FACULTY E-RESERVE REQUEST:

☐ ARTICLE  ☐ BOOK CHAPTER  ☐ CD

Please note: Faculty members are responsible for Copyright compliance.
Has this item met the Copyright Clearance Guidelines outlined by the DMCA? (see Copyright Guidelines at “http://www.wagner.edu/library/copyright_guide”)

YES √     NO ______

TODAY'S DATE:  12/11/07

INSTRUCTOR'S NAME:  Saw _______ E-Mail/ Ext. Bx 9351

COURSE NAME:  ___________ COURSE ID# ___________

JOURNAL OR BOOK TITLE:  A Savage War of Peace

ARTICLE TITLE:  Ch. 9

AUTHOR/ARTIST:  ________________

CALL NUMBER:  ___________ PAGE NUMBERS ___ to ___

PLEASE CHECK THE FOLLOWING:  \( \text{R} \)eturn to ILL

Library Material  ___________
Personal Material / I want this article returned YES ___ NO ______
Found in Database  ___________

REMARKS:  ________________________________

Revised Jan. 07

For office use only  __________________________________________

Unless otherwise noted all text will be scanned as PDF file (Adobe). All Music as WMA (Windows).

This request was scanned successfully  Yes ___ No ___
This request was saved in file folder  Yes ___ No ___
This request was posted to Course  Yes ___ No ___
A SAVAGE WAR OF PEACE
Algeria 1954–1962

Alistair Horne

Take up the White Man's Burden -
The savage wars of peace -
Fill full the mouth of famine
And bid the sickness cease.

RUDYARD KIPLING

The Viking Press  New York

THE COLLEGE OF STATEN ISLAND LIBRARY
ST. GEORGE CAMPUS
CHAPTER NINE

The Battle of Algiers

January–March 1957

A strong dilemma in a desperate case
To act with infamy or quit the place.

Jonathan Swift

Preliminaries

In Algeria the year of 1957 was occupied by one of the most dramatic and best-publicised episodes in the entire war. The actual date of the first salvo in the Battle of Algiers is as arguable as who actually fired it, although the assumption of civil power in the city by General Massu's paras presents a convenient one. As with the outbreak of any major confrontation it was preceded by a long chain of events, starting on 19 June the previous year. That day two members of the F.L.N., Zabane and Ferradj, who had been under sentence for many months, were guillotined in Barberousse prison after Lacoste — under heavy pressure from pied noir public opinion, and wanting to placate it so as to push through his own intended "bill of rights", or loi-cadre — had refused clemency. In the appallingly over-crowded prison where conditions were already atrocious ("It is hell," wrote Bitat, who was already imprisoned there, "men are beaten with iron bars, the heat is horrible and they are given salted water to drink."), the immediacy of the executions — the sinister preparations, the defiant shouts of the condemned, the very audible thud of the blade — provoked most violent reactions, and these were amplified outside. To the Algerian mind such judicial executions were particularly shocking, and in this instance exacerbated by the fact that Ferradj was a cripple.*

Announcing that for every guillotined member of the F.L.N. a hundred French would be killed indiscriminately, Ramdane Abane ordered immediate reprisals. Saadi Yacef (who, on the arrest of Bitat, had taken over the

* Zabane had killed a gamekeeper and had been in prison since the first days of the war. Ferradj, condemned for the killing in an ambush of eight civilians, including a woman and a seven-year-old girl, had lost an eye and been crippled by his wounds. Had Ferradj in particular been reprieved, the outcry among the pieds noirs would have been violent.
A SAVAGE WAR OF PEACE

Algiers network) was told to “kill any European between the ages of eighteen and fifty-four. But no women, no children, no old people....” Between 21 and 24 June Yacef’s squads roaming Algiers shot down forty-nine civilians. It was the first time that Algiers had been hit by this kind of random terrorism, and the ineluctable escalation now began here. On 10 August an immense explosion rocked the Casbah. A house in the Rue de Thèbes had been blown up; reputedly it had housed F.L.N. terrorists involved in the June reprisals, but also destroyed with it were three neighbouring houses, and the Muslim death-roll ran to seventy, including women and children. At first it was alleged that a secret bomb factory had gone off by mistake, but soon pied noir counter-terrorist groups associated with Kovacs and Achiry were making no secret of their responsibility.* The F.L.N. claim that, up to this point, no bomb directed against human life, as opposed to property, had yet been detonated in Algiers. A month later, however, under Abane’s influence indiscriminate terrorism was espoused at the Soummam Conference, and orders were passed to Ben M’hid, who had become the political leader of the Algiers Zone (Z.A.A.), and Yacef, his operational executive, to prepare for a major offensive.

Yacef was the twenty-nine-year-old son of a Casbah baker, seventh out of a family of fourteen, who had begun work for his father at the age of fourteen, a highly self-possessed young man with big, mocking brown eyes, a sensual mouth under a thick black moustache and immense confidence in himself. A keen footballer, he was daring and inventive. Arrested in France, he had managed to talk his way out of Barberousse by persuading the French gendarmes of his willingness to act as double agent -- to such effect that for some time he was regarded with distrust by his former colleagues. Knowing every inch of the tortuous alleys of the Casbah, so narrow that one can often jump from one roof-top to another, and where one square kilometre housed a teeming populace of 100,000 Muslims, he had persuaded Abane of the advantage of “purging” it of all doubtful elements and turning it into a fortress from which a campaign could be launched. With the aid of skilful masons Yacef had created a whole series of secret passages leading from one house to another, bomb factories, caches and virtually undiscoverable hiding-places concealed behind false walls.

By the end of 1956 Yacef had assembled in a meticulously organised hierarchy some 4,400 operators. These included a number of attractive and presentable young Muslim women. Chief among them were Hassiba Ben Bouali, Zohra Drif, Djamila Bouhired and Samia Lakhdir. All were

* Acknowledging responsibility for the bombing, one of the counter-terrorist leaders who was later to become chief of the O.A.S. death squad remarked lightheartedly to the author: “They must have put a bit too much gunpowder in it!” No European, however, was ever arrested for the Rue de Thèbes bombing.

THE BATTLE OF ALGIERS

of bourgeois background. Aged eighteen, Hassiba was the daughter of a former caique, and, having once wanted to become a nurse, she was currently employed in a welfare office. Djamila Bouhired, who appears to have been personally devoted to Yacef, acted as his chief procurer of suitable girls. Samia Lakhdiri and Zohra Drif were both law students at Algiers university and the daughters of respected caiques. Aged twenty-two, Zohra Drif recalled how, as a child during the Second World War, she had heard her parents explain to Hitler’s invasion of France was “God’s revenge on the Frenchmen for their treatment of the Muslims”. Already at the lycée she had become aware of the Séif massacres, and cites her motive for joining “an essentially terrorist group” the fact that France had “consistently refused the least reform”. Increasingly oppressed by the curfew, searches and daily interruptions to Muslim life in Algiers, what had shocked her most violently had been the recent executions of Zabane and Ferradji in Barberousse, which she regarded “of all the horrors of war, the most atrocious”. Meanwhile, she noted angrily: “the European population, in its tranquil quarters... lived peacefully, went to the beach, to the cinema, to le dancing, and prepared for their holidays...”. She had studied Malraux’s La Condition Humaine and strongly disagreed with his pre-war ideal of the terrorist as an heroic, solitary individualist; instead, she exulted in the anonymous collectivity of the group, and as such was ideal material for Yacef.*

