

# 2008

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Published on **8 February 2008**

**Christopher Cradock and M.L.R. Smith.** “‘No fixed values’: A reinterpretation of the Influence of the Theory of *guerre révolutionnaire* and the Battle of Algiers, 1956-1957”. *Journal of Cold War Studies* 9:4 (Fall 2007): 68-105. Doi: 10.1162/jcws.2007.9.4.68. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1162/jcws.2007.9.4.68>

Stable URL: <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/reviews/PDF/McDougall-Cradock-Smith.pdf>

Reviewed by **James McDougall, University of London**

**‘Values’, violence, and counter-insurgency**

In August 1845, Marshal Soult, the French Minister for War, wrote indignantly to his fellow officer and subordinate, Marshal Thomas-Robert Bugeaud, Duke of Isly and Governor of Algeria, to protest at disciplinary measures being applied in the army of Africa. Soldiers of a light infantry battalion had been subjected to a variety of punishments outside the provisions of army regulations, up to and including *le clou au rouge* – being suspended by a cord, with which hands and feet were tied behind the back, from a nail in the wall, until the eyes became bloodshot – and *le clou au bleu*, the same practice extended until the victim ‘turned blue’ from asphyxiation. ‘Disciplinary’ abuses of all kinds were of course not uncommon in nineteenth century armies. The French army in Africa, however, from shortly after the fall of Algiers in 1830, practised torture even on its own troops.<sup>1</sup> The levels of violence inflicted on Algerians were correspondingly more severe, and unlike the cases that prompted Soult’s intervention, they generally did not attract attention in the Parisian press.

The systematic and routine use of torture by the French army in its counter-insurgency campaign during the Algerian war of independence little over a century later, however, did of course attract such attention, and as Cradock and Smith note in their article, aspects of the war, most emblematically the ‘Battle of Algiers’ of 1956-7, were ‘controversial at the time and [have] remained the subject of often heated debate.’ (68) The authors’ claim to avoid taking a position in that debate, to move away from consideration of the war ‘as only [sic] a “lived” experience’ (71) and to reframe the French army’s conduct more ‘objectively’ in terms of strategy and operational effectiveness without ‘*being unduly swayed* either by the thinking of [the theorists of *guerre révolutionnaire*] or by the trauma of torture’ (70, my emphasis), however, is not convincing. The article, written on the basis of published French sources and recent secondary literature, makes an argument which is neither new nor very surprising, and in doing so their main objective appears to be a rather unsubtle

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<sup>1</sup> The correspondence is to be found in the French military archives: Service historique de la défense, Chateau de Vincennes, 1M/1996/21.

'assessment' (and vindication) of the effectiveness of torture in counter-insurgency. The argument—that 1950s theoretical writing on *guerre révolutionnaire* (counter-insurgency warfare) was not as influential as has sometimes been supposed in the conduct of the urban counter-guerilla campaign of 1956-7—will surprise only those whose notions of what happened in Algeria at the time depend on the abstractions of the kind of military history that considers things from the analysts' (or satellite's) -eye view rather than from the ground-level 'face of battle' where 'only' lived experience takes place. French military theorising on counter-insurgency (on the basis of experience in Vietnam) was to a considerable degree, and certainly as far as the practice of torture was concerned, no more relevant to the conduct of the war in Algeria than were equally elegant, but equally fantastic, theories of 'civilising mission' or 'assimilation' to the actual practices of colonial rule. Hence the first problem with Cradock and Smith's essay is that their ostensible opponent is a straw man, and a venerable one at that: their principle revision is to the work of George Kelly, published in 1965<sup>2</sup>. The second is that they take rather a long time to knock him down: that 'the actual influences and considerations [determining French conduct] ... were somewhat more diffuse' (70) than the application of a body of ideological Cold War theorising, and notably that they hinged on 'the contingent historical experience of the French army' (105), from defeats in Vietnam and Suez to the horrific revolutionary and repressive violence of Algeria, is unsurprising and well established, but the authors don't really get around to addressing this question until p.98, almost at the end of their article.

