

# Repression, Reprisals, and Rhetorics of Massacre in the Algerian War

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## Abstract

*From 1945 to 1962 France's war with Algerian nationalism generated some of the most extreme violence and counter-violence of French decolonization. Repression and reprisal increased in intensity over these years, becoming integral to the strategies pursued by the warring parties. Some explanation for this escalatory dynamic lies in the rhetorical appeals made to justify what might seem unjustifiable. As the conflict dragged on, French civil and military authorities, as well as settler groups and French political leaders, defended ever-widening circles of repressive action by reference to earlier notorious instances of Algerian political violence. Focused on materials from these various sources, this paper examines the process of rhetorical violence in action from the Sétif uprising of May 1945 to the final OAS bombing campaign in Algiers during the early months of 1962. Particular attention will be paid to the Constantine massacres of August 1955, perhaps the point at which highly-politicized rhetoric transformed the French imperial public sphere, opening the way to a dramatic increase in human rights abuses in colonial Algeria.*

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## Approaching massacre: the figure of Mouloud Feraoun

At 10.45 on the morning of 15 March 1962 two 'commando squads' of the 'Organisation de l'Armée secrète (OAS), broke into a meeting of educational administrators in El Biar, a satellite suburb west of Algiers. An extremist group determined to keep colonial Algeria French, the OAS was in the midst of a terror campaign in defiance of Algeria's imminent independence. Led by Joseph Rizza and Gabriel Anglade, the self-styled commandos bundled the six administrators, three Algerian, three French, into the morning sunshine outside. All six worked for the *Services des Centres Sociaux Éducatifs*, an organisation dedicated to educational provision across the colony's ethnic and linguistic divides. Moments later their bodies lay slumped, felled by a hail of machine-gun fire. The killings, conducted in plain sight of some of the victims' children, occurred three days before French negotiators and the nationalist leaders of the *Front de*

*Libération Nationale* (FLN) signed a series of agreements at Évian-les-Bains. These Evian accords brought a tenuous end to Algeria's eight-year 'war without a name'.<sup>1</sup>

A terse OAS statement claimed the men were selected for assassination because the *Centres Sociaux* sheltered FLN sympathizers. Paradoxically, the victims were also accused of being in cahoots with French undercover agents working against the OAS.<sup>2</sup> This accusation had often been repeated since a police crackdown against *Centres Sociaux* personnel in 1957.<sup>3</sup> The imputation of guilt by association was baseless, a gross distortion of the educators' efforts to keep French and Algerians in dialogue. Indeed, the murders were carried out for other reasons entirely. They marked the climax of a three month OAS killing spree in the Algerian capital the real aims of which were to derail negotiations, to terrorize the city, and to ethnically cleanse its settler districts. As one OAS gunman later wrote, apparently without remorse, 'We began by hitting low-level Muslim employees – those who most likely belonged to the FLN...Orders were given to hit all Muslims standing at bus stops who were wearing ties. We took them out [*On les flinguaît*.]...The lads were very efficient [*très opérationnels*]...empty[ing] the European quarters of Muslims.'<sup>4</sup>

Shocking, even by the violent standards of the Algerian war, the shootings at El-Biar drew extensive press commentary in Paris. Much of it dwelt on the 'fascistic' ruthlessness of the OAS. The killers' 'Hitlerian methods' transported French society back twenty years, reversing the geometry of foreign occupiers and domestic victims. But OAS counter-terrorism, some journalists insisted, was merely the reactionary by-

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Evans, *Algeria: France's Undeclared War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 328-30; James D. La Sœur, *Uncivil War: Intellectuals and Identity Politics during the Decolonization of Algeria* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 55, 84-5.

<sup>2</sup> Alexander Harrison, *Challenging De Gaulle: The O.A.S. and the Counterrevolution in Algeria, 1954-1962* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 116; also cited in La Sœur, *Uncivil War*, 56.

<sup>3</sup> James D. La Sœur (ed.), Mouloud Feraoun, *Journal, 1955-1962; Reflections on the Algerian War* English translation, (Lincoln, NE.: University of Nebraska Press, 2000), 328-9n.9. [Originally published as *Journal* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1962); La Sœur, *Uncivil War*, 69.

<sup>4</sup> La Sœur, Introduction to Feraoun, *Journal*, xli.

product of FLN violence. And it was the FLN's original responsibility for introducing terrorist methods to Algeria that should be remembered. Other commentators, and historians since, have focused elsewhere - on one of the six victims: Mouloud Feraoun.

Algeria's pre-eminent Berber writer and a longstanding associate of Albert Camus, Feraoun, like his better-known French counterpart, rejected the essentialist violence of all protagonists in the Algerian conflict.<sup>5</sup> Anguished as inter-communal tolerance drained away, he continued teaching throughout the war. All the while he kept a journal of his thoughts and experiences. Published soon after his murder, Feraoun's diary remains the most piercing account of a contested decolonization – in some ways also a fratricidal civil war – that was punctuated by repression and reprisal. That he became one of its final victims lends poignancy to an account distinguished by its honesty and mounting sense of despair. Feraoun knew his career made him an easy target for the OAS. But he was no FLN sympathizer; far from it. His critiques of Frantz Fanon's embrace of cathartic revolutionary violence, as well as of Jean-Paul Sartre's cosy intellectualization of terrorism, made plain that the killing of civilian innocents could never be justified and would probably make Algerian society more prone to post-independence bloodletting.<sup>6</sup>

Preoccupied with the actuality of killings, their imminence, and the individual tragedies left in their wake, Feraoun's writings necessarily highlighted the massacre of civilians.<sup>7</sup> His work – and his fate – offers a route into this paper's principal concerns; namely, the relationship between rhetorical violence and its physical manifestation in the form of targeted killing of civilians. By rhetorical violence, I refer in part to public calls for violent action, 'resistance' or 'reprisal', whether against colonial authority or against rebel exactions. But rhetorical violence was more than this. As well as threats of retribution, it encompassed *post-hoc* justifications for violent acts committed. Both were

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<sup>5</sup> La Sueur, Uncivil War, 94-6, 109-10.

<sup>6</sup> La Sueur, Uncivil War, 244, 292n.42.

<sup>7</sup> For the theoretical connections between concepts of civilian immunity and the nature of massacre, see: Alex J. Bellamy, Massacres and Morality: Mass Atrocities in an Age of Civilian Immunity (Oxford: oxford University Press, 2012), 17-41 passim.

integral to the polarization of opinion, the restriction of space for non-violent dialogue and the demonization or othering of those whom such violence targeted.

There are, then, three reasons for spotlighting Feraoun. One is simply that Feraoun wrote more extensively and more thoughtfully than most about the manner in which all sides in the Algerian conflict chose to justify repression and reprisal. A second is that his path from nationalist idealism towards brutalized despondency holds a mirror to the route travelled by French official rhetoric – emanating from both civil and military authorities in colonial Algeria – from the war’s immediate pre-history to its ultimate climax. His personal journey from committed nationalist to world-weary sceptic traced the same arc followed by official statements, which eventually retreated from their unbending support for a French Algeria to the acceptance of divorce. Third and finally, Feraoun’s testimony confirms that the way political violence was experienced and the way it was represented were two sides of the same coin. In this sense, massacres, perhaps the most egregious form of such violence, transcend one of the core oppositions in theoretical constructions of imperialism, that between the ideal and the material or, to put it differently, between cultural constructions of imperialism as an abstract condition and hard evidence of colonial iniquity as a social experience.<sup>8</sup> Again, Feraoun is exemplary. He witnessed colonial violence viscerally and recorded its horror true to victims’ perspectives. His writing in its searing honesty disarmed the inflated claims of FLN perpetrators, their spokesmen and literary supporters, or their French military opponents.

