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MEMORY, EMPIRE, AND POSTCOLONIALISM
Legacies of French Colonialism

Edited by
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Intimate Acts and Unspeakable Relations
Remembering Torture and the War for Algerian Independence

Joshua Cole

The Torture Debate in France

Studies of violence and memory have undergone such explosive growth lately that it is probably dangerous to generalize too much about the various tendencies and methods employed to make sense of these two complex subjects of research. One might ask, however, if historians have been sufficiently clear about the relationship between histories of violence and histories of cultural memory. Histories of memory often focus on moments of intense violence, and it is no accident that much historical work on memory has focused on particularly traumatic episodes of conflict, such as the Holocaust and the First and Second World Wars. Since histories of violence often become embroiled in the controversies that accompany the memories of trauma and victimization, one might have thought that it would be relatively clear by now what the relationship between historical writing about violence and research on memory should be. Nothing could be further from the truth. Historians working on the problem of violence have avoided treading in the murky waters of memory and cultural meaning, as if such complicated and messy subjects might contaminate an otherwise tidier realm of historical explanation. Likewise, many historians working on the problem of memory have excluded violence from their analytic framework, as if the history of violent acts could be treated separately from the cultural memories generated by such acts.

Historians and commentators on the French-Algerian war have been better than most in acknowledging the importance of violence itself as a necessary...
departure point in understanding the history of the conflict. The fact that the French government resisted labeling the conflict a “war” for so long may have something to do with this. Those who sought to understand this struggle had to begin by talking about its violence, about the routine practice of torture and resettlement practiced by the French military, about the bombing campaigns against civilians undertaken by both the FLN (Front de Libération Nationale) and the OAS (a militant terrorist organization), and about the ruthless methods that all parties used against their perceived enemies, both French and Muslim. Frantz Fanon was only the first and the most explicit of commentators to find a departure point in a discussion of violence—in his case in the opening chapter of his 1961 book, Les Damnés de la terre, “Concerning Violence.” Fanon sought to place the violence of decolonization—massacres, resettlement, torture, and mutilation—in its proper context, that is, by portraying it as an extension and natural result of the violence of colonialism itself. For Fanon, the essential distinction was that which divided colonizer from colonized—and the virtue of his analysis was to show that maintaining this distinction, by violence if necessary, was a necessary part of the colonial enterprise itself.

After Fanon, however, sustained analysis of the violence of the French-Algerian war often receded into the background of arguments that focused elsewhere. Military commentators tended to focus on the new tactics of guerrilla warfare faced by the French in Algeria, and the counterinsurgency methods that they developed in response. This focus on tactics often resulted in a sanitized, even clinical, image of the conflict itself, in which rape, torture, and resettlement disappeared behind euphemisms such as “opération policière,” “action psychologique,” and “action sociale.” Diplomatic historians, meanwhile, have asserted that the real essence of the conflict lay not in the struggles on the ground in Algeria and in mainland France, but in the international arena, where the FLN shrewdly managed to defeat French efforts to prevent the conflict from taking on more than a local significance. Only recently have historians begun to interrogate in a systematic fashion the specific history of the violent acts that are associated with this conflict, and this discussion has focused above all on one practice in particular: torture.

The French army’s use of torture had been the focus of public controversy since the war years, and the horrific details that emerged from survivors’ accounts later became inescapable reference points for an entire generation in France. Nevertheless, because the official response to specific allegations had always been to deny or minimize the extent to which torture was used, much of the discussion, both during and after the war, focused simply on establishing the fact that torture occurred. Furthermore, because of a general amnesty pushed through by Charles de Gaulle’s government in 1968, no military or police official in France ever faced charges of torture in court. No historians were allowed into the relevant military archives until very recently. The result of this situation was that for nearly forty years after the fact, public debate about the military’s use of torture in the Algerian war could never go beyond the most preliminary questions: Did it really happen? Who was responsible? And to what extent were higher authorities in the military and government aware of the practice?

