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## **The French Military in its Last Colonial War. Algeria, 1954-1962: the Reign of Torture**

Raphaëlle Branche

France did not resort to torture in all the wars fought by its armed forces. From this statement, one could easily conclude that torture was not naturally or politically linked to France. And yet, as is also the case with other types of violence, little attention has been paid to torture as a product of history. The widespread use of this violence all over the world has sometimes led to generalisations. One prevalent view would be that torture is a necessary tool to gain intelligence information efficiently.

The case of the extensive use of torture by French forces during the Algerian war for independence (1954-1962) will enable me to address the issues of history and meaning.

To quote Schmidt and Schroeder:

Acts of violence are no sudden outbursts of aggressiveness devoid of historicity, meaning and reflexivity; violence imaginaries are no ephemeral constructions of fragmented subjectivities, nor are they the inevitable products of reified concepts such as 'cultural models' or 'traditions'; violence is performed as well as imagined by reflexive, socially positioned human beings under specific historical conditions for concrete reasons (Schmidt and Schroeder 2001: 18-19).

Using their argument, I will explore the Algerian case in this perspective by addressing the widespread use of torture in France's last colonial war.

This violence can be described as violence whose widespread use was related to the conception that the leaders had of the situation on the ground and on a broader scale. Indeed, as an act of violence designed to fit the war's aims, the know-how of the practice of torture must be analysed precisely. It is only by scrutinising the acts of torture that one can properly address the issue of violence. Torture was intended to help maintain the colonial order. Therefore, its political aim has to be emphasized. Lastly, I argue that torture is not a mere tool, but a lexicon whose components were entangled with the colonial nature of democratic France in Algeria.

### **1. Torture, the basic weapon in a vaguely-defined arsenal of repression**

In order to properly understand the specificities of the Algerian conflict, one must look at Algeria's unique position within the French colonial empire. Indeed, Algeria was conquered in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century following a very long war, and was considered to be not just a part of the French empire, but a part of France itself. From an administrative standpoint, beginning in 1848, Algeria was divided into departments. Later, *communes* (i.e. municipalities) were created, following the model of Metropolitan France.

However, the native Algerian population – which represented the vast majority of the

total population – was restricted to a discriminatory status and administered differently from inhabitants of European and, particularly, French origin.

Algerian nationalism took shape as from the early twentieth century. It was initially limited to demanding equal rights for all the inhabitants of the country, whether on the political, social or economic level. After World War I, calls for Algerian independence were heard. These gathered pace in the 1930s. At the end of World War II – on V-Day, 8 May 1945, to be exact, a demonstration for the freeing of nationalist leader Messali Hadj and more freedom for Algerians was suppressed with bloodshed. This repression radicalized many nationalist militants (see Peyroulou 2009: 404). After several years of organising underground armed groups and facing repression from the police and legal system, as well as internal conflicts about whether it was time to resort to armed combat, one group decided to take up arms against France. The *Front de Libération Nationale* (FLN) was formed.

The aim was the ‘liquidation of the colonial system’.<sup>1</sup> The FLN proclaimed its goal by committing several dozen attacks on the same night, 31 October 1954. These attacks were mainly aimed at damaging property, although a few people died. The FLN’s military forces were not sizeable and the French authorities believed that they would crush the FLN easily. However, the events in Algeria were not considered to be a war, and officially, France would refuse to recognise that this was a war until 1999. Official statements made it clear that the French sought to limit the threat: the armed revolt was described as a ‘rebellion’ by ‘outlaws’. To combat it, French forces organized ‘maintenance of order operations’.

In April 1955, the legal framework for these operations was defined in a law on the ‘state of emergency’ in order to give more power to local administrative authorities to prevent and repress the revolt (Thénault 2007: 63-78). This state of emergency initially covered a few local areas before being extended to all of Algeria in late August 1955 after more than 100 civilians were killed by the FLN in the Eastern part of Algeria. This coordinated attack against civilians triggered a harsh repression by the French for nearly ten days, leaving at least 10,000 people dead (Mauss-Copeaux 2011: 279). In September 1955, it became obvious to everyone in Algeria that the war had crossed a point of no return.<sup>ii</sup> Conscripts were sent to aid the French forces. Additional military means were deployed, and the level of violence escalated.

In spring 1956, the French parliament gave the government special powers to make any decisions required to resolve the ‘Algerian problem’. One of the first decisions was to send the entire contingent to Algeria. Throughout the war, until 1962, most soldiers in Algeria were conscripts. In all, out of 1.7 million men, 1.2 million were not professional soldiers (Jaufret 2000: 365).