There has long been agreement among historians of Algeria’s violent decolonization that particular massacres and, more particularly, the retributions they provoked, decisively altered the nature of the conflict. Massacre, it is averred, changed the cultural codes, the military rules, and the permissible limits to mass violence within Algeria’s population and between French security forces and local insurgents. To be sure, there is less consensus about which spate of mass killing was most central to this

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<sup>8</sup> Patrick Wolfe, ‘History and Imperialism: A Century of Theory, from Marx to Postcolonialism,’ American Historical Review, 102:2 (1997), 389. For a long view of colonial violence as experienced by Algerians, see Omar Carlier, ‘Violence(s),’ in Mohammed Harbi and Benjamin Stora (eds.), La Guerre d’Algérie, 1954-2004: la fin de l’amnésie (Paris : Robert Laffont, 2004), 349-69.

process. As Joshua Cole points out, Algeria's Sétif uprising of 1945, the killing of more than a hundred Algerian demonstrators in Paris on the night of 17 October 1961, and the deaths of nine French Communist protestors at the Charonne metro station five months later have probably provoked most analysis.<sup>9</sup> Why this should be the case remains harder to explain. The demonstrative horror of mass killing intentionally shrinks the middle ground.<sup>10</sup> It destroys the prospects for compromise, denying political and personal space to the otherwise non-committal. Meant to polarize, its violence signifies the ultimate rhetoric of shock.<sup>11</sup> Surrounded by mounting distrust, feeling alienated and unsafe in his Kabylia home, Feraoun knew this only too well.<sup>12</sup> Little wonder that historians of Algeria's war concur that massacres served as decisive conflict escalators, whether strategically, symbolically, or both.

This escalatory dynamic is something with which analysts of asymmetric warfare, civil conflict and revolutionary insurgencies – not to mention the witnesses to such dreadful events - have long been familiar.<sup>13</sup> Less well understood is the part played by rhetoric in propagating the messages that the perpetrators of such massacres wanted to convey. Did the mass killing of civilians during the Algerian War represent an extreme iteration of what Charles Tilly identified as the 'repertoire of protest'? Were such actions rendered logical to some because opportunities to influence the actions of the state otherwise were so limited? In the Algerian Revolution as in the French,

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<sup>9</sup> Joshua Cole, 'Massacres and their Historians: Recent Histories of State Violence in France and Algeria in the Twentieth Century,' French Politics, Culture, and Society 28:1 (2010), 107-22.

<sup>10</sup> Neil MacMaster, 'The "Silent Native": *Attentisme*, Being Compromised, and Banal Terror during the Algerian War of Independence, 1954-1962,' (Lincoln, NE.: University of Nebraska Press, 2011), 283-303.

<sup>11</sup> My thanks to Talbot Imlay for his insights on this point.

<sup>12</sup> Moula Bouaziz and Alain Mahé, 'La Grande Kabylie Durant la guerre d'indépendance algérienne,' in Harbi and Stora, La Guerre d'Algérie, 1954-2004, 240-3.

<sup>13</sup> Outstanding examples include: Elisabeth Wood, Insurgent Collective Action and Civil War in El Salvador (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Greg Grandin, The Last Colonial Massacre: Latin America in the Cold War (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); Stathis Kalyvas, The Logic of Violence in Civil War (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) Daniel Branch, Defeating Mau mau, Creating Kenya: Counterinsurgency, Civil War, and Decolonization (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

violence, remained a last resort for the marginalized, not the first.<sup>14</sup> Algerians, in other words, were no more culturally predisposed to violence than their French political masters.<sup>15</sup> To follow Tilly's reasoning, the repressive action of colonial authorities rather than the FLN's ruthlessness must be held accountable for precipitating such killings.<sup>16</sup> This was certainly the FLN's assertion but it was hotly contested by French authorities at the time.

The intended audience of such actions must be central to resolving this argument. Equally, the focus on massacres, while discomfiting, makes sense insofar as simultaneous killing, usually of unarmed victims generated rumour, contestation, even conspiracy theories about FLN power and, by extension, the colonial state's incapacity. This was something that, in turn, drove French military commanders to harsher collective punishments in their efforts to destroy the FLN's Political and Administrative Organization (rendered in French as 'OPA') at village and city district level.<sup>17</sup> Rhetoric was pivotal to this discursive restructuring of the relative strengths of the war's antagonists. It signified what Paul Silverstein, in the context of Algeria's 1990s civil war, has characterised as 'vernacular knowledge production', a means of communication with discreet rules and styles of diffusion. The rhetorical depiction of massacres and the rumours they generated, in other words, gave rise to a new 'regime of truth'. Regardless of its objective veracity, this was one that the French authorities struggled to control.<sup>18</sup> Driven by growing popular unease about FLN ruthlessness and security force

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<sup>14</sup> Micah Alpaugh, 'The Politics of Escalation in French Revolutionary Protest: Political Demonstrations, Non-Violence and Violence in the *grandes journées* of 1789,' French History, 23:3 (2009), 336-8.

<sup>15</sup> For incisive discussion of the socio-cultural conditions that generated Algerian colonial violence, see: James McDougall, 'Savage Wars? Codes of Violence in Algeria, 1830s-1990s,' Third World Quarterly, 26:1 (2005), 117-31.

<sup>16</sup> Charles Tilly, 'Collective Violence and Collective Loyalties in France: Why the French Revolution Made a Difference,' Politics & Society, 18 (1990), 527-52.

<sup>17</sup> Marnia Lazreg, Torture and the Twilight of Empire: From Algiers to Baghdad (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2007), 29-30.

<sup>18</sup> Paul A. Silverstein, 'An Excess of Truth: Violence, Conspiracy Theorizing and the Algerian Civil War,' Anthropological Quarterly, 75:4 (2002), 643-6.

retribution, rumours became harder to refute. Spreading such rumours – or constructing this form of vernacular knowledge – was not just part of the rhetorical battle between French and Algerian version of events, it was integral to the FLN's psychological warfare.<sup>19</sup>

As these points suggest, the particularities of decolonization's public spheres deserve closer investigation, informed, perhaps, by the recent global turn in imperial history. To do so, this paper will examine three of the most notorious mass killings of the Algerian war: the Constantine massacres of August 1955, the lethal ambush of a French army patrol near a famed beauty-spot, the Palestro gorge, in May 1956, and the war's single largest incident of mass civilian killing – at Mélouza a year later. The first marked the war's decisive reversion to an asymmetric dynamic of targeted FLN killing and mass security force reprisals. The second was a more conventional military encounter in which this asymmetry of Algerian versus French losses was reversed. And the last confirmed the conflict's descent into fratricidal killing and unacknowledged Algerian-on-Algerian civil war. In each case, perpetrators and victims differed. Yet the rhetorical outbursts surrounding each instance of massacre evinced remarkable similarities in the ways such violence was supported, condoned or condemned. Each of these events also triggered heightened levels of French military repression. So our discussion of massacre must also take into account its military and social consequences – reprisals and other collective punishments. We need to consider how these, too, were rhetorically justified at the time.