What is surprising about this argument, if what is really intended is an analysis of the significance of a particular school of strategic theory on the practice of military operations, is that its focus is so badly chosen. Concentrating on Algiers rather than the war as a whole, on the urban rather than rural guerilla and counter-insurgency context, is bound to give a very distorted representation of this conflict. The war in Algeria was overwhelmingly fought in the countryside; the urban terror campaign and 'great repression' of 1956-7, however famous in film and literature, were very exceptional events in the prosecution both of the FLN's war of independence and of the French war of colonial re-conquest. The central notion of counter-insurgency strategy, correctly identified by the authors as 'control of the population' (76)—in which surveillance, policing and intelligence gathering went along with construction and 'development', countering the nationalist project with demonstrations of the rewards of loyalism—are indeed absent from the Battle of Algiers, which unfolded as an overwhelming and untrammelled exercise of brute force by the colonial state against a civilian population placed under siege, intimidated, imprisoned, tortured and summarily executed. In the rest of the country, on the other hand, the 'developmentalist' ideology of late imperialism, especially the investments and building projects of the Constantine plan, went hand-in-hand with the massive forced relocation and resettlement of the population, in which some 2 million people were herded into 'regroupment centres', some of which eventually resembled 'development villages', others remaining, in effect, concentration camps. The proliferation and 'weaponisation' of schools

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<sup>2</sup> George A. Kelly, *Lost Soldiers: the French Army and Empire in Crisis, 1945-1962* (Cambridge, MIT Press, 1965).

and clinics, the mobilisation of 'self-defence groups' and auxiliary army units, the campaigns of propaganda by itinerant film and loudspeaker companies, lectures and pamphlets on 'the future of French Algeria', might arguably be held to suggest that the theories of counter-insurgency were more significant in the war as a whole than the authors allow for the particular case of Algiers. Of course, the extremely obtuse and unsubtle attempts at indoctrination employed in this psychological warfare almost universally failed (*contra* the authors' assertion, again on the basis of their published French accounts, that 'it is impossible to gauge' (98) their success). Even many of those engaged, for their own particular reasons of security and circumstance in a context of social breakdown, upheaval and tragedy, 'on the French side' in French uniform, were aware by the late 1950s that the cause of independence had won the argument for the immense majority of the population.<sup>3</sup>

Leaving aside the value and accuracy of the relativisation of *guerre révolutionnaire* for a moment, it should also be noted that this argument is made on some mistaken grounds, particularly when the authors become entangled in the question of the extent to which the theorists of counter-insurgency can be held responsible for the increasingly anti-republican and putschist tendencies of parts of the French officer corps in the later stages of the war. The failure to rally the support of much of the army, or even of many of those officers directly involved in the Battle of Algiers, behind the anti-Gaullist insurrection in 1961 appears to the authors to demonstrate the lack of real influence of counter-insurrectionary thinking (77-8, 103). What failed, though, was not counter-insurgency theory but an ideology of 'counter-revolution' with which the authors conflate it but that, whatever its Cold War anticommunist colouring of the moment, was in the context under discussion much more strongly tied to a far older, and specifically French, politics of reaction against the Republic as *regime* post-1789. It was the 'ultra' ideology that, among other things, sought to imprint 'the Sacred Heart on the tricolour' that lay behind much of the last-ditch violence to defend the empire and the honour of the army against the betrayal of the 'bitch-republic' and her soft, liberal and/or leftist politicians. The prevalence of this strain of militarist ideology among DOP (torture squad) personnel in Algiers is documented in Henri Alleg's account of his own torture in 1957<sup>4</sup>, but there was never any reason to suppose that these men had been reading treatises on *guerre révolutionnaire*.

In the same vein, some other errors of detail reveal a lack of attention to the specific case at hand: Hocine Aït Ahmed, one of the historic founding leaders of the FLN, is mistakenly identified as the 'head of the MTLD', which itself is misidentified as 'a rival nationalist organisation to the FLN' (80-81) rather than its precursor. Yacef Saadi, military organiser of the FLN's Algiers 'autonomous zone' was never 'the head of the ALN', as he is presented on p.82. The location of the military staff of the 10<sup>th</sup> parachute division at Hydra, then an upscale European suburb (now the city's diplomatic district) is misinterpreted as 'implying

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example, the oral history testimonies of former *harkis* (Algerian auxiliaries in French uniform) collected by Gregor Mathias, held at the audiovisual archive of the Maison méditerranéenne des sciences de l'homme, Aix-en-Provence.