What would they do in Algeria? They had only a very vague idea in the beginning, and probably even later, despite information from Metropolitan France, where censorship was much weaker than in Algeria. Officially, the soldiers were not sent to wage war on the Algerians but on a very small number of violent radicals fighting in *maquis* or organized into urban terrorist cells. But in reality, the war they waged took many shapes: alongside classic military operations aimed at disarming and neutralising the

enemy, the French army was involved in a vast programme to administer Algeria. In order to tackle underdevelopment and a lack of administration in the country, which were blamed for some of the Algerians' anger – while refusing to acknowledge the legitimacy of the FLN's aims – French soldiers were tasked with carrying out measures for the civilian population. Among the most significant of these operations, free healthcare services were provided, and the army built schools staffed by army personnel. However, these humanitarian measures were part of the war, aimed at preventing the civilian population from supporting the FLN by housing, sheltering or feeding FLN militants. Apart from these logistic issues, the FLN's political project was of course the source of concern. If the Algerian people supported the FLN – as the FLN claimed – then France would have to withdraw from Algeria.

Thus, it was urgent for the French to pick out the individuals most involved in the war and to eliminate them. Yet French military personnel sorely lacked information on their enemies. On the one hand, they had little information because the FLN was a recent movement. Many of its members, from Messali's nationalist party, the *Mouvement pour le Triomphe des Libertés Démocratiques* (MTLD), had been living in hiding for several years and the police had lost all trace of them. Moreover, the police was poorly coordinated with the military, which had to build its intelligence network almost from scratch. On the other hand, and from a more basic standpoint, military personnel did not know who their enemy was insofar as there was no clear framework to define the enemy. Armed men? Terrorists? But what about people hiding arms caches? Or collecting funds? What about those who informed, sheltered or fed the enemy?

Faced with this guerrilla, the French army was ill equipped. There was no formal battle, no head-on combat. The armed enemy stayed in hiding, spied and attacked by surprise whenever it was sure to win. It was informed by peasants and children, who watched French military camps while herding their animals, counting the men and gathering information about the French forces. Hence the civilian population was not just the target of humanitarian measures, but could also be considered dangerous or suspect.

Very quickly, those responsible for operations in Algeria were aware of the French army's challenges. So were the Algerians. Thus, the arrival of armed troops in a village could create anxiety for the inhabitants, sometimes causing them to flee. However, in July 1955, the two ministers in charge of Algeria made a decision that would have hefty consequences: anyone fleeing could be shot dead after a warning.<sup>iii</sup> For the French troops, this instruction was tantamount to a licence to kill... assuming that the person attempted to flee. In particular, this situation demonstrated that respect for Algerians' lives was very relative in this colonial Algeria where everything had stated for decades that men were not equal and that the lives of native Algerians were worth less. In a time of war, the implicit ideas of ordinary administrative rules or the simple functions of daily life became explicit: the State used violence to assert its right over the lives of its subjects.

This exorbitant and unlimited right merged with the French military's most blatant need: the need for intelligence. In December 1954, the Minister of the Interior told French MPs that the intelligence services had to be reorganized to produce accurate intelligence.<sup>iv</sup> At that date, this was indeed far from the case, as police forces in Algeria

were arresting and torturing people who had nothing to do with the armed revolt and knew nothing about it. A scandal soon broke out in France because some of those arrested and tortured were members of the Algiers city council. The police forces were rapidly reorganized. Yet the fight against ‘outlaws’ went well beyond the police’s remit. The army was in charge in Algeria, and the army was given the task of gathering intelligence on those that were opposed to the French presence in Algeria.

To do this, all military personnel were asked to contribute. The search for intelligence became an absolute priority for all military personnel, down to the simple foot soldier, and they were all encouraged to participate. Among other sources, we can cite a memo from the general in charge of troops in western Algeria:

All means must be used for this search [for military intelligence] to be as effective as possible, either within the regulatory framework of the intelligence organisation or following any initiatives that appear appropriate in the circumstances. And, once more, we must insist on the need [...] of rapidly using the intelligence gathered, often without waiting for random confirmations [and] carrying out the required eliminations mercilessly.<sup>v</sup>