Rubbing shoulders with fellow Algerian civilians on the receiving end of the war's violence, Mouloud Feraoun rejected any such rhetorical justification of a violence that, from his local perspective, seemed less abstract and open to theorization and more visibly painful. Instead, he shared with his fellow writer, Mohammed Dib, a growing sense that the FLN's increasingly widespread killing was less a justifiable means to

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<sup>19</sup> Charles-Robert Ageron, 'La «guerre psychologique» de l'Armée de libération nationale algérienne,' in Ageron (ed.), La guerre d'Algérie et les Algériens, 1954-1962 (Paris : Armand Colin, 1997), 227-9.

overthrow the systemic cruelties of French colonialism than a reification of violence as a means of political action.<sup>20</sup>

### **Internationalizing the war's violence**

It is worth reverting to the issue of internationalization before returning to the three cases on which this paper will focus. As early as December 1948 Hocine Aït Ahmed, one of the FLN's original nine leaders who became the FLN's principal spokesperson in the USA and elsewhere, had urged the MTLN's central committee to greater diplomatic efforts to win friends, sympathy and influence overseas. Citing examples from Ireland's Easter Rising to Mao's imminent victory in China, he defined 'people's war' as inherently transnational - part of a universal struggle against injustice that transcended international politics. Aït Ahmed's rhetorical flourishes registered with his fellow revolutionaries.<sup>21</sup> In August 1954 Messali Hadj, elder statesman of militant Algerian nationalism and still MTLN leader, instructed his party executive to devise a strategy for the internationalization of the Algerian conflict through the United Nations. And internationalization of the Algerian crisis was the primary *objectif extérieur* outlined in the FLN's first proclamation, issued at the rebellion's outbreak. Two months later the Saudi delegation raised the Algerian situation with the Security Council, the first of numerous attempts to place France in the dock at the UN.<sup>22</sup>

After a hesitant start that reflected the divisions between the FLN's internal and external leadership, the movement became an adept practitioner of this transnational

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<sup>20</sup> John W. Maerhofer, Algeria "Revisited": Imperialism, Resistance, and the Dialectic of Violence in Mohammed Dib's "The Savage Night", *College Literature*, 37:1 (2010), 206-10. Colonial violence and the repression meted out after the Sétif uprising in 1945, also informed the work of Kateb Yacine, another prominent novelist of the Algerian War, see: Richard C. Keller, *Colonial Madness: Psychiatry in French North Africa* (Chicago: university of Chicago Press, 2007), 173-86.

<sup>21</sup> 'Rapport d'Aït Ahmed, Bureau politique du PPA, au Comité central élargi,' in Harbi, *Les archives de la révolution algérienne*, doc. 1.

<sup>22</sup> Harbi, *Le FLN: Mirage et réalité*, 143; Proclamation du FLN, 1 November 1954, in Harbi, *Les archives de la révolution algérienne*, 102.



battle for foreign hearts, minds, money and guns. Aside from petitioning the UN, relief agencies like the Red Cross were assiduously cultivated, further isolating the colonial authorities at home and abroad.<sup>23</sup> The FLN's external leadership, a *de facto* government-in-waiting that operated principally from Cairo and Tunis, coordinated press, radio and other publicity campaigns. The first such broadcast was transmitted on 1 July 1956. *L'Echo de l'Algérie libre*, a mocking evocation of Free French radio programming from wartime London, was produced by Mohammed ben Smail, a Radio Tunis producer. A spirited rendition of the banned FLN anthem (whose opening chorus began 'We are soldiers in a fight for justice') was followed by an Algerian news round-up mixing stories of nationalist triumphs with invocations to listeners to join the 'resistance' against colonialism.<sup>24</sup> Such propagandist output increasingly chimed with the cycle of UN General Assembly sessions and other multilateral gatherings as diverse as the Socialist International, the World Council of Churches and the NATO command. Little by little, the war sucked in other states, foreign sympathizers, charities and social commentators whose interest in colonial problems was not evident hitherto.<sup>25</sup> By 1957 high-profile figures from Indian premier Nehru to ANC leader Nelson Mandela and a young Massachusetts Senator, John F. Kennedy, had condemned French actions in Algeria.<sup>26</sup>

Nor did FLN propaganda neglect its home audience. FLN propagandists were disciplined. Silent about their losses and their internal divisions, the movement's spokesmen focused instead on an overarching domestic message: the people alone

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<sup>23</sup> Heinz-Gerhard Haupt and Klaus Weinbauer, 'Terrorism and the state,' in Bloxham and Gerwarth, Political Violence in Twentieth-Century Europe, 194-5; Matthew Connelly, A Diplomatic Revolution: Algeria's Fight for Independence and the Origins of the Post-Cold War Era (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 96-7.

<sup>24</sup> Documents Diplomatiques Français, 1956, vol. II, doc 1, Tunis Chargé d'affaires to Alain Savary, Secretary of State for Moroccan and Tunisian affairs, 2 July 1956.

<sup>25</sup> Jacques Frémeaux, 'La guerre d'Algérie et les relations internationales,' Relations Internationales, 105:1 (2001), 60-65.

<sup>26</sup> TNA, FO 371/125933, JR10345/4, Congressional Record, 2 July 1957. Kennedy chaired the Africa sub-committee of the Senate foreign relations committee.

could make nationalist revolution a reality.<sup>27</sup> Transistor radios, omnipresent in Algerian rural homes, spread the word of mobilization. Indeed, the FLN's rhetorical strategy combined stirring patriotism with targeted instructions to listeners, thus connecting the movement's nation-wide activities with its local bedrock of popular support. Calls to arms, stirring accounts of ALN victories and reminders about boycotts were interspersed with news from across the Arab world and the latest tunes from popular Maghreb singers.<sup>28</sup> It was no coincidence that the first tranche of martial law restrictions imposed in April 1955, six months after the Algerian war's outbreak, subjected radio broadcasts to comprehensive censorship.<sup>29</sup> In fact, rendering rhetoric by radio illegal only heightened its potency.

Sensitivity to foreign opinion also shaped the war's violence. From the Constantine massacres onwards, the timing of ALN offensives, bombings and urban demonstrations were calculated to maximize international impact.<sup>30</sup> The French army found itself disarmed by this kind of propaganda war. Indeed, the greater its military success against ALN bands and the FLN's urban networks, the more oppressive it appeared to outsiders. Faced with this dilemma, the authorities in French Algeria resorted instead to what historian Fabian Klose terms the 'humanitarian double standard'. Critical of rights abuses in the Communist world, they insisted that purely 'domestic' colonial problems escaped the supposedly global protections of international human rights law.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Zahir Ihaddaden, 'La propagande du FLN pendant la Guerre de libération nationale,' in Ageron, La guerre d'Algérie et les Algériens, 184-91.

<sup>28</sup> Robert J. Bookmiller, 'The Algerian war of words: broadcasting and revolution, 1954-1962,' Maghreb Review, 14:3-4 (1989), 196-213; Charles-Robert Ageron, 'Un aspect de la guerre d'Algérie: la propagande radiophonique du FLN et des états arabes,' in Ageron, La guerre d'Algérie et les Algériens, 245-59.

<sup>29</sup> Lazreg, Torture and the Twilight of Empire, 36.

<sup>30</sup> SHD-DAT, 1H1101/D1, Inspection des Forces Armées, AFN, 2ème Division, 'Action de la rébellion à l'extérieur de l'Algérie,' 28 September 1957.

<sup>31</sup> Fabian Klose, "'Source of embarrassment': human rights, state of emergency, and wars of decolonization," in Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann (ed.), Human Rights in the Twentieth Century (Cambridge University Press, 2011), 237-57.

Such defiance of international opinion became harder to sustain as dissentient Algerian voices reached a global audience. Assured of the support of Eastern bloc countries and non-aligned states from Asia and Latin America, FLN lobbyists registered additional successes with the UN General Assembly as newly-independent African countries gained admission from 1957 onwards. It now required unprecedented rhetorical inventiveness to justify an increasingly dirty colonial war. French diplomatic efforts to confine UN scrutiny of the Algerian situation to backroom committees peaked between 1955 and 1957.<sup>32</sup> UN delegations in New York, the State Department in Washington, prominent US media commentators, and the 'opinion-forming' newspapers of America's major cities were all sent Algiers government publications highlighting levels of French investment, improving welfare and educational provision. Gruesome booklets with pictures of the FLN's civilian victims prominently displayed were also dispatched as evidence of the true complexion of Algerian nationalism (see figure below).

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<sup>32</sup> Matthew Connelly, 'Rethinking the Cold War and decolonization,' 223-41.