Yacef’s girls; the first bombs

On 30 September Zohra Drif, Djamila Bouhired and Samia Lakhdiri, veiled, attended a meeting with Yacef in one of his Casbah hideouts. They were told that, the same afternoon, they were to place three bombs in the heart of European Algiers. They had been chosen for the job because, with their feminine allure and European looks, they could pass where a male terrorist could not. Noting the shock on their faces, Yacef treated them to a vivid description of the horrors of the Rue de Thèbes outrages, and told them that they were to avenge the Muslim children killed in it. Taking off their veils, the girls tinted their hair and put on the kind of bright, summery dresses and slacks that pied noir girls might wear for a day at the beach.++ Each was given a small bomb of little more than a kilogramme prepared by Yacef’s bomb-maker, a twenty-four-year-old chemistry student called Taleb Abderrahmane operating from a secret laboratory established, appropriately enough, in the Casbah’s Impasse de la Grenade. The girls concealed the bombs, set to go off at one-minute intervals from 18.30

* In 1956 Zohra Drif was sentenced to twenty years’ hard labour for her part in the Battle of Algiers; she survived the war and married Rabah Bitat, the only member of the neo-fascist group holding power at the time of writing.
++ The whole episode is re-enacted with remarkable fidelity in the Fontecorvo film, in which Yacef’s role was played by himself.
A SAVAGE WAR OF PEACE

hours, inside their beach bags under a feminine miscellany of bikinis, towels and sun-oil. On leaving the Casbah Zohra Drif was stopped at a check-point by a Zouave who, after examining the forged identity card provided by Yacef, said with a leer: "I'd like to give you a real going over, but it's not so easy here!"

To which she replied coquettishly: "That could be, perhaps, if you often come to Saint-Malo beach."

Her target was the Milk-Bar, on the corner of Place Bugeaud, across from Salan's 10th Region headquarters. It was a particularly popular spot for pâtes noirs on their way home from the beach, and on that Sunday it was filled with children and their mothers. Looking at the young faces sipping their milk shakes, Zohra Drif suffered a moment of revulsion at her task, but steadied herself by recalling Yacef's account of the Rue de Thèbes, pushed her bag under the table, paid, and left at exactly 18.20 hours. Meanwhile, Samia Lakhjari, accompanied by her mother, had made for the Café à la Sourdine on the smart Rue Michelet, a favourite haunt of European students. Several young couples were dancing to a mambo blaring from the juke-box, and on the point of departure she had to decline an invitation to dance from a good-looking young pâte noir.

When the two bombs went off a few minutes later the carnage was particularly appalling in the Milk-Bar, where the heavy glass covering the walls was shattered into lethal splinters. Altogether there were three deaths and over fifty injured, including a dozen with amputated limbs, among them several children. Only Djamil Bouhired's bomb, placed in the hall of the Air France terminus, failed to go off, due to a faulty timer. Pâtes noirs reactions were expectedly violent, and those sympathetic to the F.L.N. cause were shocked by the callous placing of the bombs. Dr Pierre Chautel, who was sheltering Ramdane Abane, expressed his disapproval but was told cooly: "I see hardly any difference between the girl who places a bomb in the Milk-Bar and the French aviator who bombards a méche or who drops napalm on a zone interdite."

Although the Ben Bella and Suez interludes provided a temporary distraction from what was happening in the city, by the last weeks of 1956 violence had reached an unprecedented crescendo. Yacef's organisation, now effectively and deeply rooted, and with its morale boosted by France's defeat at Suez, had both Muslim and European populations of Algiers in a grip of terror. Schools had remained closed in October; Europeans took to going out on the streets with automatics concealed on them, and when they saw a Muslim walking behind them on the pavement they would slow down to let him pass out of fear of an attack from behind. With the F.L.N. clearly winning more points in Algiers than out in the blade, Yacef, in agreement with his superior, Ben M'Hidi, decided to exacerbate further the rift between the two communities by assassinating a prominent pâte noir leader. The victim selected was seventy-four-year-old Amédée Froger, the "ultra" mayor of Boufarik and President of the Federation of Mayors of Algeria, a distinguished ancien combattant from the World War and a figure of considerable power and influence; the assassin, Ali Amara, was better known as Ali la Pointe.

Mayor Froger assassinated by Ali la Pointe

Aged twenty-six, Ali la Pointe came of poor parents and had never been to school; instead, he had found his education in the underworld of the Casbah, selling combs and chewing-gum on the street, preyed upon as a pretty boy by pederast beggars, and joining up with gangs of shoes-shine boys reminiscent of Pagin's urchins in Oliver Twist. On his chest he had tattooed "Go forward or die" ("Marche ou crève"), and on his foot "Shut up", exhortations which he followed to the end. Growing up, he graduated to becoming a card-sharper and pimp, and was serving a two-year sentence for resisting arrest when the rebellion broke out in 1954. In Barberousse he was "got at" by F.L.N. militants, told that he was a "victim of colonialism", and urged to join the cause. On being transferred to another prison he escaped and, returning to his old haunts, made contact with Yacef, who submitted him to the accepted test of shooting down a fic. Ali was slipped a pistol by a veiled woman, but on firing it three times at the designated victim he discovered it was unloaded. Smashing it in the man's face, he made his getaway and raged at Yacef for tricking him, but was mollified on realising that it was all part of an exacting initiation: and from that moment — with his unique knowledge of the Casbah, its petty crooks, tarts, dope-pedlars and thugs — he became Yacef's most loyal and valuable lieutenant.

As Amédée Froger left his house on the Rue Michelet on the morning of 28 December, Ali was there waiting and killed the mayor with three shots at point-blank range.* The next day, a Saturday, the whole of pâtes noirs Algiers turned out, seething with anger, for the funeral procession of the murdered leader. As a last straw, a bomb was exploded inside the cemetery which would have gone off in the midst of the cortège had it arrived on time. The crowd ran wild. Innocent Muslims (Yacef had made a point of ordering all his operatives off the streets that day) were dragged out of their cars and lynched; young thugs smashed in the heads of veiled women with iron bars. The ugly ratonnade continued all day, leaving four Muslim dead and fifty injured.

"Call in Massu..."
Governor-General Lacoste's patience was now at breaking-point, and

*It was not known until after Ali's own death that he was the assassin of Froger; meanwhile, an innocent man had already been executed for the crime.
A SAVAGE WAR OF PEACE

after another series of assassinations he took a fateful decision. On 7 January he summoned to his office the newly arrived Commander-in-Chief, General Salan, and the commander of the elite 10th Para Division who had recently led it back, frustrated, from Suez: General Jacques Massu. He explained to Massu that, since the 1,500 police in Algiers had proved unable both to prevent the F.L.N. outrages and to control the backlash of the pied noir mobs, he proposed reinforcing them with the 4,000 soldiers from Massu’s division. More than this, Massu was to be granted full responsibility for maintenance of order in the city. On a purely tactical level, Lacoste’s decision meant that, virtually for the first time in the two years of war, France was accepting the F.L.N.’s challenge, confronting it with total force and backed by the will to use it. The confrontation would have to end in a clear-cut defeat for one side or the other. But beyond this, the calling in of the paras was to signify far more than just a transient cession of power by the civil authorities to the military; for it was never fully to be restored for another five years. That good Socialist and democrat, Robert Lacoste, was in effect placing his signature on the death warrant of the Fourth Republic.

