Algeria: The War Without a Name

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(Translated by Jonathan McKie and Deborah Lodge)

It has often been said of the Algerian War that it was 'a war which dared not speak its name'.[1] It was spoken of at various times in reassuring terms, such as the 'events' after armed action was first taken by the Front de Libération Nationale (FLN) in November 1954; as 'police operations' until the people's uprising of 20 August 1955 in the North Constantine region; as 'actions to maintain order' after the vote for 'special powers' in Algeria in March 1956, which made it possible for conscripts to be sent to Algeria; as 'operations to restore civil peace' in the terrible Battle of Algiers during 1957; and as 'peacekeeping operations' during the years leading up to Algerian independence. In cinema newsreels, there was never a hint of war in the headlines. At the very most, there might be mention of the 'drama in Algeria'.

I

During the night of 31 October–1 November 1954, commandos launched an attack at different points in Algerian territory. At the same time, France learned from newspaper headlines of the birth of the 'Front de Libération nationale' (FLN) and of the existence of a town called Khenchela, which had seen the first deaths in the war of independence which was just beginning. However, the reports were of anything but war. In the newspaper *Le Monde* of 2 November 1954, Pierre Albin Michel wrote:

> Everything is happening as though an invisible hand were trying to ruin the invisible links between France and North Africa, at the very moment when it seems we could make them stronger. We must fight against the driving force behind these destructive acts, the perpetrators must be caught, brought to justice and punished.

Le Monde talks of repression as being inevitably necessary, but does

not suggest declaring a state of war. This insistent refusal to call the war by its name originates in the non-declaration of war. Had it been stated or recorded, this act of declaration would have meant a considerable upheaval, a break-up of the closed and restrictive Franco-Algerian 'family'. General Spillman, the military area commander for Constantine, where 'events' were most serious in November 1954, wrote to the historian Claude Paillat: 'You are quite right that information was freely available each time the "security forces" were engaged against rebel elements. This was quite normal, for we were not at war.'[2]

People will certainly object that this war was designated as soon as it began in November 1954, with the famous formula – 'In Algeria, the only possible negotiation is war' – of the Interior Minister of the time, François Mitterrand. At the risk of attacking an idea which was widely accepted and deeply rooted in the public conscience (in France and particularly in Algeria), the historian Charles-André Julien wrote in 1982: 'I have never found a single witness to authenticate the phrase attributed to François Mitterrand on Algeria, "the only possible negotiation is war". Those who use the phrase have no idea where it came from, only that they have heard it said. The gravest errors are spread by word of mouth and appear to be the truth when they are printed in the press.'[3]

In a book published in 1977 the journalist Franz-Olivier Giesbert explained how this formula about the war might have come about:

> On 5 November,1954, before the Home Affairs Committee of the National Assembly, François Mitterrand said that 'the actions of the Arab guerrillas do not allow us to conceive of negotiations, in any form'. And he added: 'They can only take one final form, war.' A fearsome phrase which was quickly compressed into the terse formula: 'The only possible negotiation is war'.[4]

A speech given by François Mitterrand at the end of November 1954 whilst visiting the Aurès mountains, was recorded on film and proves to be much more explicit and revealing. There is, in his remarks, a determination not to acknowledge the 'state of war'. For example:

> It does seem that throughout Algeria, and specifically in these areas, around Biskra, Khenchela and Batna, there are those who want the people to rise up against those known as foreigners, as occupiers, that is to say, the French. But the people cannot understand this appeal as they are French. Without the people's support, nothing is entirely possible. I am sure of this. But if they do not support us, they will be the first victims. And as it is our duty to warn them of this, we will take every opportunity to do so.

> We will not strike collectively. *We will avoid anything which might appear to be a state of war; we do not want this* [my emphasis]. But our punishment shall be severe, our sole concern will be for justice, and, given the present circumstances, justice demands stringency and the arrest of those responsible.[5]

Thus the tone was set for everything that was to come: for France 'calling it a war' would be tantamount to accepting the possibility of a legal separation, the break-up of the 'One and Indivisible Republic'. This was something that the whole political class of the time (except some Trotskyite and Anarchist minorities) flatly refused even to consider.