Figure 1: One of the least gruesome images from a 1957 Algiers government booklet, Mélouza et Wagram accusent showing Berber women grieving over children's corpses after a village massacre carried out in reprisal for villagers' support of the FLN's rival, the MNA.<sup>33</sup>

For all that, it was French, not FLN, misdeeds that resonated strongest. Worsening army abuses made French denials that a war was going on seem laughable. The

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<sup>33</sup> The propaganda uses to which the French authorities put the Mélouza massacre are discussed in Le Sueur, Uncivil War, 165-79.

guillotining of FLN prisoners in Algiers tarnished France's image as a cradle of democracy. The French legal system became tainted. With sometimes minimal consideration, prosecutors sanctioned some 1,500 capital sentences. Almost 200 were carried out, a fraction of the number of extra-judicial killings by the army.<sup>34</sup> As indicated earlier, most devastating were the testimonies of torture victims and their lawyers. Agonizingly intimate, but stripped of any rhetorical embellishment, there was no more powerful ammunition to mobilize public sympathy overseas. The abuses suffered by two *fidayate* detainees, each condemned to be guillotined for their role in the FLN's urban bombing campaign, drew unprecedented international attention. Djamila Bouhired's trial was conducted in July 1957 at the height of the 'battle for Algiers' between the city's FLN's cells and General Jacques Massu's 10<sup>th</sup> parachute division. Her unstinting defence of her actions stimulated the production of a booklet, *Pour Djamila Bourhired*, a hit Egyptian film, *Djamila l'Algérienne* and a string of popular songs broadcast across North Africa.<sup>35</sup> Sixty-five British Labour Party MPs signed a petition describing her trial as a travesty of 'western standards' of justice.<sup>36</sup> With international pressure mounting, Bouhired's death sentence was commuted.

The torture and rape of Djamila Boupacha, another female detainee arrested alongside Bouhired, attracted even greater hostile international attention.<sup>37</sup> Accused of planting a bomb at Algiers University, Boupacha's fortitude before her torturers inspired a portrait by Picasso. The image featured in a book written by her lawyer, Gisèle Halimi, to which Simone de Beauvoir, Boupacha's pre-eminent French defender,

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<sup>34</sup> Sylvie Thénault, *Une drôle de justice. Les magistrats dans la guerre d'Algérie* (Paris: La Découverte, 2001), part II.

<sup>35</sup> MacMaster, *Burning the Veil*, 318; Catherine Sawers, 'The Women of *Bataille D'Alger*: hearts and minds and bombs', *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*, 10:2 (2014), 80-106.

<sup>36</sup> MAE, série Europe, sous-série Grande-Bretagne, vol. 143, Ministry secretariat note, 13 February 1958. The MPs singled out the unreliability of confessions extracted under torture.

<sup>37</sup> Lazreg, *Torture*, 161-3. Djamila Boupacha suffered broken ribs, multiple cigarette burns and was raped with a beer bottle. Another *fidayate*, Louissette Ighilahriz's account of her experiences in an Algiers torture centre triggered a media storm when published in France in 2001.

contributed.<sup>38</sup> Petitions demanding her reprieve were organized from Latin America to India, although only after the war ended was she amnestied.<sup>39</sup>



Figure 2: Picasso's portrait of Djamila Boupacha

### **The Constantine massacres**

20 August 1955 was a memorable date in the calendar of anti-colonial nationalism in the French Maghreb. It marked the second anniversary of the French deposition of Morocco's pro-independence Sultan Mohammed V, an event that had come to symbolize the arrogance and arbitrariness of imperial rule in the region. With Morocco's nationalists planning simultaneous attacks, the FLN was gifted the opportunity to demonstrate its transnational connections and increase the depth of its public support. All of this barely a month before the UN General Assembly was due to go into session with France's colonial misrule high on its agenda.<sup>40</sup> There were other, more negative

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<sup>38</sup> Judith Surkis, 'Ethics and Violence: Simone de Beauvoir, Djamila Boupacha, and the Algerian War,' *French Politics, Culture, and Society*, 28:2 (2010), 38-55.

<sup>39</sup> Vince, 'Transgressing boundaries,' When Boupacha was freed from prison in the weeks following the Algerian ceasefire on 26 April 1962 she was reluctant to return to Algeria, lamenting that women would be confined to a life of domesticity in an FLN-run state: see MacMaster, *Burning the Veil*, 381.

<sup>40</sup> Martin Thomas, 'France Accused: French North Africa before the United Nations, 1952-1962,' *Contemporary European History*, 10:1 (2001), 95, 103-4; more broadly, see: Matthew Connelly,

reasons to target civilians by their ethnicity and political affiliation. Within Algeria, the revolution's first phase of targeted ambushes and assassinations seemed to be running out of steam. Tougher legal restrictions in notorious rebel 'zones' and an influx of army and police reinforcements were taking effect. Some FLN leaders were hesitant. But, determined to strike a blow for their uncompromisingly militant version of total insurgency, FLN supporters in north-eastern Algeria struck. Mass killing of civilians, largely avoided hitherto, marked a vile, but decisive statement of intent. The reprisals sure to follow would restore the revolution's impetus by driving Algeria's differing ethnic communities apart. With violence so embedded, no one within the affected communities could avoid taking a position. Governor-General Jacques Soustelle's integrationism would be dead; its underlying goal of lessening inter-communal difference exploded.<sup>41</sup>

In a south-easterly arc from the coastal city of Philippeville to the town of Guèlma, coordinated attacks were launched against European settlers, workers, and their families, as well as against colonial government installations, alleged Muslim 'collaborators' and supporters of the MNA, still a rival to the FLN. In the larger urban centres of Constantine and Philippeville, ALN fighters placed bombs, threw grenades and, in some cases, held out, urban guerrilla style, against the army reinforcements sent in to restore order.<sup>42</sup> In most cases, though, the violence was more demonstratively terroristic. Settlers, young and old, were hacked down in full gaze of the local population. And in the worst single instance of anti-European violence at El Halia, an isolated pyrite mining settlement, the thirty-six victims were butchered and left to be discovered by security forces, administrators and press.

Planned by the FLN's northern Constantine (wilaya 2) leaders, Youssef Zighoud and Lakhdar Ben Tobbal, these killings performed four functions. The first was political:

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'Rethinking the Cold War and Decolonization: The Grand Strategy of the Algerian War for Independence,' International Journal of Middle East Studies, 33:2 (2001), 223-37.

<sup>41</sup> Le Sueur, Uncivil War, 31, 98.

<sup>42</sup> Gil Merom, How Democracies Lose Small Wars (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 100. On 22 August Faure's government announced both an additional 100,000 troops for Algeria and the retention on active service of a further 120,000.

an unequivocal show of mass support for the FLN intended to silence more moderate voices and marginalize the MNA. The people, it would be claimed, were solidly behind the FLN's first 'general offensive', something that the United Nations would do well to note.<sup>43</sup> The second was strategic: an act of provocation sure to trigger retribution thus driving settlers and Algerians apart. This would, in turn, discredit France in Algeria, making it harder still for the undecided to avoid taking sides. Intrinsic to this logic was the expectation that martial law, hitherto confined to Kabylia and the Aurès mountains, highland centres of the first-stage rebellion, would be applied nationwide. The third function was cultural: affirmation that bonds of lineage, clan and community amongst Algerian town dwellers and villagers could be harnessed to the cause of anti-colonial revolution. And fourth was a rhetorical function: a replication of the abortive uprising in Eastern Algeria a decade earlier, the repression of which had catalysed the original foundation of the FLN. The Constantine massacres of 1955, in other words, served symbolically to reaffirm the FLN's regional roots, the implacability of the surrounding population, and the irreversibility of the war's outcome. If, for some, the August 1955 killings marked the true beginning of the Algerian War, for others they proved that it could have only one end.<sup>44</sup> Collectively, these functions signified a rhetorical affirmation of the FLN's singularity of purpose.