In his customary robust, military language, Massu reported to his chief-of-staff, Colonel Yves Godard, “I can tell you right away we’re going to have some heaps of empêchements!” It was a masterly understatement, but Lacoste could hardly have chosen an officer better equipped for coping with a really disagreeable job. Everything about the stocky, vital figure that was to become one of the best known on the world’s screens and in the Press over the next few years bespoke toughness: the growling voice, the vigorous hair en brosse and the down-turned eyes that reminded one a little of his fierce First World War predecessor, General Charles (“The Butcher”) Mangin, the square, set jaw and the aggressive, all-dominant nose, and the rugged features that altogether looked as if they had been hewn, like a Swiss bear, from a block of wood. On meeting Massu for the first time one was a little surprised to find that he was not eight feet tall – in fact, rather less than medium height. His presence commanded, and he was, as he looked, every inch a fighting soldier – and a superb fighting soldier at that, of the ilk of the campaign-hardened veterans of the Grande Armée. After leaving St Cyr he had served before, during and after the Second World War with colonial units in the vastness of French West Africa. The capitulation of 1940 caught him on a “pacification” mission in mid-Sahara as a captain; he joined up with General Leclerc on his historic march from Lake Chad and was with his 2nd Armoured Division when it entered Paris. After the war he had pioneered one of the first para units, had gained experience in maintenance of civil order when called in to “pacify” striking French miners, and had done his time in Indo-China. In 1955, at the age of 47, he had been promoted general – although, as he

THE BATTLE OF ALGIERS

noted proudly, his records had contained the adverse comment: “Magnificent warrior . . . but this is not necessarily the material for a general!” On the eve of Suez he had declared, without bravado, that the 10th Para Division (which he had formed) was prepared to accept “thirty to forty percent” casualties, and in his memoirs he states that, with it, “I would have gone to the ends of the world. Its command has been my greatest pride!”

Massu’s pride in his profession, in the army itself, was quite single-minded and, a stern disciplinarian, he distrusted anything that was not of it. But if he lacked subtlety of thought, le bon Massu was also incapable of deviousness (his name itself denotes a heavy, blunt instrument). Although he had been a dedicated Gaullist since 1940 and (with one notable dip) was to remain outstandingly loyal right to the end, he abhorred all kinds of political involvement, in sharp contrast to his superior, Salan, as well as several of the para colonels under his command – notably Yves Godard, Massu’s éminence grise.∗

Godard

None of the “Indo-China hands” had taken the lessons of politicsubversive warfare there more closely to heart than Godard. Only three years younger than his chief, Godard was in Poland when the Second World War broke out, training with the ski troops (he was a champion skier). Returning home, he was captured in the 1940 campaign and after two attempts to escape was sent once again to Poland, whence he finally succeeded in making his way to Paris in March 1944. He then joined the maquis in Haute-Savoie. Back with the regular army, in 1948 he was given the newly formed 11th Shock, the “dirty tricks” battalion that was the joint child of the paras and the French secret intelligence organisation answerable directly to the prime minister, the S.D.E.C.E. (Service de Documentation Extérieure et de Contre-Espionnage). For the next five years he had commanded it, taking it to Indo-China where, in the disastrous year of 1954, he had been with a column attempting to relieve Dien Bien Phu from behind the lines in Laos. Appointed to be chief-of-staff to the 10th Para Division in 1956, he was praised by Massu in his memoirs as having been a “precious right arm”, though Massus added of his highly intellectual subordinate that, “reflective to the point of lacking spontaneity, he often had a tendency to miss the bus”. In the coming Battle of Algiers, however, Godard was determined to miss no buses and was to make himself the expert on the underground world of the city, in all its conspiratorial complexities.

∗ There is the famous encounter between de Gaulle and Massu, reputed to have taken place on the former’s arrival in Algeria after coming to power in 1958:

De Gaulle, teasing: “Alors, Massu, toujours content?”

Massu, respectful and straight-faced: “Oui, mon général, et toujours gaulliste!”

Hence the popular, anti-Gaullist expression of the time: “como comme un général!”

188
A SAVAGE WAR OF PEACE

Massu's four para regiments began to move into Algiers the week after he had received his orders from Lacoste, with all the military precision of an army moving up to the front.* Under a system called quadrillage, Algiers was divided into squares, each one conforming to a regimental command, with the focal point of the Casbah allotted to Colonel Bigeard and his redoubtable 3rd B.P.C. They cordoned off the whole area with its teeming population, established check-points at all its exits and inaugurated a system of minute house-to-house searches. With the most recent humiliation of Suez grafted upon all the other motives that constituted for them a grim determination to prevail, the paras operated from the beginning with a swift ruthlessness that was to characterize the whole Battle of Algiers. On the eve of the takeover a major of Godard's old unit, the 11th Shock, presented himself at Sûreté headquarters with an armed escort and demanded of the flabbergasted police officials that they hand over all their dossiers on F.L.N. suspects. After an unrelenting twenty-four hours' examination of the dossiers, lists of suspects for summary arrest were sent out to each regiment. A mass round-up then took place, accompanied by none of the judicial formalities of warrants or preferring of charges as required by cumbersome civil procedure, and with the suspects subjected to questionable methods of interrogation.

Breaking the general strike

The first major clash of wills facing Massu and his men was the general strike which the F.L.N. had called for Monday, 28 January 1957. The principle of the strike followed as a direct consequence of the priority of externalising the conflict, determined at Soummam the previous September, but specifically, in its timing and duration, it seems to have been the brain-child of Ben M'Hidi. It was to coincide with the opening of the United Nations session in New York and was to last eight days. The reason for this protracted effort was spelled out in instructions issued by the C.C.E. in January: to demonstrate in the most decisive manner the total support of the whole Algerian people for the F.L.N., its unique representative. The object of this demonstration is to bestow an incontestable authority upon our delegates at the United Nations in order to convince those rare diplomats still hesitant or possessing illusions about France's liberal policy.

Ramdane Abane crossed the ts by explaining that: "Even if we take risks, our struggle must become known. We could kill hundreds of colonialist soldiers without this ever being publicly announced." The F.L.N. leaders felt that the combination of Yacef's grip of terror on Algiers and the F.L.N.'s acquired influence among the trade unions as a whole — in the shape of the recently formed U.G.T.A. (Union Générale des Travailleurs Algériens) — made them strong enough to accept the risks involved, and over so prolonged a period as eight days. In fact, it was to turn out to be perhaps the F.L.N.'s gravest tactical error of the entire war. The challenge, had it been carried out to the full, would have been only a degree or two removed from a general insurrection, and as such it was one that no French government of the time could ignore. Thus Lacoste's orders to Massu were to break the strike at all costs — and by any means.