<sup>4</sup> Henri Alleg, *La Question* (Paris, Minuit, 1961), 36.

that the paratroops' role lay in operations against rural guerillas' (85-6), a supposition that no-one in Algiers (or familiar with Algiers) could have made. The authors' over-reliance on secondary English-language sources and French accounts such as Trinquier's (published in 1964) is perhaps partly responsible: more recent French (let alone Algerian) works, such as Gilbert Meynier's, are ignored.

The authors are open about their concern with the 'French perspective' on their subject (71, n.12), but this lapses into their adoption, rather than analysis, of the French army's point of view. Indeed, the 'values' of the authors overlap to a disturbing degree with those of their sources, and here we come to more serious problems in the unspoken suppositions underlying their presentation of evidence and the broader argument based on it. The article uncritically relies upon a distinction between 'terrorism', committed by the FLN, on one side, as against the 'anti-terrorist' actions of the paras who assumed police powers in Algiers during 1956-57, and 'counter-terrorism' (97) in self-defence by Europeans, on the other. There can be no basis other than that of ideological preference for such a distinction. In what respect was the bombing by the 'ultra' ORAF ('French Algeria Resistance Organisation'), in the casbah on 10 August 1956, which destroyed 4 houses in the rue de Thèbes and killed between 15 and 60—the most costly single incident in the 'Battle', but referred to by the authors only tangentially and with an erroneous date (97, n.108)—an act of 'counter'-terrorism, when no such massive, indiscriminate, timed bombing against civilians had yet been perpetrated by the FLN in the city? The (justly) 'notorious' (81) FLN bombings of the Cafetéria and Milk Bar in central Algiers on 30 September, largely a reprisal for the Rue de Thèbes, killed three. The soldiers so affected by the 'jarring impact of the sight of the murder and mutilation of [European] civilians' (100) by FLN atrocities that they felt torture to be necessary and justified apparently felt no such revulsion at the much more frequent sight of murdered and mutilated Algerians. Is the authors' distinction between 'terrorism' and 'counter-terrorism', then, merely one between the violence of the dominated population, who kill fewer people themselves but whose lives are worth less, and that of the dominant, who kill more people but whose lives are worth more?

The notion that European violence was merely a response to that of the FLN is untenable at every level. The contention, made in their apologia by Generals Aussaresses and Massu, that the army's own systematic terrorising of the population averted a state of 'constant upheaval, as terrorist incidents provoked harsh counterterrorist measures' (97) is simply incredible. So is the authors' unquestioning acceptance of the argument, relied upon in the self-justifying memoirs that are their primary sources, that the army's actions in Algeria in general, and the systematic application of torture in Algiers in particular, were simply the only available 'antidote' (99) to a 'terror campaign [of the FLN/ALN] unprecedented in its scale and ferocity' (100). The wider background to the FLN's campaign of violence provides ample evidence of the conjoined efforts of European militia and regular army in the repression of Algerian nationalist risings, and of the relative scale of the violence inflicted by the former on the latter. The abortive insurrection and massive repression of May 1945 in eastern Algeria cost 103 European and several thousand<sup>5</sup> Algerian lives, and

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<sup>5</sup> The figure is impossible to ascertain; certainly more than the civil authorities' official 1500, certainly fewer than the nationalists' claimed 45,000.

the attempted *levée en masse* of the peasantry by the FLN near Phillippeville on 20 August 1955 took the lives of 71 European and 21 Algerian civilians as well as of 31 members of the security forces, before the repression killed between 1,273 (the official figure) and 12,000 Algerians. In May 1945, it was the sub-prefect of the town of Guelma, André Achiary, who armed and organised the militia; in 1956, he was the chief of the ORAF, the proto-OAS group responsible for the rue de Thèbes bombing. The army and paramilitaries would only turn against each other at the war's dénouement. The picture presented by Cradock and Smith, of Algerian terror and European 'counter-terror' mediated by the army as attempting to 're-establish order' by removing a 'minority of fanatics' from an otherwise peaceful populace, is a gross and wilful misreading of the historical record. The underlying assumption, that massive violence inflicted by a dominant population and its state apparatus against a subject population is 'legitimate', whereas violence (inevitably of a lesser order of magnitude, however atrocious in every particular instance) inflicted upon the former by the latter, is illegitimate, is at the very least ethically dubious, however lawyerly; at any event it is useless as a basis of historical analysis. It blinds the authors of this article to all the harsh complexities of the conflict they seek to apprehend from on high, and consequently fail to understand at all.