Reacting, first to the Constantine massacres, then to the war's further escalation under Mollet's Republican Front, cinema newsreels, early television reports and radio coverage of the war were still only fitfully critical. Press attacks, especially, centred on particular government policies rather than the legitimacy of France's Algerian presence *per se*. But a groundswell of opposition to the war's conduct was building nonetheless. And the highbrow press was first to break ranks. The Fourth Republic's newspaper of record, *Le Monde*; the magazines *France Observateur* and *L'Express*; as well as the progressive journals *Esprit* and *Les Temps Modernes* condemned the way the war was

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<sup>43</sup> Mahfoud Kaddache, 'Les tournants de la Guerre de libération au niveau des masses populaires,' in Ageron, *La guerre d'Algérie et les Algériens*, 52-4.

<sup>44</sup> Benjamin Stora, 'Le massacre du 20 août 1955: Récit historique, bilan historiographique,' *Historical Reflections*, 36:2 (2010), 97-107.



being fought.<sup>45</sup> Revelations of the scale of the French crackdown after 20 August exposed the chasm between the official rhetoric of severe, but controlled repression and the actuality of mass reprisal killing. Fulfilling the wilaya 2 commanders' original objective, on 26 September sixty-one members of the all-Muslim Second College of the Algerian Assembly issued a declaration condemning the mass murder of civilians during what they described as the security forces' 'blind repression'. Any further co-operation with the colonial authorities was out of the question. The gulf between rhetorical integrationist claims and massive retributive violence was simply too stark for any Algerian to ignore.<sup>46</sup> Matters looked rather different in France, however. It was not until late December 1955, however, that this credibility gap became impossible for the ministers in Edgar Faure's ailing centre-right government to bridge – rhetorically or otherwise.<sup>47</sup>

On 29 December a series of US newsreel stills, filmed five months earlier, were published for the first time in France. The sequence had an unusually clear narrative quality: an auxiliary gendarme calmly shooting an unarmed Algerian civilian in the back, reloading, and then finishing off his victim. Brilliantly analyzed by Emma Kuby, what came to be known as the 'Fox-Movietone scandal' achieved notoriety, less because of the unequivocal photographic evidence of cold-blooded security force killing than because Edgar Faure's ailing centre-right government resorted to ludicrous rhetorical pretexts in an effort to deflect criticism of their actions in North Africa. In the midst of campaigning for an impending general election, Faure's ministers followed a two-track approach. On the one hand, government voices insisted that the gendarme was unrepresentative of the wider military. The gendarme, in other words was a rogue

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<sup>45</sup> Martin Evans, The Memory of Resistance: French Opposition to the Algerian War (1954-1962) (Oxford: Berg, 1997), 77-81; Mohammed Khane, 'Le Monde's coverage of the army and civil liberties during the Algerian War, 1954-58,' in Martin Alexander and John Keiger (eds.), The Algerian War and the French Army, 1954-1962: Strategy, operations and Diplomacy (London: Frank Cass, 2002), 174-92.

<sup>46</sup> 'La politique d'intégration est actuellement dépassée affirment des élus du 2e Collège réunis à Alger,' *Le Monde*, 28 September 1955; also cited in Le Sueur, *Uncivil War*, 31.

<sup>47</sup> Emma Kuby, 'A war of words over an image of war: The Fox-Movietone scandal and the portrayal of French violence in Algeria, 1955-1956,' *French Politics, Culture, and Society*, 30:1 (2012), 46-9.

killer, driven by a particular thirst to avenge the death of a comrade's family. On the other hand, the government initially claimed that the Fox cameraman (actually a Frenchman, Georges Chassagne) had bribed the gendarme to fire. The story – a ludicrous fabrication – was that Fox-Movietone were the cats-paw of an American 'plot' to discredit France and win US favour with Latin American and other non-aligned states at the UN.<sup>48</sup>

As journalistic reports and testimonies percolated from Algeria confirming that thousands had died in the French repression after August 1955, it was hardly surprising that the Faure government's rhetorical excesses after Constantine mirrored its increasingly desperate efforts to justify the unjustifiable. Months before the Fox-Movietone scandal erupted, Georges Penchenier, *Le Monde's* indefatigable Algeria correspondent, had filed a series of reports detailing the shocking extent of security force collusion with settler vigilantes. Arbitrary killings and on-the-spot executions confirmed the colonial authorities' shoot first, suppress questions later tactics. Penchenier even provided his own eye-witness account of the murder of approximately fifty women, children and elderly residents in the village of Carrières Romaines, which soldiers alleged was a rebel support base.<sup>49</sup> Armed with Penchenier's harrowing evidence, the resumption of the National Assembly's autumn session saw French deputies from several parties lambasting the Faure government's readiness to see Algerians hunted down like rabbits. Most virulent were Communist backbenchers, including the veteran anti-colonialist Jacques Duclos, who was the first to draw the explicit parallel between the French army's razing of Algerian villages and the notorious SS massacre at Oradour-sur-Glane.<sup>50</sup> Duclos was playing with fire. Evoking the name 'Oradour' to decry the actions of the French military was, for many, beyond the pale of acceptability. The killing by SS troops of 642 Oradour villagers on 10 June 1944 was, arguably, the war crime that resonated most in immediate post-war France. Significantly, twenty-two former SS personnel were tried in January 1953 for their

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<sup>48</sup> Kuby, 'A war of words,' 46-67.

<sup>49</sup> Kuby, 'A war of words,' 49-50.

<sup>50</sup> Kuby, 'A war of words,' 50-1.

alleged involvement in the killings.<sup>51</sup> This was decades before the cases were made against those implicated in the transfer of French Jews to the Death Camps. To invoke Oradour was to question the very foundations of what the Fourth Republic claimed to be: a democracy born of the resolve to transcend the horrors of the wartime past.

The Constantine massacres, then, were decisive in shaping a new strand of ethical reflection among journalists and public intellectuals in France that gathered momentum in inverse proportion to harsher legal restrictions on press freedom in Algeria from 1956 onwards.<sup>52</sup> *Esprit* led the way. Always preoccupied with the rights and responsibilities of citizens under law, the magazine boasted a remarkable team of contributing writers from the worlds of academia, literature and philosophy. Many had impeccable resistance credentials, notably in *Témoignage Chrétien*, a movement which lent its name to another pivotal anti-war journal. Among them were Robert Bonnaud (later jailed for his support of the FLN), the Algerian-born Jean Daniel (who went on to establish *Le Nouvel Observateur* in 1964), and Jean-Marie Domenach (about to begin a long career as *Esprit's* editor, a job he took on in 1956). From the intellectual world came the philosophers and anti-war activists Francis Jeanson and Paul Ricoeur, the Algiers professor André Mandouze, renowned ethnographer Louis Massignon, and the Algerian-born poet Jean Senac. All wrote at length about the ethical dilemmas thrown up by colonialism but, from the Algerian war's inception, *Esprit's* contributors fixed on three issues above all.

One was the absurdity – cultural, political, and moral – of the French constitutional apparatus that enabled successive Paris governments to claim that the violence of French Algeria was conducted on home soil. The point was most significant to us here because, in consequence, French authorities maintained that security force operations were a purely domestic affair conducted below the juridical horizon of international law, international agencies, and the UN especially. Also recurrent in *Esprit* journalism were sustained critiques of 'integration'. This was a shorthand term for the ever-closer union reformism that underpinned official rhetoric from Interior Minister

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<sup>51</sup> . On the 1953 trial and its impact, see Sarah Farmer, *Martyred Village: Commemorating the 1944 Massacre at Oradour-sur-Glane* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 135-70.

<sup>52</sup> Kuby, 'A war of words,' 60-2.

