a code, not a literal signifier.

Yet Djebar could have used the word much more literally, for as this essay argues, the ties between children and the Algerian Revolution were profound, multiple, and fraught with unresolved complexity. In examining this past, the gap that I hope to fill is a large one. Children are all but absent not only from Djebar’s novel, but also from the scholarly

¹ For an early usage, see Auguste-Jean-Baptiste Defauconpret, *Observations sur l’ouvrage intitulé “La France”; par lady Morgan* (Paris: H. Nicolle, 1817), 44, <http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k61057183/>.

² Sjaak Onderdelinden, “Revolution as Revue: Peter Weiss’s and Tankred Dorst’s German ‘Revolution-Plays,’” in *Tropes of Revolution: Writers’ reactions to real and imagined revolutions, 1789-1989*, ed. C.C. Barfoot and Theo D’Haen (Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi, 1991), 258.

³ The novel was originally published as *Les Enfants du nouveaux monde*.

⁴ Once exception, which I discuss below, is the sixteen-year-old character Hassiba.

literature on the Algerian Revolution, on Algerian nationalism, and on French colonialism in Algeria; meanwhile, Algerian children are frequently absent from general histories of childhood.⁵ I therefore adopt a holistic approach that addresses both material and ideological dimensions of children in the Revolution. I also consider the age category of youth, both to assess the place of teenagers in the conflict and to illustrate the extent to which revolutionary politics functioned to delineate “childhood” from older ages.

The starting point for this history is an under-recognized fact of demographics, which is that children and youth made up the majority of the Algerian population during the Revolution. Recognizing their ubiquitousness opens up the question of how they lived the Revolution years. Although children were victims of the conflict, they were also sporadic actors in it. Or some of them were: child politics itself emerges as a highly gendered field, one from which girls appear to have been largely absent. On the other hand, youth participated in the conflict more routinely, and while teenage boys dominated, teenage girls were also present. Having examined the material presences of children and youth in the Revolution, I then turn to the place of children and youth in revolutionary ideologies. Contemporary theorists of the Revolution such as Frantz Fanon conceived of Algeria’s struggle as the story of a new generation of children “growing up.” Today, Algerian nationalism continues to honour

⁵ The absence of children from Algeria historiography likely has two main roots. First, many of the key texts in the field, from the work of Claude André Julien and Charles Robert Ageron on French Algeria to Alistair Horne’s study of the Algerian Revolution, were written well before children’s history became popular in the academy. Second, while children’s history is still for the most part an Anglo-American discipline (the work of French scholar Philippe Ariès is a notable exception), the majority of historical scholarship on Algeria comes from scholars writing in French. Thus although some French-language studies do concern young people, they tend to do so indirectly, with age categories such as “children” or “youth” being secondary to other categories, such as “student.” See, for instance, Guy Pervillé, *Les étudiants algériens de l’Université française* (Paris: Éditions CNRS, 1984). For a study that recognizes the youthfulness of many Algerian nationalists without pressing further to consider age as a category of analysis, see Benjamin Stora, *Le nationalisme algérien avant 1954* (Paris: Éditions CNRS, 2010), 145. Histories of childhood often overlook not only Algeria, but also North Africa and the Middle East more generally. One example of a general study that includes no content from these areas is James Marten ed., *Children and War: A Historical Anthology* (New York: New York University Press, 2002).

this revolutionary “childhood,” thereby framing the nation as a living entity whose progress has followed an evolutionary track. Yet the distinctiveness of children’s politics – the fact that children’s allegiances were implicitly new and sometimes ambiguous – provides a lens for interrogating dominant visions of Algeria as a set trajectory or destiny. This story of children and youth in the Revolution is thus not only the reconstruction of a past, but also a subversive history, a critique of normative uses of collective memory, and an alternative reading of Algerian nationalism.

