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INTRODUCTION

James D. Le Sueur

How a democratic state ultimately accounts for its use of extreme violence during wartime reveals much about its political character. On this count, the French government has not generally scored high marks, especially regarding its military's liberal application of torture during its wars of decolonization. Indeed, the state's virtual inability to confront the legacy of colonial violence continues to serve as a matter of intense national debate and as a fruitful subject of inquiry. France's difficulty in responding to these questions is undoubtedly because torture was about as commonplace during the wars of decolonization as the impunity enjoyed by the state's paid assassins and torturers. But torture was never as prevalent, nor as glaringly unexamined by the French state, as in its brutal war against nationalists in Algeria (1954–62). Charles de Gaulle protected France's professional torturers from trial with successive waves of amnesty (by decree) beginning in 1962 (the last coming in 1968, when de Gaulle even amnestied his own would-be assassins in the infamous Organisation de l'Armée Secrète, or OAS) and thereby rendered it impossible to bring anyone involved in Algeria to court for crimes against humanity.

The price of this 1960s political maneuvering is clear: France has today settled into an uncomfortable postcolonial conundrum that forces it to fret over how the history of colonialism can be taught in the university curriculum. More to the

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point, as recently as February 2005, the French National Assembly responded to the political pressures applied by veterans, ex-colonials, and the *harkis* (Algerians who fought for France against their compatriots) with the passage of a controversial law calling for, among other things, teaching the "positive role" of French colonialism overseas and the military's "sacrifices," especially in North Africa.[1] Moreover, in the wake of the worst riots in France since 1968 and in the face of intense protest by leading French historians, the French parliament voted again on November 29, 2005, to uphold this revisionist law by a clear margin of 183 to 94. Henri Alleg's *The Question*, the stunning account of torture written by a French victim of military "interrogation" during the infamous Battle of Algiers, can once again serve English readers as a useful counterbalance to France's state-sanctioned amnesia and well-established ahistoricism regarding colonial violence. More importantly, it serves as evidence of the dehumanizing effects of torture on all parties.

Written in cell 72 in the Algiers prison four months after Alleg underwent weeks of brutal torture at the hands of the notorious Paras (French paratroopers), and published midway through Algeria's war of independence in 1958, *The Question* has the distinction of being the first book banned in France since the eighteenth century. Officially, it was banned because the French government considered it anticolonial communist propaganda. Unofficially, it was banned by the doomed French Fourth Republic (which was overthrown by a military coup d'état that illegally brought Charles de Gaulle back to power in May 1958) precisely because it ended the state's ability to deny that torture had become a preferred and practically universal method of interrogation in Algeria.

The simple fact is that French authorities tortured Algerians long before the beginning of the Algerian revolution, but Alleg's book moved "the question" (torture) fully into public view and immediately attracted the attention of many important

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writers and activists. The French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre quickly added his moral weight to Alleg's text by penning a famous essay, "The Victory," for his Parisian journal, *Les Temps modernes*. Soon after, a new edition of *The Question* was published in French by Les Éditions de Minuit, combining the two texts. This combined edition became the basis for the current English translation, which was published in the United States by George Braziller in 1958. Soon *The Question* was translated into Italian, Dutch, Japanese, Czech, German, Hungarian, Romanian, Polish, Russian, and other languages.[2] And now, almost fifty years later, it is available for the first time in this Bison Books edition.

Sartre, a staunch anticolonialist and supporter of the French Resistance during the Second World War, understood clearly the implications of Alleg's book and knew that France had already betrayed the very core values that had served the French Resistance so well in its combat against Nazi occupation. In fact, what pained Sartre the most was the ease with which those men who had been tortured by the Nazis could become Nazi-like torturers themselves. To be sure, this could happen in part because the French population swallowed the government's "ticking bomb" propaganda and incessant fear mongering. As Sartre put it, "If we must either terrorise or die ourselves by terror, why do we go to such lengths to live and to be patriots?" (14). But it was unfortunately also fueled, Sartre pointed out, by a species of colonial racism that had become an integral part of the mentality of mainland France.

Jean-Paul Sartre was, of course, not alone in France in criticizing the military's general use of torture during decolonization and more specifically against Alleg. In fact, hundreds of intellectuals and activists, including de Gaulle's own future minister of culture, André Malraux, and two Nobel laureates in literature, François Mauriac and Roger Martin du Gard, as well as some prominent military officers such as Gen. Jacques de Bollardière (who was censured for his criticisms), denounced the state for its

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torturing of Alleg. In this sense, Alleg's case galvanized French activists and intellectuals (Albert Camus was a glaring exception) and united them in their opposition to the violation of human rights in Algeria. In short, Alleg's famous book became the crucible for public protest against the French military's methods of ending the Algerian "insurrection." It is important to understand why this was so.