François Mitterrand's appointment of Jacques Soustelle to the governor-general's office in late January 1955.<sup>53</sup>

To its advocates, integration was more than a Fourth Republic reinvention of the assimilationist doctrine central to French colonialist doctrine in Algeria since the mid-nineteenth century. It was instead a signal departure from the empty promises of the past.<sup>54</sup> Past colonial regimes had suggested that the rights and benefits of French citizenship lay open to Algeria's Muslim majority if only the cultural chains of Islam, clan affiliation, and obscurantism were abandoned. Integrationists, by contrast, pledged the material investment and mapped out the educational and legal pathways for Algerians to become French. Underpinning the rationale of Governor Soustelle, his liberal adversary and mayor of Algiers Jacques Chevallier, and others was that Algerian society was in transit towards modernity, French culture, French laws, and shared rights of citizenship. Integration thereby set Algeria apart from other overseas dependencies, not merely constitutionally but socially as well.<sup>55</sup> This, too, *Esprit* writers dismissed as an elaborate deceit, as economically unaffordable as it was culturally unattainable. Putting their inadequate means and unrealistic ends aside, surely it was supreme arrogance for integrationists to presume that Algerians should renounce their own identity in favour of some ersatz Frenchness? Having thus undermined declared government policy and the official arguments for unaccountable repression, *Esprit's* third line of attack focused squarely on killing. Two rhetorical themes ran through this critique. The first ridiculed the distinctions painstakingly made by the Algiers government and Interior Ministry Press Service between the brutality of FLN 'terrorists' and the army's more measured use of violence to restore order. Such calibrations were meaningless whether gauged numerically or experientially.

The second issue that *L'Esprit* writings exposed struck at the heart of the Fourth Republic's claim to legitimacy. Vaunted by its supporters – and its political founders in

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<sup>53</sup> Evans, *Algeria*, 131.

<sup>54</sup> Stephen Tyre, 'From *Algerie française* to *France musulmane*: Jacques Soustelle and the myths and realities of 'integration', 1955–1962,' *French History*, 20:3 (2006), 277-86.

<sup>55</sup> Todd Shepard, *The Invention of Decolonization: The Algerian War and the Remaking of France* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2006), 46-53, 70-2.

the Constituent Assemblies of 1944-46 – as an expression of liberal democracy restored after the dark years of war, the new Republic traded on a foundational myth of a nation forged in resistance to foreign occupation. How, then, could the regime suppress Algerian demands for release from colonial subjugation without betraying its core values? With forthright clarity and unflinching logic, the journalists of *l'Esprit* and *l'Express* situated FLN violence within a century's-old tradition of popularly-sanctioned violence against tyranny. Put differently, FLN fighters were the true republicans, while those seeking to destroy them were anything but. Soon the editorialists of *les Temps Modernes* would be suggesting much the same, albeit with a Marxist veneer of internationalist solidarity against colonialist exploitation of Algeria's underclass.

In one striking November 1955 editorial, ironically titled 'Une affaire intérieure', *L'Esprit's* directors reminded their readers of the essential distinction between individual acts of violence and violence as both a social condition and a spur to political action. The humanist impulse might be to condemn the individual acts outright. But wasn't this refusing to engage with the social origins of such killings? The harder problem to confront was the underlying societal violence that made the mass killing of innocent victims as conducted in the Constantinois on 20 August 1955 appear logical to its perpetrators. For one thing, the ALN commanders rejected the presumed distinction between combatant and civilian, between a 'legitimate' military target and an innocent victim, politically and functionally.<sup>56</sup> Politically, because settlers personified the structural inequalities of colonialism; functionally, because targeting Europeans provoked the counter-reaction sought. Algerians' engagement with the war increased as a result. For another thing, a brief foray into France's revolutionary history indicated that such demonstrative terror was in no way uniquely Algerian; indeed, it was commonplace, both in the French Revolution and its counter-revolutionary offshoot, the Vendée uprising. An explosion of popular anti-authoritarian violence was, sadly, only to be expected in a colonial society in which ethnic discrimination, extreme poverty, rural hunger, and political manipulation were endemic. By contrast, the extreme military repression that ensued in and around Constantine, with its presumptive targeting of

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<sup>56</sup> The ethics involved are unscrambled by Maja Zehfuss, 'Killing Civilians: Thinking the Practice of War,' *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 14 (2012), 423-40.

adult civilian males as irretrievable enemies of the state, *was* born of the Algerian situation. It was the culmination of the asymmetry in power, privilege and technological capacity between subjects and citizens, between rulers and ruled.

For all their horror at army repression, on this occasion *l'Esprit's* foremost concern lay elsewhere. It was the official rhetoric surrounding that violence that disturbed the paper most. With publicly available information about the scale of security force killings after the Constantine events patchy, indicators of sustained and large-scale security force and settler vigilante reprisals had to be decoded from the language emanating from government sources. No official commentaries referred in detail to the levels of state killing or its targets. But two tropes recurred in the political and bureaucratic justifications advanced for the turn to less discriminate – if not totally indiscriminate – army and police violence against Algerian civilians. The first insisted that repression was disciplinary and, therefore, corrective. Disciplinary insofar as exemplary punishment persuaded miscreants and doubters amongst Algeria's Muslim majority of the folly inherent in challenging French colonial rule. Corrective insofar as summary justice swiftly dispensed restored the Weberian geometry of the colonial state's monopoly on the use of coercive force. The paradoxes here, as *L'Esprit's* commentators noted, were obvious. Retributive violence operating outside the parameters of due legal process was being defended in the language of republican democracy – one in which power should flow upwards from the citizenry - as the sole means to contain the threat posed by FLN terrorism. Yet, in colonial Algeria, certainly no democracy, the laws of the Republic were being circumvented by the very security forces that supposedly existed to uphold them.

Linked to this misplaced republican rhetoric was the second trope, one that in the eyes of *L'Esprit* was more invidious still. This was the demonization of the FLN's political leadership and their lieutenants in the armed rebel bands of the ALN as terrorist bandits preying on their peasant communities. French government pronouncements thus resorted to a familiar tactic of anti-insurgent colonial propaganda.<sup>57</sup> The FLN's resort to violence was not only illegal, but opportunistic in its

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<sup>57</sup> For French and British examples: Martin Thomas, 'Eradicating 'Communist Banditry' in French Vietnam: The Rhetoric of Repression after the Yen Bay Uprising, 1930-32,' French

terror. Its actions had more to do with self-aggrandizement than with ethnic self-determination or political freedom. By extension, their armed units were not a people's army in the making but merely criminal gangs imposing their demands on an otherwise loyal, if silent Algerian majority. FLN fighters, then, were sectarian warlords operating in a society in which traditions of brigandage, rural extortion, and compliance through terror were endemic. And it was this endemic quality to Algerian violence – its presumed existence as a reflection of Algeria's uniquely violent moral economy – that was cited to justify the stern, exemplary punishments meted out to contain it.<sup>58</sup>

Missing from all such government rhetoric – indeed, systematically excised from it – was any use of the term 'resistance'. It was this missing dimension to governmental statements upon which *L'Esprit* focused in its condemnation of the misrepresentation of the FLN, of Algerian society, and of its people's needs and wants. According to the writers of *L'Esprit*, the rhetoric emanating from Edgar Faure's Conseil des Ministres, from the French Interior Ministry responsible for Algerian civil government, and from Jacques Soustelle's colonial administration in Algiers shared one disturbing characteristic. It was eerily reminiscent of the language used by German occupation authorities, first to condemn French resistance groups and then to account for the collective punishment of civilian populations in retaliation for resistance killings. With an editor-in-waiting, Jean-Marie Domenach, and contributors such as André Mandouze, Georges Lavau and Paul Ricoeur, who either served in the resistance or spent years in Nazi captivity, confronting a war of decolonization that cast France in the role of oppressive occupier had become a moral imperative.<sup>59</sup>

## **Palestro and after**

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*Historical Studies*, 34:3 (2011), 611-648; Philip Deery, 'The Terminology of Terrorism: Malaya, 1948-52,' *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 34:2 (2003), 231-47. For a subtle analysis of the elision between revolutionary violence and peasant banditry as depicted a propertied elites, see Samuel Brunk, "'The Sad Situation of Civilians and Soldiers': The Banditry of *Zapatismo* in the Mexican Revolution,' *American Historical Review*, 101:2 (1996), 331-53.