As the French army had opted for a strategy of occupying as much of the Algerian territory as possible, small groups of soldiers were spread out more or less throughout Algeria in military ‘outposts’. These soldiers were isolated from the rest of the army and had wide latitude, notably in their relations with the civilian population, which they sometimes had to monitor and administer. Lacking any specific training, they also had to gather intelligence. One such soldier, Armand Frémont, was stationed in one of the



regions most hostile to the French presence. He said this about the population of Chaouias: they ‘did not speak, did not say anything. Even asking them a web of questions, interconnecting the questions, or even getting angry, they did not say anything.’ He then specified: ‘Without torture, I was unable to find out where [the main nationalist leaders] were living and where they were located, and this was obviously the only thing that mattered for the army.’<sup>vi</sup> Intelligence-gathering missions did not involve specialists alone. Thus, violence built up against people whose sole defining characteristic was often that they were Algerian. The army’s chief of staff expressed concern for this in September 1956, when articles in the Christian press reminded him of information that the head of the army’s protestant chaplains had already communicated to him. He decided to call on the Secretary of State for the Armed Forces regarding ‘the sizeable problem caused by violence and exactions that may have been committed by some military personnel in Algeria, as reported emphatically by various non-official sources for some time now.’<sup>vii</sup> These sources fuelled a genuine concern for him, which he dissimulated poorly by using the term ‘may’. Torture was, in fact, widespread in Algeria, and could be carried out by any soldier in any unit.

Pressure on military personnel to gather intelligence, combined with their poor knowledge of the local language and society, topped off by certainty that they would not be punished, opened a wide path to widespread use of torture on anyone suspected of knowing anything. The scope quickly expanded from operational intelligence to seeking information on underground FLN networks that were gradually extending their influence throughout the Algerian population.

In 1957, such practices became much worse. Although it was never assumed as ‘torture’ but described as ‘harsh interrogation’, ‘forced interrogation’ or ‘tense interrogation’, torture became rationalized and justified (Périès 1997: 41-57). It spread even more easily because the army’s top brass in Algeria shifted from being concerned about torture to clearly recommending it.

Indeed, from the end of 1956 onwards, a new doctrine of warfare was implemented: the revolutionary war doctrine. Designed by French officers who witnessed and experienced the way the French army had been defeated in Indochina, the doctrine was based on the idea that France had to face a ‘revolutionary war’ in Algeria, as it had in Indochina. A revolutionary war meant, essentially, a political war waged within the population and using terrorism. It was assumed to be part of a communist conspiracy aimed at destroying the Western world, sometimes also depicted as the Christian world. References were also made to the Pan-Arab movement to strengthen this idea of international conspiracy – regardless of the contradictions between the two ‘conspiracies’.

To win this new kind of war, the newly-appointed head of the French army in Algeria, General Salan, and his men planned a ‘counter-revolutionary war’. New methods to win the war were said to be necessary, called ‘counter-revolutionary’ methods, and torture was one of these. Thus, although it had been used before, torture was given a new justification as a ‘counter-revolutionary’ necessity. Therefore, its use began to expand dramatically. Its necessity was emphasized due to its proclaimed efficiency.

This new focus came hand in hand with structural changes. Intelligence officers known as ORs (officiers de renseignement) were set up in every sector and in every regiment. They were no longer restricted to the general staff level, but were stationed on the ground. Not only did their intelligence operations restructure military orders, but they also became the alpha and omega of military operations. Troops were not sent out unless intelligence had been gathered beforehand, and troops did not return until intelligence was gathered on the ground.

The activities of ORs included record-keeping, interrogation and acting on intelligence. They were seeking two kinds of intelligence: information on the FLN's political organisation and so-called 'operational' intelligence. Assigned to a sector or regiment commander, the intelligence officer generally received a delegation for police power from his superior officer, enabling him to follow the entire intelligence chain. He could arrest, interrogate and even imprison suspects.<sup>viii</sup> If faced with a prisoner that he believed might be important or if he thought he lacked the means to make him talk, an OR could transfer the prisoner to a new department that developed beginning in 1957: the DOP, or Detached Operational Protection units. A fervent advocate of DOPs described them as follows: 'A military entity specialized in operational counter-espionage, under the orders of the military commander of the local area', the DOP 'manages the actions of police officers and gendarmes', 'centralizes intelligence', 'participates in military operations', 'acts on information obtained' and 'transfers the individuals interrogated to qualified entities after acting on the information obtained'.<sup>ix</sup> The DOP must transfer all intelligence gathered to the Second Bureau, and vice versa.

The activities delegated to the DOP are in fact those of the traditional Second Bureau, along with additional powers.