This situation changed, however, following a renewed debate that began in the summer of 2000. In June of that year a former FLN militant, Louise Ighilahriz, published an autobiographical account of her rape and torture at the hands of French paratroopers during ten weeks of detention in 1957. The public outcry was immediate, all the more so because General Jacques Massu—92 years old in 2000 and perhaps the most celebrated of de Gaulle’s generals in Algeria—admitted that her story was probably true. Following Ighilahriz’s and Massu’s public statements, a committee of twelve prominent intellectuals known for their public stands in favor of human rights publicly called for an official state apology in late October. Meanwhile, an unrepentant former French intelligence officer, Paul Aussaresses, challenged both Ighilahriz and Massu, not by denying torture, but by defending its use and refusing to apologize for having been a torturer himself. In response, many commentators called for Aussaresses to stand trial for crimes against humanity, though the committee of intellectuals who had published the October appeal warned against the dangers of attempting to settle complicated historical injustices in a trial that would necessarily focus on only one individual. On 5 December 2000, while the debates surrounding Ighilahriz, Massu, and Aussaresses were still very much in the public eye, historian Raphaëlle Branche defended the first doctoral thesis written in France on torture and the French army during the war years.

Together, Ighilahriz and Branche—an Algerian woman who lived through the war years and a French woman who grew to adulthood in the 1980s—transformed the debate about torture in France. They did so, however, in very different ways. Ighilahriz’s personal account of her experiences came in the form of testimony, an act of historical witnessing that had many precursors for the French public. Such accounts have the advantage of immediacy, and they are filled with the kinds of details that only a person who actually experienced this violence can provide. Testimony possesses an inherent weakness, however; an inherent subjectivity, which makes it easier for those who do not wish to accept the account to dismiss it as inherently partisan or even deceitful. Ighilahriz’s autobiography benefited, therefore, from the appearance of Raphaëlle Branche’s path-breaking book, for the latter provided precisely the detached tone and scholarly apparatus that Ighilahriz’s autobiography, by definition, could not contain. The reception of Branche’s work, in turn, was
largely predetermined by the emotions raised by the public airing given Ighi- 
lahriz’s horrifying story, because it gave a face to the numbing succession of 
countless victims who made their appearance in Branche’s study. The recep-
tion of Branche’s book, which appeared in the early weeks of 2001, also 
benefited from the continuing controversy over Massu’s and Aussaresses’s public 
statements.

Even if this focus on torture is understandable, given the drama of these 
revelations, the fact remains that the timing of this controversy in France had 
to do with the contingencies of public debate—the coincidence of 
Branche’s and Ighilahriz’s nearly simultaneous publications, Massu’s aston-
ishing confession, and Aussaresses’s notorious acceptance of “responsibility” 
for acts of murder—than it did with any systematic thinking through of what 
it was that made torture the central focus of France’s work of collective mem-
ory. In his account of this controversy, historian Neil MacMaster justified this 
focus because “the issue of torture had been central to the debate on the Alger-
ian war from the very beginning and continues to serve this function, not 
only because it represented the fundamental moral dilemma, ‘le mal absolu,’ 
but also because its exposure threw a penetrating light into the darkest corners 
of the logic of state, the overall structures of military, administrative, and 
judicial power.” It is difficult to quarrel with MacMaster’s assessment of tor-
ture’s significance for the French, but his statement also sidesteps the question 
of why torture has been so central “from the very beginning.” What makes 
these acts, among all the other acts of violence that took place in the war years, 
the most problematic and charged for both victims and perpetrators, as well as 
for the larger French public? Asserting that torture is a “fundamental moral 
dilemma” or an “absolute evil” is not really an answer to this question, and 
neither is the suggestion that torture is a particularly useful subject for laying 
bare the logic of state power during this period. This may have been something 
that historian Raphaëlle Branche was interested in, but Louiselette Ighi-
lahriz had other things in mind in publishing her autobiography, and the 
French newspaper-reading public’s appetite for stories of torture certainly has 
other origins than this project. In fact, an unspoken consensus seems to have 
been established in France in recent years, one that includes many of the jour-
nalists, historians, and public figures who have written or commented on the 
subject. This tacit consensus holds that all of the most controversial ques-
tions about what France’s colonial past means for contemporary French society— 
the possibility of integrating Muslims into the polity, the meaning of national 
citizenship in a postcolonial world, the treatment of people of North African 
descent by police and other government officials—refer ultimately back to a 
primal scene established by acts of torture during the war years. What is it 
about torture that makes it so central to all of these questions?

