

Torture in the Algerian war (1954-62)

The Algerian war 1954-62

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The French army systematically used torture and murder in Algeria against its opponents. For several months now this topic has been openly discussed in France, since two high-ranking retired generals admitted last November that in the 1954-62 Algeria war members of the Algerian liberation movement (FLN) were tortured, abused and executed.

This was confirmed in the French daily *Le Monde* by 92-year old general Jacques Massu, who in 1957 was in charge of the notorious "Paras" (10th Parachute Division), and his deputy, the 82-year old general Paul Aussaresses, then director of the French secret service in Algiers, who admitted that over 3,000 prisoners considered to have "disappeared" at that time had in reality been executed. Aussaresses explained that in 1957, torture and murder were an integral part of France's war policy. He boasted that methods were employed that were not covered by the conventions of war, that he had given his subordinates orders to kill and had personally liquidated 24 FLN members, telling *Le Monde*, "I do not regret it."

An earlier report in *Le Monde* by one of the torture victims had set the ball rolling. The then twenty-year-old Algerian partisan Louisetta Ighil Ahgiz, who fell into the hands of the torturers in September 1957, still suffers today from the physical and psychological consequences of the torture at the age of 64. Together with an FLN group, she fell into an ambush by general Massu and was taken, seriously wounded, to his headquarters. Here she was subjected to almost continuous torture for three months. Louisetta reported how Massu and General Marcel Bigeard insulted and degraded her, before they gave the instruction for the torture to begin with a hand movement. "It was as if a secret code existed", she said. She only survived thanks to an army doctor, who discovered her in December 1957 and took her to a military hospital, hiding her from the torturers. Louisetta said she hoped to find the doctor through the article published in *Le Monde* and thank him.

The report about Louisetta Ighil Ahgiz unleashed a tide of readers' letters and articles throughout the French media. Another former FLN fighter, Noui M'Hidi Abdelkader, who had been arrested in Paris in 1958 and was then imprisoned in Versailles, confirmed that torture was also used in the French capital. He is convinced that unopened archives still contain the statements of thousands of torture victims.

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In 1954, Algeria's smouldering independence struggle erupted into a war. Just before, the French army had been forced to withdraw from Vietnam following its historical defeat at Dien Bien Phu. France moved the largest part of the Foreign Legion to Algeria, its largest and oldest colony. As the attacks mounted by the FLN increased during 1954, the French government decided it would not abandon Algeria, which had been a French colony since 1830. For the first time conscripts were despatched to a colony, and by mid 1956 half a million French soldiers were stationed on Algerian soil.

By 1962, 1.7 million French soldiers had fought in the Algerian war.

Over 25,000 of these were killed and 60,000 wounded, while on the Algerian side, over half a million died. Despite these enormous numbers, for a long time no one was officially allowed to use the word "war". One spoke only of the "events in Algeria" or of "preserving order" in the three Algerian provinces. Only in October 1999 did the French National Assembly (parliament) decide to officially permit the term "Algerian War".

It was the social-democratic government of Guy Mollet that had given a free hand to the occupying forces in Algeria to carry out torture. In June 1956, shortly before the notorious battle for Algiers, the National Assembly accepted Mollet's proposal to set aside individual freedoms in Algeria and permit the gendarmes and soldiers stationed there to use "extended questioning," "coercive measures" or "special treatment". General Aussaresses now confirms, "We were given a free hand to do what we considered necessary."

The French *Prefect* in Algeria at that time, Robert Lacoste, was also a social democrat. The social democratic Interior Minister François Mitterrand, who later became president, said in parliament on November 5, 1954: "The Algerian rebellion can lead to only one conclusion, that is, war." He declared that Algeria was part of France: the Mediterranean separates Algeria from France just as the river Seine separates the two halves of Paris. When he became Justice Minister two years later, he rejected the clemency request of the Algerian communist Fernand Iveton made on February 10, 1957, thus assuring his death.

France's colonial policy won the support of the Stalinists, when the Communist Party under the leadership of Jacques Duclos supported the state budget in 1954 and in 1956 voted for the special measures proposed by the government, at a time when there were already mass demonstrations taking place in Paris against the Algerian war.

The eyewitness reports and recently published documents leave no doubt about the brutality, extent and systematic use of torture in Algeria. Part of the daily practice included mass rapes, submerging victims in freezing water or excrement, and repeated use of electric shocks. Even in the Algerian hinterland where there was no electricity, electric shock torture was carried out using the so-called "Gégène", utilising the pedal-powered generation system used for the radio stations.

Command over Algeria was exercised by a group of top generals, who had fought under Charles de Gaulle against Nazi Germany during the Second World War. De Gaulle became president of France in 1958, following a putsch by French settlers and the military in Algeria. In 1959, when de Gaulle tentatively moved towards allowing self-determination for Algeria, these same generals organised a second putsch attempt in April 1961; under the battle cry "Algeria must stay French!" After it failed, they created the terrorist *Organization Armée Secrète* (OAS—Secret Army Organisation), which carried out numerous killings of civilians in Algeria and also in France. Thanks to the amnesty announced in the declaration of independence signed at Evian in July 1962, as well as a further amnesty at the end of the 1960s, these generals have never faced

any criminal charges for the attempted coup or for the systematic use of torture.