In fact, the DOPs worked both in connection with, and on the margins of, the official army – a bit like a secret service. These very particular detached units were staffed by professional soldiers and conscripts, as well as police officers.<sup>x</sup> Their members had exceptional rights not just over their prisoners, but also within the army. They formed a small organisation that never exceeded 2,000 men, but which very quickly built its reputation. Theoretically, the DOPs were given charge of prisoners considered to be ‘difficult’ or who had expressed a desire to join the French army. They preferred to act unobserved and to keep their methods secret, and they presented themselves as specialists. In their intelligence bulletins, they always carefully indicated whether information had been crossed and confirmed, thus demonstrating their concern for professionalism. Their initial postulate, as formulated by their director, reminded them that they were an instrument for fighting subversion: ‘Any inhabitant should be considered a suspect due to the fact that he holds positive or negative information on rebel activities, whether these activities be political, administrative or military.’<sup>xi</sup> Thus, in reality, Algerians as a whole were the main ‘source material’ for the DOPs, for documentation to be studied and additional interrogations to be carried out.

In fact, events suggest that the DOPs radicalized the postulates and methods of the usual intelligence-gathering entities. They went to the extreme with the internal rationale of the theoreticians of revolutionary war. A former DOP officer remembers advice given by officers: ‘Remain men. Never sink to the level of enjoying interrogations. Consider

them only as a necessity. If you like to inflict violence for no reason other than to inflict violence, you will be kept away from interrogation rooms.’ (Vittori 1980: 56).

Interrogations had to be carried out carefully, and a doctor could be called in to avoid blunders, as specified by the methodical writer of the operations handbook for La Calle (El Kala): ‘It is often important to have a doctor’s assessment of some subjects, enabling a more efficient and rapid interrogation.’ (Vittori 1980: 56). Acting as professionals, the men of the DOP adapted to individuals: ‘In a few months of work, I managed to sense the exact moment when a prisoner would crack, the fraction of a second when he would let go’, according to one sergeant. (Vittori 1980: 56). The methods used were violent: ‘punches, yelling, threats of death with a pistol in hand. With a single objective: to prevent the man from thinking, to prevent him at any price from gathering his senses.’ (Vittori 1980: 56). The men of the DOP were specialists in torture. Their intelligence bulletins show that this was habitual, for instance, an intelligence bulletin from the DOP of Méchéria specified, in speaking of prisoners, that ‘we seldom see captured HLL who refuse to speak as these did.’<sup>xii</sup>

While the DOPs’ actions appear to respect the legal forms and to comply with basic principles of intelligence and counterespionage services (crossing and confirming sources, as well as secrecy, which justified the lack of written orders for the operations in which DOPs participated, in any case in towns and cities),<sup>xiii</sup> they were not concerned about legality. Their ‘essential and unwavering concern must be effectiveness.’ This alone would guide the men because ‘[their] DOP will be judged according to its results’,<sup>xiv</sup> as their chief told them repeatedly. At the same time, the DOPs managed to

impose the idea that they were a necessary part of the ongoing war, and despite a few attempts to rein them in, they remained in place until the war's end.

Thus, torture was both the reserve of a group of self-proclaimed specialists – who focused their efforts on the most delicate cases – and a widespread tool throughout the French army in Algeria, through its Second Bureau, that could be used in every sector and each regiment. These methods were well-known to all soldiers and all Algerians. They could also be used by those who, without being a member of the intelligence service, considered it necessary to obtain urgent information from a suspect. However, torture was simply a mask covering a much deeper political reality.

## **2. The meaning of, and justification for, torture**

Although the war was based on the idea that the population had to be the main target of policies and military actions, the explicit justification for torture focused on its efficiency in a context described as a war against terrorism. Yet torture was not part of every interrogation session. As they never were explicit written orders to torture people, the military in charge of the prisoners were left with a vast room of manoeuvre, personal interpretation and ethical responsibility. When agreeing on the need to torture a prisoner, they could reassure themselves by invoking the 'ticking bomb argument'. This argument basically says that if a terrorist has planted a bomb in the middle of a large crowd and you have managed to capture him, he will not reveal where he has planted the bomb unless you torture him. You have no choice in real life: you have to

use torture to extract the information that will save hundreds of lives. This argument uses the excuse of urgency: you have to be quick when innocent lives are in danger! In fact, French soldiers were very seldom confronted with a terrorist having just set a bomb. Most of the time, they were interrogating people who were assumed to know something about the FLN, the real enemy: the political organisation and not just its bombing network. Yet the public justification, with an effect that has lasted to this day, was based on the example of terrorist attacks. Therefore, torture was (and still is) always described as an intelligence-gathering technique.