By the evening of the 27th, Algiers was already a dead city. The next morning, Monday, the shutters of the Muslim shops remained down in their overwhelming majority; workers in the essential public services failed to turn up; schoolchildren stayed at home. Army helicopters scattered leaflets over the Casbah, and jeeps with loud-speakers roamed the streets, ordering the population back to work. At first the strike looked like being a total success. Then Massu showed him his mettle, applying the full force of his division. Armoured cars arrived, attached hawser to the closed steel shutters of the shops, and simply dragged them off their fixings. With some relish, Salan describes how the contents of the shops became exposed to the world: "oranges, bananas, honey cakes, jars of multi-coloured sweets... Urchins playing in the street rushed forward, helped themselves, and took flight..." Algerian sources accused the paras of joining in the pillage; whatever the truth, the unhappy shop-owners were, in any event, forced to emerge in order to protect their unguarded goods, and were then ordered to remain open under threat of imprisonment. Similar scenes took place over the rest of the country; in one provincial centre of the Mitidja, Colonel Antoine Argoud went so far as to fire a tank shell at point-blank range into a shuttered shop, wounding one of his own men but effectively cowing the strikers. At the same time, fleets of trucks were despatched round Algiers collecting strikers at their homes and physically hustling them off to work. Many of the strikers revealed themselves to be relatively lukewarm in the face of such brutal determination, as typified by one denizen of the Casbah who whispered to a para captain: "Call two gendarmes so that they can rough me up a bit, and I'll open." Meanwhile, many of Yacef's militants who might otherwise have been out stiffening resistance had either already been swept up in Massu's net, or else had their heads well down. The next day the "collection service" was repeated; this time bringing in the young Muslim truants from school. Godard claims that, whereas only seventy attended at the end of January, numbers had risen to 8,000 a fortnight later.

On the first day of the strike the postal and telegraph service reported
A SAVAGE WAR OF PEACE

seventy-one per cent of its Muslim personnel absent in the Algiers area, forty-one per cent in Oran and only twenty-eight per cent in Constantine; on the railways there was an almost total walkout in Algiers, fifty per cent in Oran and twenty-five per cent in Constantine. The next day, the figures had dwindled substantially and forty-eight hours after the beginning of the strike it had been effectively broken. In the opinion of Colonel Godard, Ben M'hidi had committed a cardinal error in endeavouring to keep the strike going so long; a short strike would have been hard to break, but eight days made it much more vulnerable. Unconvincingly, the F.L.N. tried to claim a victory; but even at the United Nations the strike seemed to make little impact. One American correspondent, Michael Clark (writing, admittedly, still during the war), considered that the collapse of the strike "may well have been a turning-point" in the war for the French. The main benefit for the F.L.N., however, was to be derived, unexpectedly and indirectly, rather from the methods used in breaking the strike than from anything achieved by it.

More bombings by Yacef

Two days before the strike was due to begin, Yacef launched a back-up operation with another wave of bombing in the smart centre of Algiers. Once again his bomb-carriers were a team of girls, all the more valuable now that Massu's men were rigorously searching every Muslim leaving the Casbah, and this time one of them, Danièle Minne, was a European, the step-daughter of a militant Communist. Using more powerful explosive, the bombs provided by Taleb were far more sophisticated affairs than those of the Milk-Bar, and were little larger than a packet of cigarettes. The targets were the Otomatic, a favourite students' bar on the Rue Michelet; the Cafétéria opposite (second time over), and the nearby Coq-Hardi, a popular brasserie. It was a spring-like Saturday afternoon and all three were crowded. Placed in the ladies' lavatory, Danièle Minne's bomb in the Otomatic seriously injured a young girl and several others. Almost immediately another explosion ripped open the Cafétéria opposite. At the Coq-Hardi, diners rushing to the window to see where the bombs had gone off were scythed down by Djamila Bouzaza's bomb, which, exploding under a cast-iron table, turned the metal and plate-glass into lethal fragments like those of a grenade, slashing through veins and arteries. Altogether the day left sixty wounded and five killed - including an innocent young Muslim mechanic lynched in the immediate past by backlash. Fifteen days later, a Sunday, bombs were exploded in two crowded Algiers stadiums, placed by girls of sixteen and seventeen: ten dead and forty-five injured.*

* A quantitative comparison could perhaps be made here between the Battle of Algiers' bombings and those of the I.R.A. more recently in Northern Ireland and

THE BATTLE OF ALGIERS

Bigeard strikes: the organigramme

Because of the growing stranglehold of Bigeard's forces on the Casbah, however, such "acts of war" were becoming increasingly hard to mount and the net was closing in all the time. After the Coq-Hardi explosion a waiter stated categorically that it had been a young woman who sat at the shattered table, and he was able to give an accurate description of Djamila Bouzaza. All women leaving the Casbah were now subjected to thorough searches; at first with cumbersome mine-detectors to pick out any weapons concealed under their voluminous robes, later with less chivalrous means. A patch of cloth found on the scene of one of the stadium bombs led to the arrest of the two young terrorists, Djougher Akhrot and Baya Hocine. French efforts were concentrated particularly on breaking down Yacef's bomb network and its odious end-products. In October it had already suffered a setback when Kouache, the expert who had helped to set up the bombs of Zohra Drif and her comrades, blew himself up at the Villa des Roses outside Algiers. After that, bomb fabrication had been concentrated in Taleb Abderrahmane's workshop in the Casbah. But by the end of January, after three days of interrogation, a locksmith picked up by Bigeard's men with bomb blueprints on him gave its address away. Forewarned, Yacef managed to evacuate its members and hide the evidence, so that a first para raid on 8 February fell on open air. A week later, however, Bigeard made his biggest catch to date; Yacef's chief bomb transporter and the mason who had constructed the factories. From the two of them, made to talk under extreme pressure, No. 5 Impasse de la Grenade was pinpointed and the names of Mustefa Bouhred and his niece, Djamila, given away - as well as, to the shock of the French, that of a respected bachaga, whose house was reported to contain a substantial depot of bombs. Bigeard's troops moved with their customary speed and ruthlessness, sometimes landing by helicopter on the flat roofs of the Casbah houses to make their raids. The bomb factory in the Impasse de la Grenade was finally located, as was the bachaga's harem. On 15 February a jubilant Bigeard announced that his 3rd R.P.C. had seized eighty-seven bombs, seventy kilos of explosive, 5,120 fulminate of mercury detonators, 309 electric detonators, etc.; many of the bomb network were either identified or already under lock and key. Yacef's organisation, which had taken eighteen months to construct, had all but fallen apart. Algiers began to breathe again.

in England. Horrible as were the outrages in Algiers, the bombs were considerably less powerful, and consequent casualties far fewer than the twenty-one killed and 153 maimed in the Birmingham outrage of November 1974 - perpetrated evidently as retribution for an I.R.A. member who blew himself up by mistake. What rainstorms and lynchings would have followed a bombing in Algiers on the Birmingham scale can only be imagined, and one may ask whether the restrained British reaction could be explained by national phlegm or the torpor of a world grown blasé to horror.
Meanwhile, threads of intelligence gathered in the course of rounding up the bombers were leading back closer and closer to the really big fish. To Godard, "the man who places the bomb is but an arm that tomorrow will be replaced by another arm". It was essential to get at the brain behind the arm. Under his supervision, a complex organigramme began to take shape on a large blackboard, a kind of skeleton pyramid in which, as each fresh piece of information came from the interrogation centres, another name (and not always necessarily the right name) would be entered. Until the actual capture of Ben M'hidi the name at the summit of the pyramid remained blank. But Yacef had already been identified by numerous cross-references. On the opening day of the general strike he had changed hideouts no less than fifteen times; to blend more inconspicuously into the background he had even grabbed a milk churn to pretend, with total audacity, that he was one of the "good Arabs" refusing the F.L.N.'s order to stay at home. Frequently he took to circulating in the Casbah disguised as a fatma, a sub-machine-gun concealed under yards of linen, and nothing would budge him from his post. But the leaders of the C.C.E. in Algiers were beginning to take serious alarm. On 9 February the paras arrested Ali Boumendjel, a young F.L.N. lawyer highly valued by the leadership, and closely in touch with it. On hearing of his arrest, Ben M'hidi, dejected and increasingly aware of his error in committing the F.L.N. to the strike, and the suffering and torture that this had imposed on his followers, is said to have remarked: "We are about to lose the battle."