Algeria entered revolution on a wave of population growth that saw both more children surviving birth and more being born. From the 1920s onwards, the number of Muslims living in the country had begun to grow exponentially, as the first prolonged phase of political stability in the colony combined with state expansion of public health measures to produce a drop in mortality rates and a rise in birth rates.⁶ Census data, which divided the population into four-year age cohorts, shows that children and youth soon became the two largest groups in the population. In 1954, the first year of the Revolution, forty-three per cent of Muslim Algerians aged between zero and fourteen; fifty-three per cent aged between zero and nineteen.⁷ While the state took no census during the Revolution years, the first census of independent Algeria, in 1966, shows that now forty-seven percent of Muslim Algerians aged between zero and fourteen, and fifty-six percent aged between zero and

⁶ Since prior to independence the term “Algerian” could also refer to settler populations of European descent, whenever such ambiguity exists I follow Jeffrey Byrne in using the term “Muslim” “to specify the majority of the population that was not of European extraction.” Jeffrey James Byrne, “Our Own Special Brand of Socialism: Algeria and the Contest of Modernities in the 1960s,” *Diplomatic History* 33, no. 3 (June 2009): 427. Demographic analysis comes from John Ruedy, *Modern Algeria: The Origins and Development of a Nation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 120.

⁷ The results of this census appear in Bouisri Abdellaziz and Pradel De Lamaze François, “La population d’Algérie d’après le recensement de 1966,” *Population* 1 (March 1971): 34. The 1954 census lists the overall Muslim population in Algeria as 8,165,002. For this brief discussion of demographics, I treat “children” as people aged zero to fourteen and “youth” as those aged fifteen to nineteen. Elsewhere, I treat children and youth as socially and culturally defined categories.

nineteen.⁸ The Revolution had seen millions of new births, and millions of children pass from childhood to youth.⁹ Before, during, and after the conflict, children and youth together formed the majority of the population.

How did these young people live the Revolution years? One way was as victims. Frantz Fanon, a first-hand observer of the conflict writing in 1959, referred to “[c]hildren scattered to the winds, innumerable orphans who roam about, haggard and famished.”¹⁰ Historians note that children were among the many civilians who lost their lives when French planes bombed the Tunisian border town of Sakiet in 1958.¹¹ Within Algeria itself, no incident became as public as Sakiet in terms of child casualties, but given the brutality of both French and Algerian military tactics it is certain that many other Muslim child civilians died in the conflict.¹² As well as a lived reality, moreover, child victimhood was a recurring image in Algerian representations of the Revolution. FLN propaganda films designed to rally the international community against France showed footage of children crying over their parents’

⁸ The overall population in 1966 was 12,096,347.

⁹ Despite the four-year gap that exists between the 1966 census and the end of the Revolution, in 1962, it is still possible to get an approximate sense of the number of children born during the Revolution by examining the number of people who in 1966 were between four and nine and ten and fourteen. These numbers are significant: 1,790,460 people were four to nine; 1,569,499 people were ten to fourteen. Still, Abdellaziz and François do suggest that approximately 250,000 births did *not* happen on the Muslim side because of the conflict’s social upheaval (31-34).

¹⁰ Frantz Fanon, *A Dying Colonialism*, trans. Haakon Chevalier (New York: Grove Press, 1965), 119. Originally published as *L’an cinq de la révolution algérienne* (Paris: Maspero, 1959).

¹¹ See Ruedy, 172 and Matthew Connelly, *A Diplomatic Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 160.

¹² An important dimension of the conflict, one that undoubtedly claimed the lives of Muslim children, was the National Liberation Front’s (FLN) targeting of *Algerians* they deemed a threat to the Revolution, often because of their perceived ties to French interests. John Ruedy claims that “[d]uring the first two and one-half years of the war, the FLN killed only one European for every six Muslims it liquidated” (164). French child civilians living in Algeria were also victims of the conflict. Ruedy refers to French children killed in the Philippeville massacres of 1955 (163) and to French children hurt in FLN bombings in Algiers (168). In general, however, French children were not exposed to violence on the same scale as Algerian children.

corpses.¹³ Djébar's novel includes a scene where gun shots sound near a family home "[a]nd the terrified child covers his ears and blinks his eyes with each new barrage."¹⁴ In imagination and in fact, children were certainly victims.