A few days before this, the President of the Council (Prime Minister), Pierre Mendès-France had told the Parliament: 'Let no one expect any circumspection with regard to the sedition, or any compromise with it. We do not make compromises when it comes to *defending the internal peace of the nation and the integrity of the Republic* [my emphasis].' In fact, in that same month of November 1954, six battalions of the 25th Airborne Division (4,200 men) were sent to Algeria under the command of Colonel Ducourneau. They were to begin preliminary *ratissages* – essentially a search and destroy operation – in the Aurès mountains. But this was in vain. An 'outlaw's' natural habitat, the Aurès was to prove impossible to control, despite the limited success of the French forces. The army began to protest. Algeria, as an integral part of France, was clearly still governed by a shared legal system. That being the case, any suspect questioned by the authorities had to be brought before a civil court, which would release him if there were not sufficient charges against him.

Were we at war, yes or no? Yes, since on 3 April 1955 the National Assembly met the demands of the army. A state of emergency was declared in the Aurès and Greater Kabylia (it was to be extended to cover the whole of Algeria in November 1955). From then on it was up to the military authorities directly to suppress any crimes and misdemeanours. A month later, the first internment camp opened in Khenchela. Some 160 people were imprisoned there. However, it was not until the people's uprising of 20 August 1955 that the civil authorities adopted wholesale the repressive measures of wartime. On that day, in Eastern Algeria, several thousand 'rebels' massacred, in the most appalling way, 123 people – men, women and children, of whom 71 were Europeans. The army began a huge round-up operation. Several hundred 'suspects' were executed, adding to a series of murders carried out by private militia made up of Europeans. The official count was 1,273 deaths. After a painstaking enquiry, the FLN put forward a figure of 12,000, which was never refuted.

Convinced of the necessity of restoring order before any talks, the Governor-General of Algeria at the time, Jacques Soustelle, gave the army a free hand from then on.

The army was to see its numbers on the ground multiply tenfold in six months. On 22 August 1955, two days after the insurrection, the government under Edgar Faure decided to recall some of the reservists from the 1952–53 draft. Eight months later, in April 1956, the government under Guy Mollet recalled all reservists. The 60,000 men originally in Algeria on 1 November 1954 increased to a veritable army of 400,000, to which were added European and Muslim auxiliary troops. This situation which 'appeared to be a state of war', as Mitterrand had said, could no longer be avoided. It was, however, disguised by the unwavering gospel that 'Algeria is France!', proclaimed by an almost unanimous French political class.

At its Conference in Asnières, on 30 June 1955, the SFIO (the French Socialist Party) declared that: 'The destiny of France is currently being acted out in the overseas territories.' In 1956 Michel Debré passionately explained what was at stake: 'The fate of France will be conclusively sealed in Algeria'. The Gaullists were not the only ones spreading this idea. An association set up in April 1956, 'Union pour le salut et le renouveau de l'Algérie' (Union for the Salvation and Renewal of French Algeria), put up two million posters which read, 'Algeria is and must remain an integral part of the Republic, as no more French Algeria means no more France.'[6] France sent her police and soldiers into a territory of which she was sole owner, as it were 'down South'. Algeria had always been perceived as a domestic matter. The State took on the role of a family member arbitrating in a rift between two enemy 'brothers'. Had the MRP Deputy P.E. Viard not already asked in 1947: 'Will France abandon her children'?[7]

II

Thus there was to be no declaration of war, since the act of naming the war would mean recognizing a separate existence for Algeria; it would mean accepting a 'different history'. To call it a war would be to consider a possible 'breakup of the household' and its inegalitarian nature. But was Algeria really a part of 'the French family'? It did indeed constitute three French departments, which came under the direct jurisdiction of the French Interior Ministry. It was, therefore, much more than a far-off colony such as Senegal, Indo-China or just a protectorate such as Tunisia. It seemed to be out of the question to abandon a territory which had been directly linked to France for 130 years, longer even than Savoie, which

only became part of France in 1860! Almost a million Europeans, who later came to be known as the *pieds-noirs*, had lived and worked there for generations. They were not all 'great colonials', masters of all they surveyed; they lived, for the most part, in towns. The majority of them had a standard of living below that of people living in France. This settlement colony, which had become partly proletarian, was represented by the traditional French political parties (of the Left and the Right), whose system and ideas came from the model of Jacobin centralization.[8] But the Muslim Algerians, who formed the majority in French Algeria, were little more than mock citizens of a Republic which wished to assimilate them. For many years they were only able to attain full citizenship by abandoning their 'personal status' as Muslims. A series of decrees, measures and regulations under a parallel system of colonial law placed them in an awkward position with the Republic, none the less described as 'one and indivisible'. The ordinances of 1944 and the statute of 1947 concerning Algeria finally conferred on them the right to vote, but only within the framework of a 'double electoral college': the vote of one European was equivalent to the votes of eight Algerians. The Republican principle of equality, 'one man, one vote', was not observed. It took the outbreak of 'hostilities' for the integration of Algeria into the French Republic to be considered. Upon coming to office on 15 February 1955, the new Governor-General, Jacques Soustelle, announced: 'A choice has been made by France: that choice is integration.'[9]