<sup>58</sup> Raphaëlle Branche, *L'embuscade de Palestro: Algérie 1956* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2010), 77.

<sup>59</sup> *L'Esprit*, 'Une affaire intérieure,' November 1955.

Quite how imperative became apparent soon enough: On 18 May 1956 an ALN unit ambushed a French army patrol near the Palestro gorge, a famous beauty-spot south-east of Algiers. Seventeen soldiers died in the ensuing fire-fight. Strewn across scrubland, several of the corpses were mutilated. Of the remaining four men taken prisoner, one died during a rescue attempt and two others were never found. This left a sole survivor. His account of events proved no barrier to a sustained French press and governmental misrepresentation of what had taken place.<sup>60</sup> Speaking from the Algerian capital, Jacques Soustelle's successor as head of the colonial administration, Resident-minister Robert Lacoste described the soldiers' 'extermination' as a criminal 'atrocité'.<sup>61</sup> Forty-eight hours after the killings, the tabloid evening paper *France Soir* misleadingly claimed the soldiers had their throats cut after capture (a fate that may have befallen those wounded by gunshots). A day later, local paper *Le Parisien libéré* went much further. It described captured soldiers slaughtered by the women and elders of the very village they were seeking to protect. As Raphaëlle Branche's forensic reconstruction of the Palestro events describes, a successful ALN ambush had become a massacre, something to be rhetorically characterized as symptomatic of Algerians' allegedly 'eternal atavism'.<sup>62</sup>

The patrol's destruction and the discovery of desecrated bodies were shocking enough, but what resonated most in the French public sphere was the fact that the victims were newly-arrived reservists. Most of them were twenty-somethings only just called back into uniform from the suburban hinterland of Paris. Anything but professional colonial warriors, the loss of family men and youngsters just starting out in life intensified public debate about what was at stake in Algeria. The fact that the patrolmen were sent to their deaths by the requirements of national service raised deeper questions about republican military obligation more generally.<sup>63</sup> Leading intellectuals, including Sartre, the surrealist pioneer André Breton, and acclaimed

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<sup>60</sup> Branche, *Palestro*, 7-8, 66.

<sup>61</sup> Branche, *Palestro*, 79.

<sup>62</sup> Branche, *Palestro*, 77-8.

<sup>63</sup> Raphaëlle Branche, *L'embuscade de Palestro: Algérie 1956* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2010).



writer François Mauriac, signed up to a 'Committee opposed to the sending of conscripts to North Africa'.<sup>64</sup> Others, including a Catholic Cardinal, several Sorbonne professors, and the pioneering ethnographer Paul Rivet reacted differently, coming out in support of Mollet's policies.<sup>65</sup> Central here was the 'citizen in arms' ethos of a commitment universally shared to defend the Republic and its values. But deploying the rhetoric of Valmy, of the *levée en masse*, and defence of *la patrie en danger* to defend France's colonial actions peddled a lie: the constitutional fiction that Algeria was French soil.<sup>66</sup> Even a large public demonstration of loyalism to France by inhabitants of the Palestro region tended to confirm the population's fright at likely security force retribution rather than any genuine belief in Algeria's unity with France.<sup>67</sup> The core presumption of integrationism it may have been, but, as the tragic events at Palestro demonstrated, suggesting that Algeria was France was ludicrous. The rhetorical blasts from Mollet's supporters insisting otherwise only lent ammunition to the government's critics.

Where were these critics to be found? To be sure, there were some dissenting Socialists inside the National Assembly: former Minister André Philip, Algiers-born colonial specialist Alain Savary, and Young Socialist leader Michel Rocard. But most mainstream politicians toed the official line.<sup>68</sup> More vocal dissent could be heard on the streets where public anger over the Palestro ambush added impetus to the protests at railway stations, ports of embarkation and other conscript assembly points. These

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<sup>64</sup> Evans, *The Memory of Resistance*, 141.

<sup>65</sup> Jean-François Sirinelli, 'Les intellectuels dans la meele,' in Rioux, *La guerre d'Algérie*, 118-20.

<sup>66</sup> Alan Forrest, '*La patrie en danger*. The French Revolution and the First *Levée en masse*,' in Daniel Moran and Arthur Waldron (eds.), *The People in Arms: Military Myth and National Mobilization since the French Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 8-14, 25-7.

<sup>67</sup> 'Cinq milles Kabyles de la région de Palestro ont manifesté leur loyalisme,' *Le Monde*, 24 March 1956.

<sup>68</sup> Evans, *Algeria*, 199; Marc Sadoun, 'Les Socialistes entre principes, pouvoir et mémoire,' in Rioux, *La guerre d'Algérie*, 229-30. André Philip parted company with the Socialists in 1958, later aligning with de Gaulle. Alain Savary resigned as Minister of State for Moroccan and Tunisian Affairs in November 1956. Michel Rocard published a report criticizing Algeria's rural resettlement camps. Other leading Socialists who contested Mollet's decisions included Daniel Mayer, Marceau Pivert and Gaston Defferre.

demonstrations, which started among disenchanted reservists called up during the course of 1955, intensified in the wake of the special powers vote.<sup>69</sup> Seventy-seven individual episodes were recorded in thirty-six of France's ninety *départements* between April and the end of June 1956. Communist Party militants, the rail and dockworkers' unions, and other anti-war activists ramped up their rhetoric as the campaign gathered pace. By the time of the Palestro ambush, protest organizers were threatening public defiance of Mollet's government and the Fourth Republic's overthrow through direct action. But revolutionary talk of taking to the barricades misrepresented the mood among the majority of demonstrators. Most of those listening to Communist and trade union firebrands were not ideological fellow-travellers but soldiers' family members and friends appalled that their loved ones were being sent to fight such a wretched cause.<sup>70</sup>

What made official rhetoric seem hollow and leftist idealism inappropriate was the growing general knowledge of how the Algerian war was being conducted. With so many conscript returnees in French homes, workplaces, and wider social settings from 1956 onwards, eye-witness accounts of village massacres and of routine army torture turned from a trickle into a flood during the two years that separated the Palestro ambush from the Fourth Republic's demise in the May crisis of 1958. Young ex-servicemen and women were returning to France traumatized. Some remained silent; others were desperate to share their experiences. Ultimately, though, the victims of French army torture, once a voiceless constituency of Algerian detainees, hounded villagers, and rape survivors, spoke with the clearest voice. Many did so with a shocking vividness that provided devastating counterpoint to the high-minded rhetorical claims of government policy. *La question*, the account by Henri Alleg, Communist editor of the left-wing daily *Alger Républicain*, of his experiences under torture by army parachutists during the battle of Algiers in 1957 caused a media storm in France and overseas that

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<sup>69</sup> Jean-Charles Jauffret, 'Le mouvement des rappelés en 1955-1956,' in Harbi and Stora, *La Guerre d'Algérie, 1954-2004*, 133-53.

<sup>70</sup> Danielle Tartakowsky, 'Les manifestations de rue,' in Rioux, *La guerre d'Algérie*, 132-3.

lasted long after its February 1958 publication.<sup>71</sup> Despite government denials and military statements to the contrary, the unjustifiability of human rights abuses conducted in the name of security needs and intelligence imperatives was at last brought home.<sup>72</sup>

Central to the disconnection between French politicians and public was the popular belief that the governing parties that had dominated the Fourth Republic's governing coalitions and imperial policy-making since 1946 had no idea how to arrest France's slide deeper into the Algerian morass. Leading figures in the governing Socialist and Radical parties, as well as participants in previous coalition administrations from the MRP and the UDSR, were increasingly tarred with the same brush. From the Communist left to the Gaullist right flowed accusations that ministers, wedded to the rhetoric of order before reform, were playing fast and loose with French lives, money and international reputation. Still, Mollet's government refused to change course.