Yet victimhood cannot be the only frame of analysis. One of the aims of recent scholarship in the history of childhood has been precisely to contest the notion of children in war as passive subjects, "scattered to the wind" without politics or agency.¹⁵ Behind the predominant victim-image is a quieter, less-documented story of children in the Revolution as political actors. It is clear, first of all, that children acted on behalf of their elders in situations where adults would have been conspicuous. Fanon notes that nationalists tried to avoid revealing their politics by getting "minors" to buy for them the French newspapers that sympathized with the Algerian cause. It was not long before news stands refused to sell *L'Humanité* and *Libération* to Muslim children: French authorities had picked up on the strategy and had come to view children as political threats.¹⁶

Not only did children work for adults, but there are also cases of children articulating their own politics – or rather, there are cases of boys doing so, as girls here become almost invisible.¹⁷ Fanon cites a quote from a seven-year old boy, living in a refugee camp after French soldiers had killed his parents and sisters: "There is only one thing I want: to be able to cut a French soldier up into small pieces, tiny pieces!"¹⁸ Young boys could be radically political, then. And the image of the boy nationalist, speaking the language of revolution with

¹³ Connelly, 133.

¹⁴ Assia Djébar, *Children of the New World*, translated by Marjolijn de Jager (New York: The Feminist Press, 2005), 2.

¹⁵ See, for instance, James Marten, *The Children's Civil War* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

¹⁶ Fanon, 81.

¹⁷ That political girls are invisible in the archives does not rule out the possibility that they may have existed. Being "political" does not necessarily require the kind of public action that boys are on record as having engaged in. With more space and with a wider range of sources, it would perhaps be possible to write girls into the Revolution as actors. My aim here is simply to highlight the fact even children's public politics was highly gendered.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 26. Fanon takes the quote from a report by "Swedish newspaperwoman" Christian Lilliestierna, but he does not provide any further bibliographical information.

the force and bellicosity of any adult, entered popular history through the film that provides one of the best-known representations of the Algerian Revolution. In a scene midway through the *Battle of Algiers*, a small boy steals the microphone that French soldiers are using to broadcast propagandistic slogans over speakers in a public square, and he makes a calm nationalist speech that draws cheers from a crowd of adults.¹⁹ Here, and in the writings of Fanon, an image appears of children's revolutionary action as tangibly, if unsystematically, present and already subject to the same gendering as the adult sphere.

If children's participation in the Revolution was unordered, visible in the archives only in disparate fragments, youth participation, at least on the part of males, was much more structural. Male youth were not new to politics in Algeria. During earlier decades, teenage boys had joined nationalist movements such as the *Parti du peuple algérien* (PPA).²⁰ But revolution brought about a tighter relationship between teenage boys and politics. In the run-up to the insurrection of November 1954, one historian argues, the goal of the *Organisation spéciale*, the paramilitary wing of the PPA, "was to recruit young men of little or no political connection in order not to compromise the political action of the movement."²¹ Youthfulness thus became politically expedient, a sign of malleability and potential. Once the Revolution began, meanwhile, male teenagers were some of its earliest converts.²² A passage in Assia Djebar (written from the perspective of an adult) suggests that joining the movement actually functioned for boys as a marker of age:

¹⁹ The boy's speech is: "Algerians! Brothers! Take Heart! The FLN tells you not to be afraid! Don't worry, we're winning. The FLN is on your side." Gillo Pontecorvo, director, *The Battle of Algiers* (Criterion: Special Three-Disc Edition, 2004).

²⁰ To take one example, future FLN leader Abbane Ramdane was sixteen when he joined the PPA, in 1936. Benjamin Stora, *Les mots de la Guerre d'Algérie* (Toulouse: Presse Universitaires du Mirail, 2005), 5.

²¹ Ruedy, 153.