Most of the French military (and probably most of the French people) were persuaded that this was true. Despite the recent experience of WW2 and the issue of underground fighters having been tortured by the French police or the Nazis, despite the fact that some officers in charge in Algeria might have experienced themselves the agony of torture at that time or the fear to be arrested and tortured, the situation in Algeria appeared to be disconnected from this past. Of course, people might talk when submitted to physical or mental pain but it is far from obvious that they always tell the truth, provided that they had something to say to their interrogators. And yet, the use of torture was always connected to the goal of gathering intelligence. Torture was analysed and discussed as a means to gain intelligence.

All the intelligence officers did not resort to torture: some explicitly rejected it as ineffective in gaining intelligence and favoured other means (basically, since the French military had too little native informants, they had to analyse documents from the enemy and intelligence obtained through technical means). Our objective here is not to call into question the rationalisation used by the participants or the justifications that they found

for actions that they might have considered morally repugnant. Classified as a tactical weapon, part of the military routine, torture could acquire a place in French military personnel's view of the war, enabling a wide number of those using torture to do so considering that they were fulfilling their obligations as a soldier.

Nevertheless, these forms of violence had an effect on the Algerian population that went well beyond the issue of intelligence gathering. Thus, their meaning must also be interpreted differently – and some of the generals and high-ranking military officials were well aware of this. Ultimately, torture was a form of political violence, as shown in a study of the exact mechanisms of torture.

Torture has specific effects on the victim's psychology. It is pain inflicted deliberately on another human being. It is carried out in a framework in which the victim is deprived of all rights, while the torturer has all the power, including the right to put another human being to death. The aim of the perpetrators is to deprive the other of his or her ability to think. It has its psychological basis in the manipulation of the victim's fear of death or permanent injury.

What leads from this psychological description of the mechanisms of torture to the interpretation of such violence as political? I will argue that in Algeria, violence was used to maintain a political order that was colonial in nature. French soldiers and Algerian victims were components of this order. To perpetuate this order, the basic necessity was to make sure every character on this political stage played its part. As some Algerians were overtly resisting and contesting the political order built by France,



they had to be reminded who wielded power in Algeria. Torture was crucial in this regard.

Indeed, the basic psychological mechanism of torture is not enough when it comes to interpretation (see Branche and Sironi 2002: 539-548). Torture is a very powerful force imposed upon a social fabric. The violence of torture is not restricted to the room in which it occurs. It spreads outside this room, to the family of the victim, to the village or the neighbourhood, into his or her entire community. By torturing someone, the perpetrators' explicit wish is often to get information about something or somebody. Thus, the victim is injured in order to break the silent oath, the secret contract, the promise made not to reveal anything to the enemies of his or her community. Whether this presentation is false or not, whether the French army was the enemy of all Algerians or only suppressing the political radical nationalists, the fact remains that, after a torture session, the question was no longer relevant to the victim. At least, for the Algerian victims, the French army became an enemy.

Surprisingly enough, this interpretation was not dominant within the ranks of the French army at that time. Officially arresting the true culprits, theoretically gaining enough information to get rid of the FLN and the ALN, the French army was supposed to be a powerful ally to any Algerian that wanted to live free from the FLN. Yet some officers raised doubt about the double-edged effect of torture on the population's willingness to be involved in building a true French Algeria. Their argument was countered, however, by stating that the French army had to balance the FLN's terror on the population. And the only way to achieve this balance was to resort to counter-terror.

In this respect, torture was obviously an efficient means not only to torture one human being, but to reach his or her entire community. It was a remote-controlled tool whose efficiency went well beyond the immediate effect of obtaining information. Indeed, my argument is that torture was used not only to force people to talk, but to make them understand – and remember – who wielded power. Torture was effectively adapted to this war where control over the civilian population was at stake. In this sense, it was above all a political form of violence, aiming at maintaining the colonial order.

However, emphasising this dynamic does not help us understand all the features of torture in French Algeria. To summarize, there were three main features: 1) the illegal status of the violence, which contrasted with its widespread use; 2) the perpetrators' focus on not leaving marks on their victims' bodies; and 3) the use of electric torture. To understand these characteristics, we will have to dig deeper into the violence. From this scrutiny emerges an intimate link between colonialism and French identity.