Algeria had become a war of political attrition, a slow, grinding conflict punctuated by shocks and scandal.<sup>73</sup>

### **Mélouza: denying responsibility for massacre**

An especially devastating shock registered in the days following 28 May 1957. It was then that French troops, alerted by an army observation plane, discovered 315 corpses in Mélouza, a remote highland district in Berber Kabylia. Composed of five close-knit hamlets, 'Mélouza' quickly became French rhetorical shorthand for the untrammelled

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<sup>71</sup> Donald Reid, 'Review article: *The Question of Henri Alleg*,' *International History Review*, 29:3 (2007), 573-86. Harold Macmillan's Private Office received a sack of letters from outraged constituents after *The Manchester Guardian* serialized Alleg's harrowing story in March 1958: Conservative Party Archive, Bodleian Library, Oxford, CC04/7/167.

<sup>72</sup> Torture's innate counter-productiveness is explored in Ruth Blakeley, 'Why Torture?' *Review of International Studies*, 33:3 (2007), 376-88.

<sup>73</sup> Anthony Nutting, 'Nationalism in the Middle East: the tragedy of Algeria,' *New York Herald Tribune*, 15 May 1957.

cruelty of their Algerian opponents. The comparison with Oradour-sur-Glane, cited two years earlier by anti-colonial Communist deputies to heap discredit on the French Army, was now symbolically re-appropriated in *Le Bled*, the frontline soldiers' newspaper, to condemn the FLN's murderousness.<sup>74</sup> For those closest to the conflict's internal fault-lines, the political motive behind the killings was readily legible. The district's inhabitants were known to be sympathetic to the FLN's nationalist rival, Messali Hadj's *Mouvement National Algérien* (MNA). More to the point, their menfolk were suspected of furnishing militiamen for an MNA 'Armée nationale du peuple algérien'. Led by Si Mohammed Bellounis, a ruthless, charismatic figure, this 'national army' had pretensions to rival the ALN.<sup>75</sup> Politics, though, could only explain so much. For, it was not just the scale, but the manner of the killings that caused such revulsion. With a cordon thrown around Mélouza's isolated settlements by a composite ALN guerrilla force, all males aged fifteen and over were first separated, then ordered to recant their allegiance to the MNA. Those who refused were butchered. Fighters selected for the task then moved house to house slaughtering remaining male villagers with axes and knives.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Evans, *Algeria*, 216-17.

<sup>75</sup> Le Sueur, *Uncivil War*, 166-7.

<sup>76</sup> Although Mélouza's victims were male, the incidence and torture and mutilation anticipated the staggering levels of cruelty shown to women and girls during the 1990s civil war; see: Meredith Turshen, 'Algerian Women in the Liberation Struggle and the Civil War: From Active Participants to Passive Victims?', *Social Research*, 69:3 (2002), 897-900.



Figure 3: Mélouza

For this, the biggest single massacre of the Algerian War, the FLN elected to disavow any responsibility. Frantz Fanon, writing in the FLN newspaper, *El Moudjahid*, went so far as to claim that the Algiers government had orchestrated the entire event, the rhetorical implication being that an increasingly embattled colonial state would stop at nothing to discredit Algerian nationalism. Mohamed Yazid, a key FLN's spokesman in the United States, repeated this line, advising media outlets that French security forces were to blame. In a statement reprinted in the French Communist daily, *l'Humanité* on 3 June, Yazid even called for an immediate UN investigation to establish who was really responsible for the massacre.<sup>77</sup> The truth was that members of Mohammed Saïd's wilaya 3 ALN brigade conducted the killings. Although the party executive was clearly aware that the general disgust with such tactics might

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<sup>77</sup> Le Sueur, *Uncivil War*, 168-9; Ihaddaden, 'La propagande du FLN,' 192-3.

undermine FLN legitimacy as a popular movement, FLN tracts distributed locally still referred to the massacre to cow the population into compliance.<sup>78</sup>

Mouloud Feraoun, as usual, saw beyond the rhetorical excuses. Reflecting on a day that witnessed the FLN's largest single attack on fellow Algerians, the writer gave vent to his exasperation in his journal. The precision with which FLN fighters, many of them from farming backgrounds, turned village into abattoir, kitchens into killing floors, appalled him. So, too, he bridled at the FLN's amoral resolve to register its supremacy over potential rivals, and the hollowness of its rhetorical claims that 'collaborators', 'traitors', and 'lackeys' should expect the movement's summary judgements. But he was equally dismissive of sanctimonious French political statements and voyeuristic media coverage, which exploited the massacre as justification for unlimited military reprisal against a brutish people. 'Alas! All the newspapers are talking about the Mélouza massacres. Horrible photos are splashed across front pages, and world opinion, now vigilant, is beginning to express anger and disapproval. A disgrace! A disgrace, a stupid act whereby an entire nation is condemned, and its people shamelessly reveal their inhumanity.'<sup>79</sup> Reeling from the army's recent shooting of his brother-in-law and fearful for his family's safety in the spiralling, dystopian violence of his native Kabylia, in July 1957 Feraoun relocated to Algiers. Soon afterwards, the latest in a string of garish colonial government leaflets detailing the FLN's crimes spurred him to write once more about Mélouza:

Received some propaganda about the Mélouza massacres. It contains excerpts from the foreign press condemning this horrendous crime, condemning barbarism, fanaticism, and the savagery of those who committed it. Those responsible? Who, precisely are we talking about?...Gentlemen of the FLN, gentlemen of the Fourth Republic, do you think that a drop of your blood is really worth more than a drop of anyone else's blood – blood that, because of you, is being shed on the scorched soil of Algeria? Do you truly believe that, with your

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<sup>78</sup> Evans, *Algeria*, 217.

<sup>79</sup> Feraoun, *Journal*, 3 June 1957, 212.

dirty hands, you are going to build the better future that you are promising us in your hysterical speeches?’<sup>80</sup>

## Conclusion

And so we come full circle. The horror of Mélouza made starkly apparent to Feraoun what had been implicit hitherto, namely, the connection between spiralling political violence and the inflated rhetoric of the Algerian war’s protagonists. Sadly, this was nothing new; quite the reverse: rhetorical invention was always bound up with the justifications advanced for Algerian colonialism. Since the philosopher-politician Alexis de Tocqueville first put pen to paper in defence of France’s Algerian colonial project in 1837, apparently liberal-minded rhetoric had been invoked to justify expropriation and violence.<sup>81</sup> Yet, as Cheryl Welch reminds us, this did not mean that de Toqueville’s conscience was not pricked by the massacres characteristic of the early conquest period.<sup>82</sup> Rather, much like his successors in the successors in 1950s France, he remained torn: ‘the spell of patriotism made it impossible for Tocqueville to entertain second thoughts about the Algerian conquest openly.’ He worried nonetheless that, what Welch terms, ‘the commission of atrocities in the name of the nation’ would undermine French democracy, discrediting French republicanism in the process. In this worldview, Algerians’ rights to life and liberty were secondary, but they could not be utterly discounted for the very reason that doing so inflicted incalculable damage on the legitimacy of the imperial nation responsible.<sup>83</sup> The resonance of this argument with French military abuses immediately prior to the Fourth Republic’s collapse needs no emphasis.

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<sup>80</sup> Feraoun, *Journal*, 222-3.

<sup>81</sup> Jennifer Pitts, *A Turn to Empire: The Rise of imperial Liberalism in Britain and France* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 204-19; Jennifer E. Sessions, *By Sword and Plow: France and the Conquest of Algeria* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011), 204-5, 252.

<sup>82</sup> Cheryl B. Welch, ‘Colonial Violence and the Rhetoric of Evasion: Tocqueville on Algeria,’ *Political Theory*, 31:2 (2003), 237-44.

<sup>83</sup> Welch, ‘Colonial Violence and the Rhetoric of Evasion,’ 245-7, 249-53.