²² Ruedy refers to how "disillusioned small-town youth" became one of the first "layer[s] of Algerian society" to join the Revolution (157). At the same time, it is important not to exaggerate the youthfulness of the movement. While teenage boys were a key demographic for recruitment, a quick survey of Benjamin Stora's *Biographical Dictionary of Algerian Nationalist Militants* shows that the leaders of the Revolution were primarily older men born in the 1900s, 1910s and 1920s. Benjamin Stora, *Dictionnaire Biographique de Militants Nationalistes Algériens* (Paris: l'Harmattan, 1985).

[The father] ... thinks of ... his children: the oldest is growing up fast, thirteen years old now; two more years, maybe three, and then up the mountain will beckon him; it will be his turn to play a role in the spectacle of those burned-out valleys.²³

The first trip “up the mountain,” Djébar implies, was a symbolic event that helped boys to mark the passage from “childhood” to “youth.” In this way, the links between the Revolution and teenage boys were intimate and dialectical, with male youth helping to drive revolution, and revolution helping to constitute “youth” as a category.

As in the case of children, the absence of teenage girls from much of the literature on the Revolution suggests that youth participation was highly gendered. Yet a small number of teenage girls almost certainly did participate. One scholar cites the figure of 10,949 as the number of women who played an active role in the Revolution, and while it is difficult to know how that number breaks down by age, sources from the period imply that teenage girls were present.²⁴ Fanon celebrated (albeit in exaggerated terms) the figure of the girl revolutionary who fought “dressed as man”:

For months and months, the parents would be without news of a girl of eighteen who would sleep in the forests or in the grottoes, who would roam the djebel [mountain] dressed as a man, with a gun in her hands.²⁵

²³ Djébar, 5.

²⁴ The figure of 10,949 comes from Clarisse Zimra, Afterword to *Children of the New World*, by Assia Djébar (New York: The Feminist Press, 2005), 230.

²⁵ Fanon, 109. In retrospect, Fanon’s vision of women’s participation in the Revolution as “the birth of a new woman” – patriotic, “liberated” from patriarchy, and “unveiled” – was rosily optimistic (107). Clarisse Zimra writes that “[t]he belief that the leadership unreservedly embraced the participation of women guerilla fighters ... was more wishful thinking than fact, for women’s actual numbers were always small, and their reinsertion into public life next to impossible. The FLN soon quietly proceeded to withdraw women from the

One of Djébar's characters, Hassiba, is a girl of sixteen who joins the movement at the end of the novel. "I'm not a child. I'm sixteen," Hassiba argues, in terms that suggest that enlisting functioned as growing up ritual for girls as well. "I've thought about it a lot," she continues, "the revolution is for everybody, for the old and the young."²⁶

It is now clear that children and youth were materially present in the Revolution as a demographic force, as victims, and as actors. But this material presence was only part of their role; at another level, children and youth were an ideological presence, the basis for theories that tried to explain and conceptualize national struggle. One interpretation of the Revolution framed it as the rise of a new generation of Algerians over their elders, whose relationship to colonialism had been complacent and submissive. Fanon, a key proponent of this view, argued that "the colonized father at the time of the fight for liberation gave his children the impression of being undecided, of avoiding the taking of sides."²⁷ Change came when Algeria's "children," enlightened and politicized, overthrew the traditional dominance of "the father," replacing his "universe of infinite waiting and resignation" with their "new world" of radical nationalism.²⁸ "The old stultifying attachment to the father melts in the sun of the Revolution," wrote Fanon.²⁹ "It was the young Algerian who swept the family into the vast national liberation movement."³⁰

battlefield, where it deemed them 'disruptive.' So much for sound revolutionary principles trumping patriarchal customs" (220).

²⁶ Djébar, 148.

²⁷ Fanon, 100.

²⁸ Ibid, 103. A similar opposition between young Algerians and "their elders" persists in the scholarly literature. For instance, James McDougall refers to "the militant, populist, revolutionary avant-garde that created the FLN and embarked, against overwhelming odds and the reason of their elders, on armed struggle." James McDougall, *History and the Culture of Nationalism in Algeria* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 12.

²⁹ Fanon, 101.