Some of these military figures, such as general Marcel Bigeard, who achieved the highest military honours in the post-war period, continue to resist any uncovering of the crimes committed in Algeria. Bigeard, the Algerian Commander and a former OAS member, is today the spokesman of a parliamentary group of yesterday's men who dispute all accusations of torture in the public debate. In agreement with people such as Jean-Marie Le Pen, the leader of the extreme right-wing National Front and a former paratrooper who served in Algeria, Bigeard speaks of the "network of lies", which in his opinion is "destroying everything that remains decent in France".

Bigeard, Le Pen and a number of old stalwarts from the Algerian war polemicalised sharply in *le Figaro* against the "slandering of the French army." They were joined by Philippe Séguin, the failed Gaullist candidate of the *Rassemblement Pour la République* (Assembly for the Republic) for Paris mayor and an opponent of French integration into the European Union, who vehemently opposed any new debate about France's activities in Algeria. Charles Pasqua, the former Gaullist Interior Minister, who belongs to the Euro-sceptic *Rassemblement pour la France* (Assembly for France), harshly condemned an initiative by the Communist Party calling for an official committee of inquiry into the Algerian war.

In the 1950s, numerous accounts already testified to the systematic use of torture in Algeria. Even before the outbreak of open war, the newspaper *L'Observateur* reported in December 1951 on torture practices in Algeria. In 1958, the book "*La Question*" (The Question) by Henri Alleg was published, in which he exposed his own torture at the hands of the French. In 1960, a group of intellectuals around Jean Jean-Paul Sartre, including Simone de Beauvoir, André Breton, Simone Signoret and many others protested against the war with a "Manifesto of the 121". The historian Pierre Vidal Naquet attacked the use of torture as a break with France's liberal traditions in his book, "*Torture dans la République*" (Torture in the Republic).

Nevertheless, after the 1962 amnesty the topic was generally regarded as a social taboo. When the satirical weekly *Le Canard enchaîné* reported in the 1980s that Jean-Marie Le Pen had participated actively in carrying out torture as a second lieutenant in the paras stationed in Algeria, the paper was hauled before the courts, eventually losing the case before the appeal court.

It is only more recently that there has been any open talk about this chapter of French history. A number of people directly affected by the events have now spoken out: primarily of course, the torture victims, who have yet to receive any compensation. A number of veterans have also come forward, who have had to endure the trauma that they experienced as young soldiers in Algeria for forty years without being able to speak about it. Others now speaking out include the *Pieds Noirs*, the white Algeria settlers who had to flee the land in 1962; as well as the *Harkis*, Algerians who fought on the side of the French army, and who can neither return to Algeria nor find recognition in France.

Almost all the French press are taking part in this debate, films are being shown, and in December 2000 a seminar took place at the Sorbonne university with French and Algerian historians chaired by the president, Jacques Chirac.

The question arises: Why is a topic that has been suppressed for almost forty years now suddenly taking such a prominent place in the public debate? Why is the current government permitting such a debate, when all their predecessors suppressed it with all the means at their disposal?

Although in the past, the French army used every opportunity to cloak itself with the myth of the anti-fascist *Résistance*, the present government seems to be more inclined to dissociate itself from their old team of generals. The reason for this is not, however, a principled break with the past. It is no coincidence that the public debate accompanies the

transformation of the French military from a conscript force into a professional modern army.

One of today's prominent advocates of this process of coming to terms with the past is the Secretary of Defence, Alain Richard. He told parliament that the army should consider itself lucky, "that transparency is being created in these questions"; and added, "the rules of military conduct nowadays exclude such practices".

In September 1997, just three months after Alain Richard entered office under Socialist Party Prime Minister Lionel Jospin, he gave a speech outlining the proposed changes to be made in the army. He outlined the historical framework for the decision to introduce a professional army. This change was made necessary following the collapse of the Stalinist states in Eastern Europe and the 1991 Gulf War, i.e. at a time when NATO had opened the struggle for a new world order and for control over the most important raw materials. In addition, Richard said, the experiences of 1991 showed, "that our traditional military was no longer capable of fulfilling the tasks it confronted. Conscripts were not sufficiently prepared for the local conditions they faced and the complexity of a modern army. The complex nature of the army... has made us decide in favour of a professional force".

In the Gulf War, France had incurred costs and losses, but gained little in practice. It had demonstrated that the European participants required substantially more modern and more flexible combat troops in order to keep up with the USA. Above all, France, which had lost its status as a world power a long time ago, could not achieve very much by going it alone, and was dependent on the formation of a common European armed forces. So far, none of the establishment parties had stated any possibly objections to the transformation of the army into a professional force.

Even if working over the past role of the French army appears at first sight to compromise the bourgeoisie, it provides an opportunity to dissociate itself from some of the old generals, who want to cling on to outdated military forms, and get rid of a whole layer of conservative Gaullist politicians who oppose France's integration into the European Union and want to preserve French sovereignty.

The half-hearted character of the government's turn towards openness is revealed in the fact that although Lionel Jospin has granted access to the files to a few selected scientists, he refuses to make them available to the general public. Some of these files will remain closed until 2060.

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