In order to make sense of this question, one must first tackle the historical 
problem of violence itself, or more specifically, the problem of what violence 
means. Unfortunately, however, a great deal of historical research on violence 
does not focus as much on the meaning of violence as on what violence does. Those who 
seek to understand violence by focusing on what it accomplishes—that is, 
those who see violence as primarily a means to a more or less rational end— 
are usually either functionalist or instrumentalist in their focus. Functionalists 
look for ways in which violent acts serve certain structural needs of the social 
order. In such accounts, society itself is held to contain certain logics of 
tension, confrontation, and competing interest, and it is the historian’s task to 
reveal these often hidden logics in order to explain outbreaks of violence. These 
competing interests can be conceived of in many different ways—as character-
istics of rival social classes or ethnic groups, for example, or as a part of the 
structural relations between the state and certain sectors of civil society. 
Regardless of the ways that the social structure is conceived, however, functionalist 
accounts tend to take the existence of such structures for granted. Their goal 
is not to examine how such social groups are constituted, but rather how their 
violent interactions tend to serve the needs of the system as a whole.

Instrumentalist approaches to violence share the functionalist emphasis on 
seeing violence primarily as a means to certain identifiable ends, but instead 
of focusing on the impersonal level of social structures, such accounts look 
to explain violent acts in terms of the intentions, ideologies, and will of the 
perpetrators—a typical example of such work might be Martha Crenshaw’s 
essay on the causes of terrorism. Such accounts tend to be political in their focus, 
rather than social, because instrumentalists are interested in the inten-
tions and actions of individuals and on the institutions, procedures, capaci-
ties, or technologies that allow them to achieve their ends. Outside the realm 
of scholarly study, of course, instrumental accounts of violence are ubiqui-
tous. The instrumental application of violence is the focus of the so-called 
军事 sciences, and one of the reasons that modern warfare has become 
such an arena of technological fantasy is the apparently irrefutable idea that 
violence is inescapably useful, and that these uses can be refined and elabo-
rated in a myriad of different ways.

The assumptions behind these approaches—the instrumental and the func-
tionalist—are so widespread both within and outside of the scholarly community precisely because they are reductive. They make something complicated— 
violence—easier to understand. It should not be necessary to point out that 
something is lost in this reduction, but in fact it is. Much of the recent de-
bate about the use of force in Iraq, for example, has been structured by the
assumption that one can and should separate out the U.S. army's idea of the tactical usefulness of violence from the meaning of this violence to Iraqis. Many people have pointed out the disconnect fostered by the clean computer-generated simulations of "smart bombs" hitting their targets that appeared on American news networks and the actual carnage caused by American weapons, images of which almost never reached the American public. The whisper campaign that one heard in certain quarters after 11 September 2001 about the need for torture in the arsenal against terror is another example of what happens when an instrumental approach to violence is divorced from an attention to the meaning of violence for the parties involved in the act. Once the initial photographs of torture at Abu Ghraib prison began appearing on the Internet, however, it became clear that such acts could never be reduced to a purely rational set of procedures. Defenders of the administration's "war on terrorism" thus stopped talking in veiled terms about the necessity of torture and instead concentrated on portraying the treatment of prisoners at Abu Ghraib as the anomalous acts of a few out-of-control soldiers. Instrumental explanations of violence ignore some of the most powerful meanings attached to violent acts, meanings that are quick to spin out of control as awareness of violence spreads.

The problem with functionalist explanations, on the other hand, is that they are themselves prisoners of the vocabulary and categories that emerge from the conflict under investigation. A functionalist account of the so-called French-Algerian war must assume that the conflict took place between groups constituted as "French" and "Algerian" and ignore the difficult fact that it was precisely these categories that were up for grabs in the war. Contrary to appearances, this is not a trivial point. Functionalist accounts are prone to a necessary literalism in laying out the categories that are subject to dispute, because parsing these categories and subjecting them to careful analysis makes the clear attribution of interest, motives, and strategy far more difficult than functionalists would wish. This was especially clear in much of the media coverage in the 1990s of the violence in the former Yugoslavia and in Rwanda. "Serb" and "Bosnian" or "Hutu" and "Tutsi" lend themselves to functionalist accounts only if one accepts an inevitable and obviously reified homogenization of historical reality within these categories and a disturbingly strict separation dividing them from one another. In other words, functionalism requires meeting Slobodan Milošević on his own terms.