Recognizing that the war was justified means pondering the development of a French democracy which failed to see the point of exporting its universal principles until it was too late. Explaining why the war took place means telling the tumultuous story of the French and the Algerians, who lived together for so long before finally deciding to break with each other. It was a life of complicity, but also one of conflict and dissatisfaction, punctuated with treacherous turns of events, loaded with painful occurrences, like the Constantine massacres of May 1945, with acts of violence and with passions. What was the meaning of this unbearable 'conjugal life' which could no longer go on because one of the partners was 'bad'? In what way did this unworthy partner fall short of expectations? Economic relations and emotional antagonisms were also a prominent feature of these Franco-Algerian ties, broken off so brutally in 1954. This marriage never meant an equal alliance between communities, rather total subordination of one to the other.

When the pact was broken at the instigation of the inhabitants of outlying shanty towns, which sought to put an end to the poverty of the rural areas (*clochardisation*, to use the word coined by Germaine Tillon in *L'Algérie en 1957*), and demanded dignity, this 'mixed couple' was

soon to be torn apart once and for all. The Algerian independence movement's petition for divorce, filed in the hope of gaining repentance or at least an apology from their partner, accused the French of systematic cruelty. In the works of the writers and intellectuals - Kateb Yacine (*Nedjma*), Mohammed Dib (*La grande Maison*), Mostefa Lacheraf (*Psychologie d'un conquête*), and especially Frantz Fanon (*Les damnés de la terre*) – the violence portrayed is spectacular, the account of a long process of physical abuse and humiliation. Those who had been victims no longer had anything to lose by revealing what it was like to live under the same roof as France. In a war there can be no middle road. Until a divorce was granted, in the form of independence, those in favour of separation delighted in painting a gloomy picture of colonial life. In France, on the other hand, the Algerians were obliged to tone down any personal guilt that might arise from this divorce petition. The French could not tolerate being abandoned as a result of a war declared by the Algerians alone.

III

The army was the first to become involved in this war. It continually requested (and obtained) extra resources and men (by July 1956 troops numbered nearly 405,000). For most of the officers there was no war or Algerian uprising, but an action on the part of terrorists who had come from the outside under foreign leadership. In this sense, the war of ideas was of greater importance than the armed conflict. The plan was simple: eliminate harmful foreign influences, neutralize all 'suspects' by locking them up in 'reception centres' and re-instil pro-French feeling by means of public meetings in order to explain the situation. Such psychological action, considered essential by the army, only served to disguise the real war. The enemy was therefore invisible. He was successively referred to as 'suspect', 'outlaw' or 'rebel'. He could not really be seen, yet his presence was felt as he moved about by night and hid by day. 'The war is nowhere . . . and everywhere', said numerous soldiers interviewed for the television series *Les Années algériennes*. This enemy, whose words remained inaudible, his shadow elusive, was classed all the more as an indefinable entity in that the Algerians had no 'name' under French colonial rule. How in fact were the Algerians referred to before and during the war years?

Under French colonial rule, 'the Arab' was a 'North African'. But in those days a North African was not considered as an inhabitant of Africa, for 'the African' was black (with the exception of the South African, still seen as a white man). Nor was he an inhabitant of North Africa,

otherwise the *pieds-noirs* would logically have been called North Africans. Should these non-citizens living in what was considered French territory be called 'Algerians', 'Muslims', 'Algerian Muslims', or perhaps 'French Muslims'? And what of the Algerian immigrants in France? Their existence was ill-defined, and they did not appear in official immigration statistics. This was quite normal, since 'Algeria is France', and the French could not see how 'Algerians' could come under the heading 'foreigners'. Matters became more complicated with the ordinances of 1944, which granted French citizenship to a large number of 'natives', and particularly with the Statute of Algeria in 1947, which extended to Algerian workers in France all the rights of the French citizen. Such an opportunity was not available in Algeria: the 'Muslims' voted in a separate electoral college.