Because he was an important French writer and communist activist living in Algeria, French citizens could identify with him more than they could with Algerian nationalists undergoing similar horrors. He was the editor of a widely read Algiers independent leftist newspaper, the *Alger républicain*, which represented a strong anticolonialist position. The newspaper was banned by the French government in September 1955, an act that placed Alleg in peril. Following a pattern similar to that experienced by his Algerian counterparts, Alleg was eventually forced into hiding in November 1956 and was finally arrested in June 1957 by Gen. Jacques Massu's Tenth Paratrooper Division on charges that he had been involved in publishing banned material. He was first held in custody at the prison in El Bair for one month, during which he endured several intense torture sessions that he detailed to great effect. After that, he was transferred to a detention camp at Lodi. It was in the camp at Lodi that he began to write of his experiences, and it is this written account that was smuggled out of prison and eventually to France. It was banned about two weeks after it was published, but only after an estimated sixty thousand copies were sold.[3] Because of the banning, *The Question* was published in Switzerland and then smuggled back into France.

Throughout much of the time that this banned book was being read and debated in Europe and elsewhere, Henri Alleg remained in prison. French authorities kept him in prison in Algiers for three years, and then he was transferred to a prison in Rennes, France, in which he remained on trumped-up charges

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until his escape in October 1961, just months before the war ended in March 1962.[4]

Alleg's book is important for many reasons, but foremost among them is that it set off a chain reaction of protest by French citizens against the French state's prosecution of the war and more specifically against the misdeeds of the military—not unlike the fin-de-siècle Dreyfus Affair had. Written as a first-person account of victimization, it also illustrates that, as common as torture was, Alleg fully understood that his case was extraordinary in that—unlike many of the Algerians who endured even more sadistic acts in the French military and police torture chambers—his arrest provoked an immediate sense of outrage among the Europeans in mainland France. As he put it, "My particular case is exceptional in that it has attracted public attention. It is not in any way unique" (34). This account thus details his experiences as a European being "interrogated" by French military personnel using electric shock (including on his genitals), water torture, and beatings. He wrote: "I have survived so much pain and so many humiliations during this time that I would not bring myself to talk once again of those days and nights of agony if I did not believe that it would serve a purpose, and that by making the truth known I might do a little towards bringing about a cease-fire and peace" (34). His book was therefore a story of immense personal anguish and an attempt to make sure that the story of Algerians and others (including another Frenchman, Maurice Audin, who was disappeared in 1957 by the French military) reached the general public.[5] Muslim prisoners, Alleg is careful to point out, suffered far worse forms of torture than his own, and these crimes included the widespread raping of Muslim women by French soldiers.

By the time Alleg's book appeared in 1958, France had just begun to grasp the full extent of the human rights abuses in Algeria. In June 1957, the same month that Alleg was arrested, a French writer and Nuremburg POW, Pierre-Henri Simon, published an

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important book, *Contre la torture*. Simon's book offered one of the first major discussions of the problem of torture in the French military and served as a wakeup call to all those who denied that French soldiers used torture extensively in the Algerian conflict. More generally, the Algerian debates migrated to the United States when, in July 1957, Senator John F. Kennedy delivered his famous speech, "Imperialism—the Enemy of Freedom," on the Senate floor. He deplored the effects of the war in Algeria, and ever cautious, Kennedy warned that the war would weaken the French military's ability to live up to its NATO obligations. He pointed out that the government itself was on the verge of collapse. This led him to support Algerian nationalists' efforts to achieve self-determination via a federation with France.[6]

Yet within France itself, other publications continued to surface despite the state's extensive efforts to suppress them. One was *La Gangrène*, edited by Jerôme Lindon in June 1959, which detailed how the practice of torture had moved to the Paris prisons during the war. Finally, along with Alleg's case, another infamous case of torture involved Djamila Boupacha, a young Algerian woman who lost her virginity after she was tortured and raped by French soldiers with a beer bottle. Her case provoked international and domestic outrage in France in the early 1960s, when it was taken up by Simone de Beauvoir in a June 3, 1960, article in *Le Monde* and later chronicled by Gisèle Halimi and Simone de Beauvoir in a book entitled *Djamila Boupacha* (1962).[7] Not surprisingly, after his own escape from the prison in Rennes, Alleg came to Boupacha's defense with testimony he had written in exile about prison abuses in Algeria, which was published in the appendices of *Djamila Boupacha* and supported Boupacha's accusations against the French state.[8]

Alleg's escape, short time in exile, and eventual return to Algeria are themselves fascinating stories, ones that have recently come to life in his autobiography, *Mémoire algérienne*, and which merit a few words here. After his transfer to Rennes, Alleg's health

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