There is good reason, therefore, to turn from purely functionalist or instrumental approaches to violence and look at the alternative—studies that seek to explore more subtly the meaning of violence, rather than its accomplishments. These studies are primarily ethnographic or cultural in their approach, and they focus less on the specific social or political circumstances of individual acts of violence than on the constellation of meanings that are at play in violent confrontations. Focusing on the complexities of meaning allows one to do several things: first, since meanings are both produced and consumed, an ethnographic or cultural approach to violence allows one to approach a violent event or act from a variety of subject positions—and to see precisely how these subjectivities are themselves made possible and transformed by the act of violence. Secondly, a cultural approach can do much more to explain the form that violence takes, since it is less concerned with the specific rationality of the violent act in a strictly functional or instrumental sense. Finally, a cultural approach can provide us with a clearer vehicle for linking histories of violence to the history of memory, because it is precisely the play of meanings that is at stake in contested memories of violent events.

The study of colonial violence is an especially charged arena for exploring these questions. Here, as elsewhere, violence should not be seen simply as a tool, as one means among many for achieving political or social ends. Rather, colonial violence should be examined as a form of communication whose meaning both arises out of a specific historical relationship and transforms this relationship in powerful and irrevocable ways. What is important in understanding such violence, therefore, is not only what it accomplishes in a realm outside of that defined by the violent act—material benefit, political advantage, territory, etc. Colonial violence also creates a specific space in which the violent relationship can be reenacted and exploited as a kind of existential condition; it is what gives meaning to the social and political relationships that emerge from this violence. In the long run, the colonial enterprise depends more on the perpetuation of such relationships than it does on any specific material or territorial goals. For this reason, violence in the colonial situation should not always be seen as simply the unfortunate cost of an otherwise more or less defensible goal—sometimes, at least, it is the goal itself.

Torture's Family Romance

The recent debates in France about the French military's use of torture in the Algerian war provide a good example for exploring this dynamic, because the army's use of torture was an open secret at the time, and its defenders, although never acknowledging its extent, publicly defended its use with an essentially instrumental account. According to General Jacques Massu's memoirs, the problem faced by the French army during the Battle of Algiers was essentially one of information: when the army arrested a suspected militant, they had twenty-four hours to get what they needed to know. After twenty-four hours, any information would be worthless because any associates of the arrested prisoner would have had time to find new safe houses, and any plans that he or she may
have been privy to would have changed. The logic of this situation, said Massu, meant that interrogation "had to hurt a little" ("il fallait qu'ça cogne un peu"). Massu's account of torture made it seem like a rational procedure—he and his men tried the electricity out on themselves first, so they would know exactly how to calibrate the application of pain, and in their mind this scientific procedure distinguished him and his paratroopers from the sadistic torturers of the Gestapo, for example. The reception given to Louise Ighilahriz's story in 2000, however, demonstrated that what is now most disturbing to both the French and Algerians about this history of torture is not the status of perpetrators and victims (i.e., the question of who did what to whom, or even the ostensible purpose used at the time to justify these acts). What needs to be explained is the terribly intimate and disturbing relations between perpetrators and victims fostered by torture. Ighilahriz was severely wounded in an ambush and taken as a prisoner to the headquarters of General Massu's 10th Parachute Division. Held naked and tied to a bed in a cell for over two months, she was repeatedly tortured and raped. In her account she identified Generals Jacques Massu and Marcel Bigeard as having been present during some of her "interrogations." She was saved from execution when a military doctor discovered her in her cell and removed her to a hospital to treat her wounds. He later supervised her transfer to an ordinary prison. Louise Ighilahriz was not even sure of the spelling of this doctor's name, but she overheard him addressed as "Commandant Richaud." She tried to contact him after the war to thank him but was not able to find him.

When Massu corroborated Ighilahriz's account, he explicitly invalidated all the justifications for torture that he had given in his memoirs—nothing he said there could have justified the continuous torture that Louise Ighilahriz faced for a period of over ten weeks. Massu did not remember her case specifically—there were apparently so many others—but he agreed that the details sounded accurate and he apologized for the use of torture during the war years: "No," he said, "torture is not indispensable in wartime, we could have very well done without it. When I think of Algeria, it makes me sorry, because that [torture] was part of a certain atmosphere [cela faisait partie d'une certaine ambiance]; we could have done things differently." Massu identified the mysterious Commandant Richaud, who had rescued Ighilahriz from her torturers, and said that he had remained in close contact with him until his death a year and a half earlier.