On the 15th took place an anguished meeting of the five members of the C.C.E. remaining in Algiers. Abane urged that they should get out of Algiers forthwith, or be trapped like rats and have secrets of the whole movement ground out of them. Seizing the analogy, Ben M'hidi countered that they would be more like rats abandoning a sinking ship. Finally it was reluctantly agreed that, after a space of ten days in which to reorganise the Algiers command set-up, the C.C.E. would depart for safer ground. Yacef was to assume full charge of the Algiers Z.A.A.; Ben M'hidi, always loath to leave the city, decided that, as a temporary compromise, he would move from the dangerous confines of the Casbah to an F.L.N. "safe house" in the Rue Claude-Debussy. On one of his last meetings with Yacef, he is quoted as having remarked: "I would like to die in battle. Before the end."

The death of Ben M'hidi

Ben M'hidi effected his move at the worst possible moment. Acting on a tip provided by Trinquier's network of informers, the paras were, so they thought, on the track of Ben Khedda, and on 25 February the clues led them to the Rue Claude-Debussy - where, to their surprise, they found Ben M'hidi in pyjamas. In news-shots of the time, the captured thirty-four-year-old ex-comedian, who had once played minor parts on Algiers radio, shows a cheerful, brave and rather distinguished face, concealing any awareness of what lay ahead. Then, on 6 March, Lacoste's Press officer announced that Ben M'hidi had "committed suicide by hanging himself in his cell with the help of strips torn from his shirt".

The exact truth about Ben M'hidi's death remains a mystery to this day. Lebjaoui, who knew him, and other Algerians insist that the devoutness of his faith ruled out any possibility of his taking his own life. Yves Courrière, generally well-informed on French undercover activities, declares categorically that M'hidi was not tortured, but that he was shot at dawn after being rendered full military honours. What seems to be fact is that Bigeard himself interrogated M'hidi after his capture; was told that the F.L.N. was bound to win eventually, but no other useful details; was impressed by the dignity and courage of the F.L.N. leader; treated him with the respect due to a captured enemy commander, and left him alive and unharmed. According to an F.L.N. spy in Algiers police headquarters, who reported to the C.C.E. on 4 March, Bigeard then "was unable to prevent Ben M'hidi being handed over to men of a 'special section' of the paratroops. These interrogated him on their own initiative, and killed him last night."

Admitting that M'hidi had had to be transferred to another prison, at Maison Carrée, for administrative reasons, Massu claims that he hanged himself with an electric flex that night but was "still breathing" when taken to the Maillot hospital, while two French medical officers who examined him stated officially that M'hidi was already dead before reaching the hospital, but that "our attention was not attracted by apparent marks of wounds". Perhaps of all those involved, few would have been more likely to know the truth than the late Colonel Godard. In his memoirs he says, simply but revealingly, that, after first discussing M'hidi's death with Massu the following morning: "Massu made no comment. In my heart of hearts, I believe that Ben M'hidi would not have committed suicide had he remained chez Bigeard."

La torture

The death of Ben M'hidi left, alive and at liberty, only Belkacem Krim out of the original neuf historiques of the F.L.N. Like an unsightly molehill, it also threw up the whole ugly but hitherto largely subterranean issue of the maltreatment of rebel suspects, of torture and summary executions; or what, in another context and depending upon the point of view, might perhaps be termed "war crimes", and what in France came simply to be known as la torture. From the Battle of Algiers onwards this was to become a growing canker for France, leaving behind a poison that would linger in the French system long after the war itself had ended. The resort to torture poses moral problems that are just as germane to the world
A SAVAGE WAR OF PEACE

today as they were to the period under consideration. As Jean-Paul Sartre wrote in 1958, "Torture is neither civilian nor military, nor is it specifically French: it is a plague infecting our whole era." But what is immediately of importance here is the influence, or influences, brought to bear by it upon the subsequent course of the Algerian war. And these were very potent indeed. It is one of the most difficult things in this world to establish the truth about torture; whether it did or did not take place, and the nature and scale of it. The plaintiff is as unlikely to tell the unadorned truth as his oppressor: for it is so superlative a propaganda weapon given into his hands. All the writer can do is to state what was claimed and admitted on both sides. Here one is aided by the fact that, among others, General Massu has come forward in the aftermath of the war and declared, in his forthright way: "In answer to the question: 'Was there really torture?' I can only reply in the affirmative, although it was never either institutionalised or codified. ... I am not frightened of the word." There was, he claimed, no other option in the circumstances then prevailing in Algiers but to apply techniques of torture.

It is essential to be clear about what one means by the word of which Massu was "not frightened". In a conventional war, so-called "war crimes" generally fall into two distinct categories: those committed in hot blood - prisoners despatched out of hand on the battlefield, shot-down bomber crews lynched by enraged civilians after an air-raid; and those perpetrated in cold blood - the concentration camps. Similarly, in an unconventional war like Northern Ireland or Algeria, there are the brutalities, the roughing-up, the passage à tabac that may be inflicted immediately following the arrest of a suspected terrorist; and there is the prolonged and systematic application of physical or psychological pain expressly aimed at making a suspect "talk", which constitutes torture as opposed to brutality. Though the passage à tabac has long existed as a police institution in France, to no people has torture been more abhorrent, morally and philosophically, especially following their own hideous experiences from 1940 to 1944. As an instrument of state, torture was expressly abolished by the French Revolution (which never practised it) on 8 October 1789, but even well before this French humanists writers had deemed that it was both inhuman and inefficient. Article 373 of the French Penal Code (aiming specifically at highwaymen who had an unpleasant habit of "warming up the feet" of their victims) actually imposed the death penalty upon anyone practising torture. Nevertheless, in Algeria there appear to have been at least isolated incidents of torture even before 1954, as both Ben Khedda and François Mitterrand assured the author, and the fact of it seems confirmed by the forceful interventions made by French authorities on various occasions. In 1949, for instance, Governor-General Naegelen in an official circular ordered: "strong-arm techniques

THE BATTLE OF ALGIERS

must be absolutely prohibited as a method of investigation. I am determined to punish with the utmost severity not only those members of the public service found guilty of using violence but also their superiors." In 1955 Mendès-France declared categorically that all "excesses" must stop everywhere and at once", and Soustelle during his stewardship issued strict instructions that "every offence against human dignity ... be rigorously forbidden", and in his memoirs he insists that any proven cases of brutality or summary executions "did not rest without punishment".

Institutionalise torture?

In March 1955, however, even more suggestive evidence came in a highly controversial proposal made in the Wuillaume Report by a senior civil servant quite unconnected with the police. Wuillaume opined that, like the legalising of a rampant black market, torture should be institutionalised because it had become so prevalent, as well as proving effective in neutralising many dangerous terrorists. From his researches, Wuillaume recommended:

The water and electricity methods, provided they are carefully used, are said to produce a shock which is more psychological than physical and therefore do not constitute excessive cruelty. ... According to certain medical opinion which I was given, the water-pipe method, if used as outlined above, involves no risk to the health of the victim. This is not the case with the electrical method which does involve some danger to anyone whose heart is in any way affected. ... I am inclined to think that these procedures can be accepted and that, if used in the controlled manner described to me, they are no more brutal than deprivation of food, drink, and tobacco, which has always been accepted. ...