³⁰ Ibid, 104. Another angle, beyond the scope of this paper, is the possibility that France also in some ways attributed the Revolution to "children." Historian William Cohen argues that French empire literally conceived of its subjects as children, so much so that the roots of colonial policy are visible in ideas about child-rearing in France. William B. Cohen, "The Colonized as Child: British and French Colonial Rule," *African Historical Studies* 3, no. 2

While Fanon articulated these views during the Revolution, the vision of Algerian “children” as the catalyst of national liberation has had its greatest sway as a retrospective reading of the past. Today, in fact, viewing the independence struggle as the story of a new generation of children “growing up” has become a feature of Algeria’s official, state-sanctioned history. Former nationalist militants have published memoirs that frame their pre-Revolution childhoods as the well-spring of their future politics. In one such account, revolutionary turned politician Ahmed Taleb-Ibrahimi portrays growing up in the 1930s and 1940s as a process of nationalist awakening. “Childhood” in his account is not a physical or social phase but a political one, punctuated by the arrest of his activist father, the moment of revelation he experienced when a schoolteacher spoke of a pre-colonial Algeria, and the spectacle of a *cadi* (Muslim judge) drinking alcohol –utterly corrupted by contact with the French.³¹ Taleb-Ibrahimi’s chapter on “childhood” begins with a personal event, his birth in January 1932, but it closes with a national event, one that historians now see as having pushed Algeria towards revolution: the Sétif massacres of May 1945.³² Personal history thus falls in line with the history of the nation seen in retrospect.³³ As children grew up, such memoirs suggest, so did Algeria.

(1970): 427-431. Was there some form of convergence, then, around the figure of the revolutionary as “child,” between Fanon’s nationalism and French colonial thought?

³¹ Ahmed Taleb-Ibrahimi, *Mémoires d’un Algérien, Tome 1: Rêves et épreuves* (1932-1965) (Alger: Casbah Editions, 2006), 30, 35, 22. Taleb-Ibrahimi’s formulation of the scene at school is “Un jour, M. Baba-Ahmed, dans son cours d’histoire, traite des Zayyanides, des Mérinides et de la création de Mansourah. C’est un déclic” (35). Another militant, Lakhdar Bentobbal, also remembers having “discovered” colonialism in primary school history class (McDougall, 63).

³² See Chapter 1, “Une enfance tlemcénienne, 1932-1945” (13-39). For a discussion of the Sétif massacres, see Ruedy, 149-150.

³³ The blurring of personal history with national history is a common trope in other memoirs. Another example comes from Abderrahmane Fares, whose opening page places the nation ahead of his own birth: “Over the course of Algeria’s long history, the Soumman Valley has been the theater of many events. The most recent of these was the FLN Congress on August 20, 1956, referred to as the Congress of Soumman ... It is in this valley that lay the village of Akbou, where I was born on January 30, 1911.” Abderrahmane Fares, *La cruelle vérité. mémoires politiques, 1945-1965* (Alger: Casbah Editions, 2006), 9.

That children and youth in the Revolution have become a fixture in Algeria's official vision of history is problematic on several counts. First, this direct link between childhood growth and national development serves to reaffirm the fact that, as James McDougall argues, "[m]odern Algerian history ... has continued to be narrated in 'evolutionary' terms," as a story with a set "destiny" and a natural propensity to fall into "cycles" of violence.³⁴ Equating "growing up" with "becoming national" creates an inherent bond between self and nation, and a vision of history that is literally "evolutionary." For individual Algerians, meanwhile, nationalism comes to saturate memories of growing up. The "school history class" and other nationalist tropes appear as set fixtures in accounts of pre-revolution childhoods. Where writers who grew up during independence struggles in other North African and Middle Eastern countries have published memoirs of childhood that largely ignore their respective nationalisms, similar distance from the nation in Algeria seems harder to attain.³⁵

But stories of children and youth in the Revolution do not always reaffirm a narrow nationalist history. On the contrary, children and youth sometimes provide a unique lens through which to view this history differently, because while young people in the Revolution were clearly not pre-political, they were also never born revolutionary, and they can therefore offer a rare glimpse of political identity as a process, unfolding and often somewhat ambiguous, rather than as a destiny. In his 2001 memoir, FLN-member turned political exile Mohammed Harbi provides an alternative story of schoolroom revelation when he credits a *French* high school teacher with encouraging him to adopt nationalist politics in his teenage years.³⁶ Another unconventional image of revolutionary childhood comes from Albert

³⁴ McDougall, 29, 1-2.