In an astonishing article which appeared in the review *Esprit* in 1954, on 'crime among North Africans in the Paris area', the writer denounces the clichés circulated by some journalists (who presented North African immigrants as an 'army of crime'), and he goes on to say: 'Theft is indeed the great crime of the North Africans. But if we give the immigrants from the Maghreb work, these crimes will cease to be committed.' And then he makes this decisive remark: 'In order to put a stop to this crime, immigration from Algeria should be controlled, since this measure produced significant results when applied to Tunisians and Moroccans. *But controlling – i.e. curbing – this immigration poses a constitutional problem in that, since 7 February 1944, Algerian natives have been granted French citizenship* [my emphasis].'[10] *Esprit* reacted against the delusion that poverty was invading France and bringing crime with it, against the cliché of the immigrant 'Third World' (as it was soon to become known) sweeping into the country, and it did indeed prompt the question: why should there be this racism against a category of 'French nationals'? At that time 'public opinion' was already dominated by an obsessive fear of growing numbers of immigrants from the colonies. The notion of the North African invasion became popularized, the idea of this colonized people, these second-class citizens intruding into the French nation and even into the very heart of the cities and of Paris. Coupled with this vision there was also that of the fratricidal clashes between Algerian nationalists. In the factories, 'hostility, distrust, indifference or at best sympathy – that was the attitude of French workers towards North Africans. Such views only very rarely developed into true solidarity', recounts Daniel Mothé, describing the atmosphere in the Renault factory in 1957.[11] In the factories and in society, the 'nicknames' inflicted on Algerians on the other side of the Mediterranean became common (*ratons*, *melons*, *bougnoles* ...).Were these terms brought over by discharged soldiers, or by *pied-noirs* who had come and settled in France before 1962? At any rate,

it was precisely at the outbreak of war that these racist expressions began to appear in France. But let us come back to the question of the 'Name'.

Symptomatic of this problem is the semantic ambiguity, picked out by Abdelkader Djeghloul, of the 1961 French police communiqué which imposed a curfew on Algerians in Paris (and which was to be the root cause of the tragic demonstration of 17 October 1961). In the communiqé successive use is made of the terms 'Algerians', and 'French Muslims'.[12] The end of the Algerian War saw the arrival in France of 'Algerians' who had never been called Algerians (but Europeans or *pieds-noirs*) and of others who were called Algerians, but who no longer had any right to that name (this was the case of the so-called 'Harkis', Algerian soldiers loyal to the French). In fact, this question of names goes back to the organization of colonial society in Algeria. There one was defined by one's religion. This in fact constituted a denial of the principles of the Republic, in a territory which was intended as a simple extension of France, where citizenship is granted according to the community to which one belongs. Indeed, the principles of 1789 dissociate man from his office, his caste, his ethnic group and from his religion when granting civil rights. The great dilemma facing the Algerians under French colonization was this: to become French citizens meant renouncing all their specific values, particularly with respect to religion. The 'natives' could attain full citizenship only by giving up their personal status as Muslims. In other words, it was a choice between radical assimilation and total rejection. In this sense, becoming a naturalized French citizen was tantamount to breaking all ties with the religion to which one was born.

The various barricades put up to prevent access to the French city were erected on the pretext that it was impossible to assimilate 'autochthonous communities'.[13] Through the war these 'men without a name', who had been given as few rights as possible, tried to regain a nationality exclusive to them. One hundred and thirty years of conjugal life and then it was the last straw; things had gone on too long; what had been endured until then was no longer tolerable. Contrary to the famous words of Maurice Thorez about Algeria, in this case the right to divorce was exercised because divorce was the only possible course of action.[14] The false image of two countries living together in harmony was shattered by the war; a couple bound by emotional and economic ties was torn apart. All family secrets, jealously guarded until then, were divulged: inadmissible injustices, ill treatment, economic poverty, a one-sided political system. Nor did the two parties confront each other alone. They brought with them their own networks of social relations to testify in their favour. Amidst this cruel separation the facts came to light: it was impossible to live within a 'family' founded on hatred and passions. But until the very end the

grim violence of these family secrets had to be withheld by means of censorship. Those who refused to accept this separation denied that the war even existed. Those who did not said that the life they had led had been sheer hell, and put this long period of shared existence to the backs of their minds. Whatever people's views, they all tried to forget.