Other former military officers were shocked at Massu's apparent change of heart. General Marcel Bigeard, whom Massu said he had seen using electricity on a suspect in 1955, denied Ighilahriz's entire story and said that it was a "tissue of lies" from start to finish. He had never heard of Commandant Richaud, and was offended at the suggestion that he had been present while somebody was being tortured. What was odd, though, is that Bigeard denied something that Ighilahriz never actually accused him of—characteristically speaking of himself in the third person, he exclaimed to Le Monde's interviewer "Bigeard practically raping a woman with Massu, it's unimaginable!"

Bigeard's outburst got to the heart of the matter. By bringing rape and torture together in the same breath, the former general's denial concentrated all of the anxieties that the French felt in listening over the years to stories of torture and the army's justifications for its use in the struggle against the FLN. In fact, it is clear by now to anybody in France who is paying the least amount of attention to this discussion that torture and rape were never only about getting information about the FLN; these practices were not a regrettable but necessary tactic in a difficult and unpleasant war, or even a way of simply punishing suspected terrorists. Torture and rape were about establishing a particular relationship between French soldiers and Algerian Muslims, one in which the most essential parts of victim's personality—the integrity of their bodies, their relations with their families, their connection to a religion, a cause—were annihilated. When Massu said that this was the product of a certain atmosphere at the time he is not far from the truth: the French military—in both its conscript forces and its elite units such as the paratroopers—determined to use the trauma of torture and rape as a kind of primal scene, that would forever define the relationship between the state and its colonial subjects, between the torture-ers and the torture-able.

Torture is an intimate violation of one person's body by another—it possesses the same sweaty closeness and proximity of an act of love, the same casual familiarity with the most private recesses of the body, its fluids, and smells. It is precisely because of this similarity to other intimate acts that torture has such powerful psychological effects on its victims and such apparent attractions for those who come to commit such acts. Of course, what distinguishes torture from other forms of intimacy, and makes even the use of the word in such a context seem perverse, is the absolute wall or separation that is constructed between the two individuals who are brought together so closely by the act. Elaine Scarry has written that there is nothing so difficult for a mind to comprehend as the pain felt by somebody else's body—and that there is nothing so difficult for that person to express than that pain. The paradox at the heart of torture is that the two individuals involved are bound together by the enormity of what separates them.

The terror campaign that the FLN led against the French settler population of Algiers was, of course, the mirror image of this primal relation established by the intimacy of torture. In contrast to the unbearable violations exacted by the parachutistes in their interrogation centers, the FLN offered the horrifying anonymity of the café and office bombing. Even so, however, the FLN could
not escape the fact that this violence was the product not of irrevocable difference or separation, but of close proximity. The bombing campaign was possible because these two populations knew each other, lived and moved among each other, and understood one another, in ways that nationalists on both sides were at pains to deny. This fact was well understood by Gillo Pontecorvo in his film, *The Battle of Algiers*, in his depiction of the young Muslim woman who flirts with a French soldier on her way to bomb a bar in the European quarter. This woman has dyed her hair and put on a short dress and summer blouse, so that she may pass for “French” and cross the barricade that separates the French part of the city from the Muslim quarter. Her moment of feigned interest in the young soldier is no less compelling for being insincere, since it is precisely her ability to mimic the French codes of courtship that illustrate Pontecorvo’s point about the intimacies of civil wars, and the anxieties that arise from the unexpected human relations produced by such intimacy.23

- In recent discussions about the torture and rape that accompanied French military action in the wars of decolonization, one can detect an underlying theme—what one might call the “family romance” of decolonization—a tendency to speak about the relations between French and former colonized peoples in terms of familial relationships that somehow go awry.24 There is of course a history to this trope—the paternalist language of French colonialism in which the peoples of Africa were infantilized—but it also appears in the descriptions of French Algerian households, many of which had Muslim servants and laborers who were “part of the family” and whose betrayal during the war was described in the tones of horrified parents who can’t explain why their children have forsaken them. Massu’s 1972 memoirs are filled with this kind of language, and even Louiseit Ighilahriz’s account of her ordeal makes reference to this kind of relationship, in her description of her initial encounter with the Commandant Richaud, who discovered her in her cell and rescued her from almost certain execution. “I remember,” said Ighilahriz, “he told me: ‘I haven’t seen my daughter for six months, you remind me terribly of her.’” Ighilahriz recounted that she now wanted to find Richaud’s daughter, to tell her “how much her father loved her, over there, in Algeria.”25