³⁵ See the memoirs (none of which come from Algeria) in Elizabeth Warnock Fernea ed., *Remembering Childhood in the Middle East: Memoirs From a Century of Change* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), 169. Admittedly, this critique of nationalist tropes in memoirs is easier to make in the case of memoirs written *by* former nationalist militants. But the fact that so many nationalist militants in Algeria *have* published memoirs is itself a sign of the dominance of the nation over popular memory.

³⁶ Mohammed Harbi, *Une vie debout. Mémoires politiques, Tome 1: 1945-1962* (Alger: Casbah Editions, 2001), 30. Harbi claims to be aware of "the simplifying myths of nationalism" (21).

Camus' unfinished autobiographical novel, in which the character Jacques Cormery, on a return trip to his native Algeria during the final stages of colonial rule, looks out the window of his mother's Algiers apartment at one point to see in the street an Arab family whose boy has dressed up as a French paratrooper.³⁷ In different ways, both of these images disrupt the natural link between childhood and nation, Harbi's by showing that revolutionary consciousness was not simply an awakening against and around a static colonizer, Camus' by suggesting that revolutionary consciousness was never universal or automatic in all Algerian children. History of childhood works here not to re-inscribe, but to reframe the nation. Algeria, seen through these images of growing up, is a site of possibility and heterogeneity in ways that dominant nationalism rarely permits.³⁸

For much of the colonial period, "Algeria" was a bedtime story for French children in France.³⁹ Only in revolution did Algerian children manage to reclaim their country. Children and youth were central to the liberation struggle: they were the key demographic, the most vulnerable victims, and some of the most courageous and iconic actors. In the manifestos that urged on the nation during the conflict, and in the practices of memory that continue to reify the nation today, childhood and youth were and are heavy with symbolic meaning, and "growing up" comes to function as an allegory for acquiring nationalism. Children emerge from these practices of memory as the saviours of Algeria; the nation's struggle becomes a "children's" struggle. Here is a context for which the catch phrase "children of the revolution" is not simply a metaphor for adults, but something closer to a literal truth.

³⁷ Jacques Cormery is made up of elements of Camus himself. *Whether the Arab boy is fictive or autobiographical is in some ways beside the point, since hegemonic nationalisms in many contexts themselves* rely on images of questionable or undeterminable factuality. Albert Camus, *Le premier homme* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), 73.

³⁸ Re-thinking the Algerian nation as heterogeneous – for instance, as a blend of both "tradition" and "modernity" rather than as one or the other, or as a mixed territory that includes not only Arabs but also a substantial Berber minority – is one of the key goals of current Algeria historiography (McDougall, 6-12).

³⁹ Examples of this genre are Napoléon Roussel, *Mon voyage en Algérie raconté à mes enfants* (Paris: Rislér, 1940), <http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k5788335m/>; and Adolphe Badin, *Jean Casteyras: aventures de trois enfants en Algérie* (Paris: J. Hetzel, 1888), <http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k68868z/>.

In today's Algeria, children remain a key demographic. Twenty-five percent of the population ages between zero and fourteen – a lower percentage than in 1954, but nonetheless a significant one.⁴⁰ In the wake of the tragic 1990s, when civil war broke out between Islamic militants and the Algerian state, commentators worry about young Algerians turning to violent forms of Islamic fundamentalism.⁴¹ The task of historians is to tell the history of children in the Revolution in ways that respect children's agency and show that children's politics are never a foregone conclusion.

⁴⁰ *The World Factbook*, s.v. "Algeria," last modified November 24, 2010, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ag.html>.

⁴¹ Clarisse Zimra, for instance, refers to how "disaffected unemployed youths have turned to the promises of a radicalized religion" (227).