To better understand the nature of torture in Algeria under French rule, we have to focus on how the physical acts of violence were carried out. The first obvious element is that this violence was not a result of individual abuse or blunders. Torture was deliberately chosen among a variety of tools that the men in charge had at their disposal. The evidence being that this act of violence was always inflicted by a group, under the command of a superior.

Yet it was forbidden under French law. Legitimized, tolerated, even implicitly acknowledged by some officials as necessary, this act of violence had to be carried out very carefully. While the presence of an officer during the torture session was an indication of the involvement of the military structure, it also provided evidence that torturers were being watched. In particular, inflicting death under torture was a huge error: not only did it lead to the death of the victim (and potential informant), it also put the military at risk (some people might complain, an enquiry could be ordered, journalists might become interested). A careful balance had to be maintained. To threaten the Algerian population could be useful and rewarding (torture was part of that purpose), but French opinion also had to be taken into account, and in a very different way.

French identity is based on the values of the French Revolution, and France likes to portray itself as the Cradle of Human Rights. Therefore, although the war in Algeria took place before the first NGOs and before international pressure on human rights became a new actor in wars, the French authorities feared that their own citizens might rise up and protest the methods used in Algeria if they had enough evidence of them. The press in Algeria was not free, but that was not the case in Metropolitan France: press campaigns were a real threat for the government and, indeed, the spring 1957 campaign on torture proved its ability to put the government on notice. The need to keep torture away from French or Western eyes became, therefore, important. France could regularly argue that its military complied with the rules and the law, and that the stories about torture were mere allegations or, at worst, excesses whose perpetrators were to be condemned.

This double standard should not come as a surprise to specialists of the colonial world. Each community was addressed using specific discourses. In the course of a war, this phenomenon went to extremes and the spatial distinction between France and Algeria made it stronger. In Metropolitan France, the repression of Algerian nationalism was carried out by the police. Although this repression put severe pressure on the Algerian migrant community (a special curfew was even ordered in Paris in October 1961), the logic of violence was different and the use of torture in particular could not be so widespread (House and MacMaster 2006: 375). On the contrary, Algeria was an open field for the military, without any European witnesses throughout the vast majority of the country. In this respect, the intervention of paratroopers in Algiers in January 1957 (known as the Battle of Algiers) was a major exception. In mainland Algeria, they could exert their power without any counterweight, except that of the FLN/ALN.

So why were the torturers so eager to heal the wounds that they might have inflicted? Why did they seek not to leave scars on the bodies? The first thing to bear in mind here is that torture was not an act of violence by chance. It was intentional and therefore appeared to be subject to certain rules, and drew on a relatively limited array of violent acts. By this, I do not mean that torture needed specific training or, even more, a scientific approach. In Algeria, the torturers learned their skills on the spot and by exchanging techniques with one another. Yet a pattern of violence could be described – so specific that Darius Rejali named one of the styles of torture he distinguished after it: ‘the French modern style’. What were its main components?

Torture sessions systematically began with the victim being stripped down. The torturers would choose between five separate methods of torture, often combining two of them. These methods were: beatings, hanging by the feet or hands, water torture (i.e. water boarding), torture by electric shock, and rape. Apart from the beatings, which were systematic, electric shock was undeniably the most widely-practiced torture method. The method caused small burns on the skin, but they could be healed over a certain period of time.

This aspect was crucial. With regard to the regime in France, it allowed the double standard discourse and the denial of the systematic use of torture by French authorities. It was, as Darius Rejali has argued, because France was a democracy that the country favoured electric torture, leaving no scars (what he rather clumsily calls ‘clean torture’). ‘French modern style’, he wrote, ‘was a stealthy style, one that was pioneered to avoid unwanted publicity and to create plausible deniability.’ (Rejali 2007: 167). The existence of public opinion was central in his perspective. But, this use of electric torture was also crucial for France as a colonial power. Let me expand a bit further on this point.

As with all torture, electric torture had a twofold effect: it caused pain *hic et nunc* and pain long after, for what might be a never-ending period. From the colonial perspective, the psychological pain, the trauma, was as important as the initial pain. Indeed, to make the people remember how badly they could be treated if they tried to resist was part of the colonial rule. Leaving no visible scars, the torture achieved the longer-term effect of making the pain even more intimate. It was impossible to share it by showing it. You

had to put the pain in words, which seemed quite an impossible task to achieve. Thus, the colonial power, by leaving the victims to walk freely after having been tortured, was not necessarily at risk. The victims were living witnesses of its power. They acted as landmarks in the social fabric to make others remember not to transgress, with only a vague intuition of what might happen if they did. In this regard, the widespread use of torture by the French army in Algeria echoed back to the conquest.