This family romance of decolonization lies at the heart of the controversy over torture in France today, and it is a preoccupation with the unfinished business of this perverse and terrifying intimacy that will not allow the issue to go away. A sign, however, that both sides are finally beginning to acknowledge what continues to tie French and Algerians together in the memory of this war came in the fall of 2001 in the case of Mohamed Garne. He was born on 19 April 1960 in a resettlement camp in Algeria to a sixteen-year-old married woman; Kheïra Garne, who had been repeatedly raped by French soldiers and subsequently repudiated by her husband. The husband was later killed fighting the French. Given up to a nurse immediately at birth, Mohamed Garne ended up in the hospital soon afterwards, with signs of beatings and malnutrition. He grew up in Algiers in a foster home that fell apart when he was fifteen and he was sent back to an orphanage. When he was seventeen his foster father told him in a rage that he was the son of a prostitute, and in despair Garne tried to commit suicide soon after. After getting out of the orphanage when he was twenty-five, he ended up spending several months in a psychiatric clinic and three years in prison for stealing from his adoptive mother. He later married, had a child and became a nurse. Obsessed with finding the truth of his origins, he embarked upon a three-year search to find his mother. He finally found her in 1988, living in a cemetery in Hydra, in the hills above Algiers. *Le Monde*’s reporter depicted the emotional meeting:

... il tombait des trombes d’eau, ce jour-là. Les gens regardaient avec méfiance ce type qui cherchait Kheïra Garne, on a fini par lui dire qu’elle habitait tout près, dans le cimetière. Elle était là, devant une sorte de grotte, aménagée entre deux tombes, une hache à la main. Mais quand il lui dit qu’il était son fils, elle l’a embrassé.26

... it was raining buckets that day. People looked with suspicion on this man who was looking for Kheïra Garne, but eventually someone told him that she lived nearby, in the cemetery. She was there, in front of a sort of cave, hallowed out between two tombs, a hatchet in her hand. But when he told her that he was her son, she embraced him.

Kheïra Garne eventually told Mohamed the name of her dead husband, Abdelkader Bengoucha, but she refused to undertake the necessary steps to have her son adopt her husband’s name, and their relationship turned confrontational. When Mohamed Garne took his mother to court to insist on his paternity, her family provided evidence that Abdelkader Bengoucha had been sterile. Kheïra Garne testified that she had been raped and tortured over a period of weeks by French soldiers, who beat her and shocked her with electricity when she became pregnant. While telling this story in court, she collapsed on the stand.

According to the French journalist who recounted this story in the pages of *Le Monde*, Mohamed Garne left Algeria and came to France in 1998, “with one fixed idea: to make his story known to the one father he had left: the French state.”27 In 2000 his request for a military pension was turned down, but his lawyers continued to press his case. They argued that Mohamed Garne had suffered permanent effects from beatings his pregnant mother had received during her detention, and a court-appointed expert concurred, saying that his infirmities were “all attributable to the responsibility of the French state.”28
November 2001, a French court agreed with most of these arguments, and awarded Garne a 30 percent pension as a "victime de guerre" [war victim].

The court never actually recognized Mohamed Garne's paternity, but the decision to offer him a pension seems to be a much more significant act of remembrance than anything else the French government has done to commemorate the Algerian war. Prior to Garne's suit, his relationship to the French state was filled with ambiguity. Labeled by the French press "français par le crime" [French by crime], he was in fact French by birth, even without taking the story of his presumed father into account, because he was born in Algeria before 1962. Furthermore, since French nationality was a prerequisite to receiving this type of pension, the court's decision represented much more than a simple statement of responsibility for a "victime de guerre" [war victim]. It was also a victory for Garne's quest to resolve the painful story of his own origins, and an open recognition of the tacit and disturbing familial order that continues to structure conceptions of French-Algerian relations.