NOTES

1. According to a work by John Talbott, *The War Without a Name, France in Algeria, 1954–1962* (London, 1981).
2. Claude Paillat, *La Liquidation* (Paris, 1972), 154–5.
3. Charles-André Julien, 'Mitterrand et l'Algérie', *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 2 Jan. 1982.
4. Frantz-Olivier Giesbert, *François Mitterrand ou la tentation de l'Histoire* (Paris, 1977), 131. The first controversial use of this phrase is to be found, with no reference to the source, in the work of Francis and Colette Jeanson, *L'Algérie hors-la-loi*, (Paris, 1955), 183. It was to be taken up again by an advocate of French Algeria, Pierre Laffont, in his book *Histoire de la France en Algérie*, (Paris, 1980).
5. INA Archives, an extract broadcast in *Les Anneés algériennes*, a series on Antenne 2, 1991.
6. Quoted by Charles-Robert Ageron in 'L'Algérie, dernière chance de la puissance française', *Relations Internationales*, 57 (Spring 1983), 113–39.
7. Ibid.
8. On the exacerbated nationalism of the French in Algeria, cf. Benjamin Stora, *Algérie coloniale* (Paris, La Découverte, coll. 'Repères', Paris, 1991).
9. The doctrine of integration, 'as distinct from assimilation', had been studied from as early as May 1946 by Bée, a jurist. The expression had been taken up again by Mitterrand. Cf. C.-R. Ageron, 'L'Algérie, dernière chance de la puissance française', 117.
10. Pierre-Bernard Laffont, 'La criminalité nord-africaine dans la région parisienne', *Esprit*, (1954).
11. Daniel Mothé, 'Les ouvriers français et les Nord-Africains', *Socialisme ou barbarie* (mai-mars 1957).
12. Abdelkader Djeghloul, 'Analyse d'un refoulement', in 'Mémoire d'une communauté', (Paris: Actualité de l'émigration, 1987), 37–41.
13. In this context certain provisions should be pointed out. The *senatus-consulte* of 14 July 1865 defined the native Muslim as French, but he must apply for naturalization and abandon his 'personal statute' (Muslim law); the decree of 16 May 1874 introduced a 'travel permit' for Algerian Muslims applying for emigration (decree abrogated 18 June 1913); the 'Code de l'indigénat' in 1881 excluded the native Muslim from ordinary French law and subjected him to a 'special system'. The 'Code' provided for a list of offences which could be amended by orders of the prefect. This procedure put the Algerian Muslim at the mercy of the administrator, with no right of appeal. It was not until 7 March 1944 that an ordinance opened up, for the first time, civilian and military jobs to Muslims and increased their representation in the local Assemblies.
14. At the ninth congress of the PCF, at Arles in December 1937, Maurice Thorez, speaking about the colonies, proclaimed 'that the right to divorce does not mean an obligation to divorce'.

The Central African Emergency, 1959

JOHN DARWIN

In the plain man's view, a state of emergency is the natural recourse of governments faced with disorder that cannot be controlled by the ordinary methods of the criminal law: police action and judicial process. But in colonial politics the plain man's view would be at best a half-truth. Where government was authoritarian in principle but depended upon the active co-operation or passive acquiescence of its subject population, the key to political success lay in finding individuals and communities whose self-interest lay in alliance with foreign rule. Contrary to popular impression, the real art of colonial government was not an adamantine rigidity but a machiavellian flexibility in the perpetual search for collaborators. As policy or circumstance piled up enemies, competent colonial rulers changed constitutional tack, displaced old friends and sponsored new to outflank or divide any hostile combination that might form against them. To sustain fresh or irresolute allies and demoralize their opponents rougher methods were sometimes necessary and most colonial governments showed a certain virtuosity in intimidation. The use of punitive police, restriction orders, publication bans, deportation or externment of particular individuals were all means of harassing the enemies of government and reassuring its friends. If all else failed to hearten the friends of government – the 'moderates' as they were sometimes picturesquely called – colonial governments might be driven to their last resort and declare general war on their opponents – defined conveniently as 'extremists'. The state of emergency, as this general war was called, was an ace to be played when no other card would turn the trick. But it was essentially the continuation of colonial politics by other means.

Nevertheless, it was an ace to be played with reluctance – because it might after all be trumped. A state of emergency which empowered government to suspend normal judicial process and gaol its political opponents might swiftly restore political calm. It might expose the absence of popular support for self-styled populists. On the other hand, open confrontation with the opposition where it enjoyed at least some popular backing – and a state of emergency was scarcely necessary where