It was a view that would not necessarily be shared by Algerians subjected to the gégène or having had their bellies pumped full of water during the Battle of Algiers. Noting how police morale had been affected by the "pillorying" of "such excesses as have taken place", Wuillaume concluded: "There is only one way of restoring the confidence and drive of the police - to recognise certain procedures and to cover them with authority."

Although Soustelle "categorically refused" to accept the Wuillaume conclusions, they may well have taken root already in Algeria. Citing a letter from a soldier written well before the Battle of Algiers, Pierre-Henri Simon recounts how the writer had been invited by gendarmes to attend the torture of two Arabs arrested the previous night:

The first of the tortures consisted of suspending the two men completely naked by their feet, their hands bound behind their backs, and. plunging their heads for a long time into a bucket of water to make them talk. The second torture consisted of suspending them, their hands and feet tied
A SAVAGE WAR OF PEACE

behind their backs, this time with their head upwards. Underneath them was placed a trestle, and they were made to swing, by fist blows, in such a fashion that their sexual parts rubbed against the very sharp pointed bar of the trestle. The only comment made by the men, turning towards the soldiers present: “I am ashamed to find myself stark naked in front of you.”

But the fact that in the army torture was by no means institutionalised yet seems to be implicit in Serban-Schreiber’s Lieutenant en Algérie (1957), which, highly critical as it is of French army excesses, omits any specific reference to torture as such. By way of explaining the essential atmosphere in which torture could become institutionalised within the French army in Algeria, one needs to take into account all those factors touched upon in the previous chapters: horror at the atrocities of the F.L.N., a determination not to lose yet another campaign, and the generally brutalising effect of so cruel and protracted a war. Noting the growing indifference to the “enemy” as a human being, such a tough para commander as Colonel François Coulet himself admits that the army had come to regard a prisoner as “no longer an Arab peasant” but simply “a source of intelligence”.

Interrogation techniques

“Intelligence”, said Godard, “is capital.” Massu’s system of quadrillage and the rifling of the police dossiers was augmented by the work of a new body called the Dispositif de Protection Urbaine (D.P.U.). Created by order of Lacoste and placed under the control of that Indo-China expert on subversive warfare, Colonel Roger Trinquier, in its operation the D.P.U. carried it sinister undertones that also could not help but recall French experiences under the Third Reich. It divided the city up into sectors, sub-sectors, blocks and buildings, each bearing a number or letter (even today the hieroglyphs can still be found painted on the fronts of houses in the Casbah). To each block was nominated a responsable, generally a Muslim ancien combattant considered trustworthy, and to this block-warden fell the duty of reporting all suspicious activities occurring within his territory. In the short term the D.P.U. – which Trinquier describes as forming “a flexible bond between the authorities and the populace” – undeniably produced results. It was through its information that Ben M’Hidi had been caught, and, according to Trinquier, it meant that “no Muslim was able to enter the European quarters without being reported”. But in the long run it was to place the “loyal” Muslim block-wardens in a thoroughly invidious position, often resulting either in their assassination or in the end of their loyalty to France.

The numbers of Muslim suspects passing through the hands of the paras as a result of the D.P.U. and the other forms of intelligence collection ran

THE BATTLE OF ALGIERS

into enormous figures, with Edward Behr reckoning that between thirty and forty per cent of the entire male population of the Casbah were arrested at some point or other during the course of the Battle of Algiers. The suspects were generally, as a matter of principle, arrested at night so that any colleagues they named under interrogation could be grabbed before the lifting of the curfew, and before they would have a chance of being warned and disappearing. A directive marked “Secret” and signed by Massu (dated 4 April 1957) ordered that: “The most absolute secrecy must be ensured on anything concerning the number, identity and the nature of suspects arrested. In particular, no mention of whatever kind is to be made to any representative of the Press.” This was designed as much to confuse the public as to what was going on as it was to heighten terror among the suspect’s entourage at the uncertainty of his fate. He would then be handed over to a Dépêchement Opérationnel de Protection (D.O.P.) which Massu describes as being “specialists in the interrogation of suspects who wanted to say nothing”, and would then either be released or passed on to a centre d’hébergement, where he might be hauled out for further and protracted interrogation.

At first his D.O.P. interrogators would attempt to trap him into admissions by displaying ominous knowledge about the personalities and workings of his group. Often he would be confronted with a boukkara or cagoulard, a Muslim with his head covered in a sack with eye-slits who had broken under interrogation and was now acting as an informer – a particular horror for the Algerians. Then, says Trinquier:

If the suspect makes no difficulty about giving the information required, the interrogation will be over quickly, otherwise specialists must use all means available to drag his secret out of him. Like a soldier he must then face suffering and perhaps even death which he has so far avoided.

And this is what happened. Because of the numbers of suspects involved, the D.O.P. “experts” often had to rely on outside help; “in certain cases”, admits Massu, “each of the regimental interrogation teams of the 10th Paratroop Division was obliged to have recourse to violence”. It was at this point, one might say, that torture became institutionalised in the army in Algeria.

“Little electrodes…”

The most favoured method of torture was the gègène, an army signals magneto from which electrodes could be fastened to various parts of the human body – notably the penis. It was simple and left no traces. Massu states that he, as well as other members of his staff, tried it out on himself in his own office; what he failed, however, to note in his “experiment” was the cumulative effect of prolonged application of the gègène, as well
A SAVAGE WAR OF PEACE

as of all deprivation of the element of hope— the essential concomitant of any torture. Robert Lacoste also belittles the gégène; it was, he claims, "nothing serious. Just connecting little electrodes. And Massu's paras were, after all, des garçons très sportifs!" But what the gégène was really like is vividly described by Henri Alleg (among many others) in his book The Question, which caused an uproar in France in 1958 when it first revealed the systematisation of torture in Algeria. Alleg, a European Jew whose family had settled in Algeria during the Second World War, was the Communist editor of the Alger Républicain and had been held under interrogation by the paras for a whole month in the summer of 1957. Of his first subjection to the gégène, with electrodes attached merely to his ear and finger, he says: "A flash of lightning exploded next to my ear and I felt my heart racing in my breast." The second time a large magneto was used: "Instead of the sharp and rapid spasms that seemed to tear my body in two, it was now a greater pain that took possession of all my muscles and tightened them in longer spasms." Next the electrodes were placed in his mouth: "my jaws were soldered to the electrode by the current, and it was impossible for me to unlock my teeth, no matter what effort I made. My eyes, under their spasmed lids, were crossed with images of fire, and geometric luminous patterns flashed in front of them." He was left with an intolerable thirst, which his torturers refused to assuage.

Then there were the various forms of water torture: heads thrust repeatedly into water troughs until the victim was half-drowned; bellies and lungs filled with cold water from a hose placed in the mouth, with the nose stopped up. "I couldn't hold on for more than a few moments," says Alleg; "I had the impression of drowning, and a terrible agony, that of death itself, took possession of me. 'That's it! He's going to talk,' said a voice." And there were the instances (perhaps less common than publicity made them seem at the time) of the tortures still more degrading of human dignity: bottles thrust into the vaginas of young Muslim women; high pressure hoses inserted in the rectum, sometimes causing permanent damage through internal lesions.

The torturers tortured

Almost as painful as the torture inflicted on oneself was the awareness of the suffering of others nearby: "I don't believe that there was a single prisoner who did not, like myself, cry from hatred and humiliation on hearing the screams of the tortured for the first time," says Alleg, and he records the horror of the elderly Muslim hoping to appease his tormentors: "Between the terrible cries which the torture forced out of him, he said, exhausted: 'Vive la France! Vive la France!'"