However, this violence was combined with the strength of the French army in the 1950s. In many respects, the military was able to behave as an army of occupation: stable, well equipped, with a certain knowledge of the country (although full of prejudices). The use of electric torture also bore witness to this: France was the country of progress, rationality and, to cut a long story short, civilisation.

Indeed, the electric device used to torture was initially designed for the field telephone or the radio. Technological developments allowed troops to transport an electric generator with them into combat. Adapted with alligator clips, this generator, nicknamed a *gégène*, was used as a method of torture. It permitted pain levels to be increased gradually, and adapted to the reaction of the victim. Progress and rationality were thus opposed to the numerous images of the FLN's violent acts characterized as 'barbarous', 'savage' and summarized by the image of the cutting blade<sup>xv</sup>. Where the FLN would make its victims bleed, the French would carefully watch that they did not leave any scars. Where the FLN would impose the same violence on everybody, from infants to the elderly, the French would argue that they adapted their technique to the victim in order to get the information out of him or her. Where the FLN would use the

cold blade, the French would favour burning electrodes. Where the FLN would need proximity to its enemy's body, the use of a machine allowed the French soldier to distance himself from the violence inflicted, and from the body of the other person. The use of objects employed in the other torture methods arose from the same impulse. Eventually, where the FLN would leave the corpses and display them for the people to witness its harshness, the French would hide the corpses that they had sometimes to deal with and would try to hide the scars before releasing their victims.

The political lexicon that stemmed from the act of violence on both sides seemed to have been constructed as a mirror image. This dynamic of mimicry and counter-mimicry was certainly no accident. On the French side at least, authorities worried that they should distinguish themselves from the FLN. The propaganda was regularly fuelled with discourses on the FLN's savagery, especially in the first years of the war. The act of torture could not be separated from this broader pattern: their characteristics helped to entrench torture within a culture of civilisation and rationality.

The so-called rational, modern and civilized violence was not only addressed to the FLN as evidence of France's superiority versus the FLN's regressive path for Algeria, it also resorted to a lexicon familiar to the inhabitants of Algeria, be they French or Algerian. This lexicon was used to link France with progress and modernity, with freedom and electricity, with wealth and health, etc. This lexicon aimed at proving the French people's right to be in Algeria (whoever these people were: Algerian, French, but also other European countries, etc.). It tacitly implied that modernity and progress

were a common aspiration, a basic assumption on which everybody could or would simply agree.

By torturing Algerian people the way that they did, the French tried to absorb them into their realm of values. As this movement was not genuine and not effective enough by using other means, torture could be useful. In this regard, there is an obvious continuity with former and other forms of colonial domination by the French.

The legacy of violence is strong in Algeria. Violence is a value in Algerian political life and society. Yet to draw a simple line from torture during the war of independence to political and military violence in Algeria or even to the civil war of the 1990s would be hasty. Algeria's recent past over the past two centuries at least is full of violence, and torture is just one of the final occurrences of it for the colonial period. Although it is important, the collective trauma that shaped the identity of the Algerian nation today is not particularly related to that violence. On the contrary, the narrative is strongly connected with the fight for independence, struggle and resistance. In that perspective, torture was an ordeal and, in a sense, it was worth it.

What about the French army? The war in Algeria was a turning point in many respects, and the widespread use of torture was certainly one of the aspects that needed to be strongly modified. As this violence was part of imperial domination, one would expect it to stop after the empire was dismantled. Indeed, nowhere did this situation ever occur again. Yet the habits of violence, the freedom that some people took on the ground notably by resorting to illegal violence out of a sense of legitimacy, held consequences



for the military's future. The army went through what was called a 'moral crisis' and, as some newspapers put it, so did the whole nation. This crisis was also a crisis between the army and the nation. This led to a need to reconsider this relationship, and the army had to rebuild a new identity after the war.

## Conclusion

In 1966, the general rules of discipline changed and mentioned the necessity to respect the laws of war and the international conventions (and not simply the 'French rules of humanity'). Several texts issued as of the 1970s carried the same message. Today, the French army is a professional army that insists very much on its new moral foundations. The basic document issued in 1999 is entitled 'Foundations and Principles' and it clearly states that ethics are not a question of disciplinary rules, but rather a question of personal fulfilment. Therefore, this document is said to be a 'guide for thought and action'. The Algerian war is very obliquely referred to when the guide mentions 'decolonisation conflicts that had, sometimes, shattered convictions'<sup>1</sup>.