Here we come to the crux of the matter: can we really believe, as the authors assert, that the effect of the army's conduct in Algiers was in fact to 're-establish order' (97)? While the role of counter-insurgency theory in the French 'victory' in Algiers is downplayed by the authors (102), the supposition that this was, in fact, a victory, won by unconventional but apparently necessary means, is not questioned. 'The effectiveness of torture in producing information', they assert, 'is not in doubt' (104), and indeed it is unsurprising, when between a third and a half of the male population of the casbah had been rounded up and interrogated, that it should ultimately have been possible for the French to dismantle much of the FLN's urban guerilla network. But both the statement and the assumption behind it—that the aim of torture really was to produce information, that it was a means of last-resort unwillingly applied in extraordinary circumstances and only to 'save innocent lives'—rest on very dubious foundations. As to the reliability of the information obtained under torture, and indeed the accuracy of the information that was sought, the well-known case of Djamilia Boupacha, an FLN liaison agent who confessed under torture to harbouring FLN fighters but who was further tortured (culminating in her rape with a bottleneck) until she signed a false confession to a bombing in which she had played no part, but of which the French authorities attempted to convict her, is an exemplary illustration of the abuse, even within its own perverse bounds of acceptability, of the uses to which '*interrogatoire poussé*' was pushed. Her case became famous because of the account<sup>6</sup> her lawyer, Gisèle Halimi, wrote at the time and published with the support of Simone de Beauvoir, but it can hardly have been exceptional in any other respect. As for the real purposes of torture, as recent scholarship on the subject has abundantly demonstrated<sup>7</sup>, its systematic and

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<sup>6</sup> Gisèle Halimi and Simone de Beauvoir, *Djamila Boupacha* (Paris, Gallimard, 1962).

<sup>7</sup> See the chapter by Raphaëlle Branche in Mohammed Harbi and Benjamin Stora (eds), *La guerre d'Algérie, 1954-2004: La fin de l'amnésie?* (Paris, Laffont, 2004).

longstanding practice in Algeria belies the arguments of expedient ‘necessity’ advanced by its practitioners during the Battle, and largely accepted by Cradock and Smith. As the authors duly point out, torture was in routine use by the French police in Algeria before the beginning of the FLN’s insurrection in 1954, but the point is taken in their argument only to illustrate the existence of an influence on the army’s conduct preceding that of counter-insurgency theory. What it more significantly points to, however, is the routinised terrorism to which the Algerian population had long been subjected by the apparatus of the French colonial state. Torture, as debate at the time and much scholarship since has shown, was never a specifically targeted means of extracting specific ‘actionable’ information for the prevention of particular terrorist outrages: it was a generalised demonstration, to which anyone might be subjected, of the absolute power which the forces of the ‘maintenance of order’ held over the lives of a subject population (and their sympathisers). The aim of Commandant Aussaresses and his henchmen in the Battle of Algiers was certainly to ‘break’ the FLN, by whatever means available, but in no respect did this mean protecting a majority civilian population for whom the established order was legitimate from a few fanatical terrorists seeking to subvert it. The army’s resort to the massive, indiscriminate and singularly *untargeted* terror that was unleashed against the civilians of Algiers *en masse* was merely the final culmination of the overt violence, in various forms, on which the colonial ‘order’ had always rested, and which, as Marshal Solt had discovered in 1845, had already then led to institutionalised abuses within the ranks of the military that indicated (well before the traumatic defeats of 1870, 1940, and 1954) that all was not well with the honour, or the self-respect, of the army. The Algiers casbah was indeed ‘gripped by terror’ (102) in 1956-57, but it was not that of the FLN. The ‘Battle of Algiers’ was not only not ‘a triumph of *guerre révolutionnaire*’; it was no triumph at all, but a self-inflicted strategic defeat for the French in Algeria, one that revealed not only the moral bankruptcy of the colonial system and of the apparatus of extreme and illegal coercion that alone could uphold it, but the extent to which it was strictly *impossible* to ‘win’ a counter-insurgency war that depended, as its theorists observed, on ‘the unconditional support of the population’. When the entire population became the enemy to be suspected, corralled, searched, checked, intimidated, imprisoned, tortured, murdered in secret and dumped at sea, how could it not be apparent that the war was already lost?

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*Commissioned for H-Diplo by Thomas Maddux, California State University, Northridge*