But the humiliation was double-sided; as many other nations have discovered, torture ends by corrupting the torturer as much as it breaks the victim. The centre de tri where he was held had, says Alleg, become "a school of perversion for young Frenchmen", and his view is shared by paratrooper Pierre Leulliette of the 2nd R.P.C. who was forced, unwillingly, to take part in the torturing. Initially, says Leulliette, the paras "tackled these methods, rather new to them, first with reluctance, and then wholeheartedly". Based in an unused sweet factory, he recalls one big Alistian sergeant who seemed particularly to relish his work: "With his fist, which could have strangled an ox, he would plunge in the heads of his clients, who were often choking with apprehension long before they touched the water... He would have liked to interrogate Europeans; but they were rare..." Reactions among the paras varied: "Those who flaunted their vices embroiioned on it at leisure, and found it all quite normal; the 'humanists' thought they should merely be shot. Very few seemed to realise that there might have been some innocent men among them." Leulliette himself became deeply oppressed by what was going on round him in the sweet factory: "All day, through the floor-boards, we heard their hoarse cries, like those of animals being slowly put to death. Sometimes I think I can still hear them... All these men disappeared..."

Gradually, "I felt myself becoming contaminated. What was more serious, I felt that the horror of all these crimes, our everyday battle, was losing force daily in my mind." Going on a month's leave to Paris was like a deep breath of fresh air, and sufficient "to make me forget the suffering throughout poor Algeria. I felt ashamed. Ashamed of having been so happy."

"All these men disappeared..."

On seeing Alleg in person at the Palais de Justice in 1970, Massu comments dryly on his "reassuring dynamism", and questions, "Do the torments which he suffered count for much alongside the cutting off of the nose or of the lips, when it was not the penis, which had become the ritual present of the fellahas to their recalcitrant 'brothers'? Everyone knows that these bodily appendages don't grow again!" But, once taken away, nor does life itself "grow again", and Massu does not mention those who did not survive arrest during the Battle of Algiers. "All these men disappeared," says Leulliette, and he admits later of having "to bury one of the suspects, who had died in their hands, in the quicklime at the bottom of the garden. There were others..." During the Battle of Algiers, disposal of the "inconvenient", of those who died under torture, or who refused adamantly to talk, apparently became prevalent enough to gain the slang expression "work in the woods". Courriére writes of bodies dropped out in the sea by helicopter, and of a mass grave between Koléa and Zéralda, some thirty kilometres from Algiers (though no such grave has apparently been uncovered subsequently by the Algerian government); Vidal-Naquet cites the killing by suffocation in March 1957 of forty-one
A SAVAGE WAR OF PEACE

out of 101 detainees locked up in wine-cellars in Oran; Lejaoui lists the names of a series of men to whose families either Salan or Massu stated that they had been released, but who, Lejaoui claims, were never seen again. The number of such “disappearances” may never be verified; the distinguished secretary-general at the Algiers prefecture, Paul Teitgen, put it at just over 3,000. Though Godard disputes it vigorously and arithmetically, this was to become the figure generally accepted by the opponents of para excesses during the Battle of Algiers.

There was, inevitably, a mass covering-up within the army. As “Major Marcus” in Servan-Schreiber’s Lieutenant en Algérie remarks: “The captains and the mayors lie to the generals and the prefects... when a supérie is committed in my regiment by some of my men on an operation, do you think I ever hear about it? No. It’s covered up ‘between pals’.”

The cases which did, however, lift the lid to public gaze were those concerning well-known, or at least identifiable, figures. There was the ill-explained death of Ben M’hidi, and later there was the detailed account of his own tortures by Henri Alleg. Meanwhile, following closely on the revelation of Ben M’hidi’s “suicide”, there came the radio announcement that on 23 March the prominent young lawyer Ali Boumendjel had thrown himself out of a window of a building in Blida tenanted by the 2nd R.C.P. “to escape interrogation to which he was going to be subjected.” Supporting the official statement, Salan claims that numerous incriminating documents were found in Boumendjel’s possession, and that he had wished “to escape from justice”. Godard adds that either he “had wished to die for the cause, or was deranged in his mind”. Whether or not either explanation was satisfactory, Boumendjel’s death was to cause an uproar in France.

L’Affaire Audin

An even greater and more persistent outcry, however, was sparked off by the disappearance of Maurice Audin in June 1957. Audin was a twenty-five-year-old lecturer in the science faculty of Algiers University and a member of the same Communist cell as Henri Alleg. He was arrested by Colonel Mayer’s 1st R.C.P. on suspicion of harbouring and aiding terrorists and - according to Salan, who cites statements made by both the sergeant and the lieutenant in charge of him - managed to escape into the night while being transported in a jeep. Shots were fired after Audin, but no body was ever found, and the sergeant was sentenced to fifteen days’ arrest for his negligence. The official story was that Audin had made his way to Tunisia; but he has never been seen since. Courriére claims that he was “liquidated” by operatives of the 11th Shock in mistake for Alleg.

* An episode which Salan in his memoirs also acknowledges, though with some discrepancy in the details.

THE BATTLE OF ALGIERS

Vidal-Naquet says categorically that “It was at Fort Emperat that Maurice Audin was secretly buried after he had been murdered.”

Bollardière and Teitgen protest

The French liberal conscience and instinct for humanity being what they are, however, soon powerful voices, both in Algeria and metropolitan France, were being raised against torture. One of the first was General Jacques de Bollardière—Grand Officer of the Legion of Honour, Companion of the Liberation, etc. - whose outstanding wartime career has already been noted in the previous chapter. Arriving in the latter part of 1956, he had been given command of a sector near Blida and had then been brought into the Battle of Algiers. Early on, when dressed in plain clothes, he had been shocked to overhear a young cavalry officer remark, “In Algiers, now, there is nothing but genuine chaps, paras, the Legion, fine big blond fellows, stalwarts not sentimentalists.”

Bollardière intervened: “Doesn’t that remind you of anything, des grands gars blonds, pas sentimentaux?”

The young officer replied, quite unashamedly: “If I had been in Germany at that moment, I too would have been a Nazi.”

Bollardière’s sense of outrage was further increased when approached by weeping Muslim women who told him that their sons or husbands had “disappeared in the night”, and finally he sought an interview with Massu, telling him that the orders he had been issued were “in absolute opposition to the respect of man, which was the foundation of my life.” After this Bollardière commented: “If the leadership yielded on the absolute principle of respect for human beings, enemy or not, it meant an unleashing of deplorable instincts which no longer knew any limits and which could always find means of justifying itself.” He then wrote to the Commander-in-Chief requesting to be posted back to France. On returning to France he gave voice to his indignation by writing, on 23 March 1957, a letter to his friend Servan-Schreiber for publication in L’Express, in which he pointed to “the terrible danger there would be for us to lose sight, under the fallacious pretext of immediate expediency, of the moral values which alone have, up until now, created the grandeur of our civilisation and of our army”. For this fundamental breach of military discipline the general was sentenced to sixty days of “fortress arrest”, the most severe punishment meted out to any senior officer during the Algerian war.