Two years later, in 2001, a brief 'Code of Soldier's Behaviour' was given to every soldier in the army. Point 4 of 11 was: "Orders had to be obeyed, provided that they do not contravene the laws of war and the international conventions". The soldiers are told to be proud of their flag and its motto 'Honour and Fatherland'. On the one hand, honour stems from ancient times and chivalric values. These values are explicitly mentioned in some other texts, and medieval knights are supposed to epitomize military virtues, totally disconnected – to say the least – from any political context. On the other

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<sup>1</sup> Armée de Terre, 1999, "L'exercice du métier des armes : fondements et principes", quoted in Bachelet 2002. This book is also known as the green book.

hand, the Fatherland is deeply connected with the French Republic and, what is even more complex, with its universal values. Indeed, the Declaration of the Rights of Man is presented as French (which it is of course) and universal. Therefore, nothing universal is unknown to the French people. To be a patriot, to serve one's country, is to be a citizen of the world and a man of virtue, even respecting the international conventions.

In this respect, France seems to have returned to its true values. The country got rid of its empire and its conscripts and has achieved its metamorphosis. Could this really be so? As recent events have shown, the Algerian war for independence may not be so far away. The colonial empire is dead, but the tasks French soldiers faced in its last big country (i.e. Algeria) are still there. The multifaceted war waged in Algeria has a lot in common with the French army's operations today. When it comes to waging a war in the midst of a civilian population that is not necessarily friendly, some echoes to the war in Algeria can be found, and some fears may arise.

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<sup>i</sup> Proclamation of 1 November 1954. For more on the FLN (see Meynier 2002: 812).

<sup>ii</sup> The state of emergency was first implemented on 3 April 1955, and extended from 22 August 1955.

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- <sup>iii</sup> Instruction from the Ministries of Defense and the Interior, 1 July 1955: ‘In ground fighting, there should be no hesitation regarding the appropriate conduct: any rebel that uses a weapon or is seen armed or committing any act of violence shall be shot on sight. Any suspect attempting to flee shall be shot.’
- <sup>iv</sup> François Mitterrand testifying before the National Assembly’s Committee on National Defense, 2 December 1954 (Archives of the National Assembly).
- <sup>v</sup> Memo from General Pédrón to zone and division commanders, 17 September 1956, 1H 3088/1\* (SHD).
- <sup>vi</sup> Interview with the author on 7 May 1997. Armand Frémont refused to torture. He published his notebooks from the period in *Algérie - el Djazaïr*, Paris, Maspero/Hérodote, 1982: 276.
- <sup>vii</sup> Letter from General Piatte to the Secretary of State for ‘Ground Forces’, 29 September 1956, 1R 40/2\* (SHD).
- <sup>viii</sup> On this extension of intelligence officers’ role, see Branche 2001: 474.
- <sup>ix</sup> Service memo from General Dulac, 31 August 1957, 1H 1472/1\* (SHD).
- <sup>x</sup> On the collaboration between the army and the police within the DOPs and the CRAs (*Centres de Renseignement et d’Action*) set up in Constantine, see the author’s PhD dissertation (Branche 2000), which develops these themes more extensively than the book published by Gallimard.
- <sup>xi</sup> Memo from Colonel Simoneau, 21 May 1957, 1H 1466/1\* (SHD).
- <sup>xii</sup> Intelligence Bulletin from the DOP of Méchéria, October 1958, 1H 1657/1\* (SHD). HLL referred to “hors la loi” (i.e. outlaws).
- <sup>xiii</sup> Memo on the topic of operations in cities and towns, CCI, section ‘P’, 10 July 1958, 1H 3087/1\* (SHD). The word ‘efficiency’ is emphasised in the text.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Service Memo sent to the DOPs regarding their mission, in the appendix to the report of Squadron Chief Ruat from 1957, 1H 1466/1\* (SHD).

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<sup>xv</sup> Accordingly, a ‘civic and moral training book’ for the 1959 contingent of conscripts prepared the French soldiers, ignorant of Algerian realities, to the ‘impulsive character’ of ‘the Algerian’ – the use of the singular is another sign of the naturalisation of Algerians as a separate species.