Just two days after Bollardière’s offence, Governor-General Lacoste received a letter of resignation from an even more influential figure: Paul Teitgen, his secretary-general at the Prefecture. Teitgen, a Catholic and hero of the Resistance, had been deported by the Gestapo to Dachau, where he was tortured on no less than nine occasions. In August 1956 he took up his post in Algiers, which carried with it special responsibilities for
A SAVAGE WAR OF PEACE

overseeing the police and in which he found little that was congenial. In November he was confronted with an appalling moral dilemma. Fernand Yveton, the Communist, had been caught red-handed placing a bomb in the gasworks where he was employed. But a second bomb had not been discovered, and if it exploded and set off the gasometers thousands of lives might be lost. Nothing would induce Yveton to reveal its whereabouts, and Teitgen was pressed by his Chief of Police to have Yveton passé à la question.

But I refused to have him tortured. I trembled the whole afternoon. Finally the bomb did not go off. Thank God I was right. Because if you once get into the torture business, you’re lost. . . . Understand this, fear was the basis of it all. All our so-called civilisation is covered with a varnish. Scratch it, and underneath you find fear. The French, even the Germans, are not extortioners by nature. But when you see the throats of your copains slit, then the varnish disappears.

With Lacoste’s handing over of responsibility to Massu in January, Teitgen found that his hands were tied. Thus on 29 March he wrote to Lacoste, offering his resignation on the grounds that he had failed in his duty and that “for the past three months we have been engaged in irresponsibility which can only lead to war crimes.” He added that, in visits to two centres d’hébergement, he had “recognised on certain detainees profound traces of the cruelties and torments that I personally suffered fourteen years ago in the Gestapo cellars.” He feared that “France risks losing her soul through equivocation”.

Lacoste begged Teitgen to remain at his post and keep his letter secret. Feeling that it would be better for him to continue as watchdog, rather than have no watchdog at all, Teitgen assented. As a consequence of the pressures of protest, he was permitted to retain powers of detention, which meant in theory that the paras could not hold suspects; secondly, in April a “Safeguard Committee of Individual Rights and Liberties” was instituted by Paris to investigate and redress excesses. Some moderation was achieved, but, says Teitgen, torture was by no means stamped out, and in September he decided he could stay no longer. By this time, he claims, over three thousand Algerians had “disappeared”.

How effective was torture?

There remains the vital question, with much relevance to today: what did torture achieve in the Battle of Algiers? Putting aside any consideration of morality, was it even effective? Massu, with a courage that demands respect, claims that the end justified the means; the battle was won and a halt was brought to the F.L.N.-imposed terror and the indiscriminate killing and maiming of both European and Muslim civilians. He also notes that, when critics compared them to the Nazis, his paras practised neither extermination nor the taking of hostages. And Edward Behr, who could by no stretch of the imagination be regarded as an apostle of torture, nevertheless reckons “that without torture the F.L.N.’s terrorist network would never have been overcome. . . . The ‘Battle of Algiers’ could not have been won by General Massu without the use of torture.” Had the Battle of Algiers indeed been lost by the French in 1957, then the whole of Algeria would almost certainly have been swamped by the F.L.N. — leading in all probability to a peace settlement several years earlier than was otherwise the case.

This is certainly true of the short term, but in the longer term — as the Nazis in the Second World War, and as almost every other power that has ever adopted torture as an instrument of policy, have discovered — it is a double-edged weapon. In some of his last utterances even Massu’s chief lieutenant, Yves Godard, expressed doubts as to the efficacy of torture, especially when weighed against the emotional weapon it presented the enemy. In what seemed like an indirect criticism of his old commander, he added:

If I had carried a lot of brass, having first warned the enemy, I would have shot publicly any assassin caught in flagrante — I say advisedly in flagrante — if within forty-eight hours he had not voluntarily handed over his secrets. . . .

There is no need to torture. . . .

From a purely intelligence point of view, experience teaches that more often than not the collating services are overwhelmed by a mountain of false information extorted from victims desperate to save themselves further agony. Also, it is bound to drive into the enemy camp the innocents who have wrongly been submitted to torture. As Camus declares: “torture has perhaps saved some at the expense of honour, by uncovering thirty bombs, but at the same time it has created fifty new terrorists who, operating in some other way and in another place, would cause the death of even more innocent people”. Torture, one feels, is never warranted; one should never fight for a good cause with evil weapons. Again, says Camus, “it is better to suffer certain injustices than to commit them . . . such fine deeds would inevitably lead to the demoralisation of France and the loss of Algeria”. In the long run, the facile tu quoque arguments, such as those offered by Massu on the Alleg case, can only lead to an endless escalation of horror and degradation. In answer to the standard plaint that Muslim intellectuals were rarely heard to protest against F.L.N. atrocities, Pierre-Henri Simon counters passionately: “I would reply — ‘If really we are capable of a moral reflex which our adversary has not, this is the best justification for our cause, and even for our victory.’”

THE BATTLE OF ALGIERS
A SAVAGE WAR OF PEACE

One of the worst aspects of the admission of torture as an instrument is the wide train of corruption that inevitably follows in its wake. In a submission to the “Safeguard Committee” of September 1957, Teitgen wrote words that would apply equally to any latter-day authoritarian regime, whether it be Greece, Chile, Spain or the Soviet Union:

Even a legitimate action . . . can nevertheless lead to improvisations and excesses. Very rapidly, if this is not remedied, efficacy becomes the sole justification. In default of a legal basis, it seeks to justify itself at any price, and, with a certain bad conscience, it demands the privilege of exceptional legitimacy. In the name of efficacy, illegality has become justified.

In a civilised society, torture has no more counter-productive and insidious long-term effect than the way that it tends to demoralise the inflicter even more than his victim. Frantz Fanon, the militant Martiniquais psychiatrist, cites several examples of acute, lingering neurosis induced among the tortured; a kind of anorexia suffered by the innocent who had been put to la question wrongfully; pins-and-needles and a lasting fear of turning on a light switch, or touching a telephone, in those who had experienced the gégère. But just as psychically impaired were numerous cases like that of the European police inspector found guilty of torturing his own wife and children, which he explained as resulting from what he had been required to do to Algerian suspects: “The thing that kills me most is the torture. You just don’t know what it’s like, do you?”

Louis Joxe, the man summoned by de Gaulle to negotiate the final peace settlement with Algeria, told the author:

I shall never forget the young officers and soldiers whom I met who were absolutely appalled by what they had to do. One should never forget the significance of this experience in considering a settlement for Algeria: for practically every French soldier went through it. This is something that the supporters of Algérie française never properly understood.

Simon declares that a policeman torturing a suspect “l’oue in himself the essence of humanity”, but for the military to resort to it was one degree worse because: “It is here that the honour of the nation becomes engaged” Certainly the pernicious effect on the French army as a whole lasted many years after the war had ended, and many officers came to agree with General de Bollardière in condemning Massu for ever having allowed the army to be brought into such a police action in the first place, thereby inevitably exposing it to the practice of torture. But could Massu, in fact, have refused? Outside the army, in Algeria the rifts created by torture led to a further, decisive step in eradicating any Muslim “third force” of interlocuteurs valables with whom a compromise peace might have been negotiated; while in France the stunning, cumulative impact it

THE BATTLE OF ALGIERS

had was materially to help persuade public opinion years later that France had to wash her hands of the sole guerra. As Paul Teitgen remarked: “All right, Massu won the Battle of Algiers; but that meant losing the war.”

By the end of March 1957 – the first month in many when no bombs exploded in Algiers – it certainly looked as if, at any rate in the short term, the battle had been won. Sickened by what they had been forced to do, and breathing deep sighs of relief, Bigeard and his paras left the fetid city for the open air of the bled once more.