A functionalist account of torture during the Algerian war can do little to explore themes such as these, and such accounts cannot therefore explain the practice's continued relevance to contemporary French political debate. The French use of torture in the Algerian war, like other kinds of violence that take place in the colonial situation, was the product of intense and even intimate historical relationships, and it became the crucible for transforming these relationships into powerful linkages whose singular effects could not be effaced by the political dissaggregation that we call decolonization. The reception of Louise Thélamour's autobiography in France, as well as the wide attention given to the story of Mohamed Garne, are only two examples that show the powerful resonances of a language that invokes familial connections and resemblances across the French-Algerian divide. It remains to be seen, however, if such a vocabulary has the same resonance in contemporary Algeria. As Neil MacMaster pointed out, representatives of the government in Algeria have been noticeably silent on the torture controversies raging in France, because some of their military leaders actually served in the French army during the war years and were thus implicated in the French army's repressive policies, and also because the Algerian government has itself resorted to torture in its recent struggles with oppositional groups and Islamic movements.29 The work of memory in Algeria will necessarily begin with a different set of concerns, and it will play out against the background of a very different political situation. It seems significant, however, that it was "Algerian" voices which allowed the French to confront the family romance of their colonial war. The stories told by individuals such as Mohamed Garne—"français par le crime"—and Louise Thélamour, a militant nationalist who took up arms against the French, received such close attention by journalists and the wider public in France because they spoke not only for themselves but for all those whose complicated family history was linked to the experience of colonial subjection. The French do not keep official statistics of citizens who are of Algerian descent—or Senegalese, or Ivorian, or Vietnamese, or Malagasy, for that matter—because their laws do not allow them to make distinctions between different kinds of citizens. No one doubts, however, that these stories resonated differently for those French citizens who in their daily lives face the contradictions between a universal definition of citizenship and a colonial past that has made France a multicultural society in fact if not in name. In this sense, Garne's and Ighilahriz's stories provide a sincere refutation to Renan's suggestion that forgetting past conflicts is a necessary task for those who wish to forge a sense of national identity. At a minimum, such stories show the limits to any sense of national identity based on the suppression of past atrocities, and suggest that if those who consider themselves French are to fully come to grips with the lasting effects of their colonial history, they will have to learn to speak openly about the relationships engendered by decolonization and its violence.

Notes


use of the term “guerre d’Algérie,” in response to a law proposed by Jacques Floc’h, a socialist deputy and a veteran of the war himself. The law was aimed at providing benefits to widows and families of veterans who were denied assistance before the change in vocabulary. See Raphaëlle Bacque, “La Guerre d’Algérie n’est plus une guerre sans nom,” Le Monde, 11 June 1999.

5. Fanon wrote: “When in 1956, after the capitulation of Monseur Guy Mollet to the settlers in Algeria, the Front de Libération Nationale, in a famous leaflet, stated that colonialism only loosens its hold when the knife is at its throat, no Algerian really found these terms too violent. The leaflet only expressed what every Algerian felt at heart: colonialism is not a thinking machine, nor a body endowed with reasoning faculties. It is violence in its natural state, and it will only yield when confronted with greater violence.” Frantz Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth (New York: Grove Press, 1963), 61.


7. The diplomatic history of the wars of decolonization has recently been a particularly rich area of suggestive research. On Algeria, see especially Matthew Connelly, A Diplomatic Revolution: Algeria’s Fight for Independence and the Origins of the Post-Cold War Era (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); Irwin Wall, France, the United States, and the Algerian War (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001). On Indochina, see Irwin Wall, The United States and the Making of Postwar France, 1945-1954 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 233-262. Matthew Connelly’s work on the international history of the Algerian war in particular has done a great deal to clarify the place of Algeria at the vortex of powerful global forces of aggregation—the emergence of a bipolar world order during the Cold War—and fragmentation—the highly varied effects of the spread of consumer markets, which bound some parts of the world tighter to the developed world, and left others increasingly on the margins. According to Connelly, these “fault lines” as he calls them, ran right through Algeria, making the international context of the war the essential focus of his work. Because of this focus, however, his book contains no sustained attention to the violence of the conflict.


9. Books and pamphlets on torture that appeared during the war years include Henri Alleg, La Question (Paris: Minuit, 1958); Laurent Schwartz, Le Problème de la torture dans la France d’aujourd’hui (Paris: Comité Audin, 1961); Pierre-Henri Simon,


11. The appeal of the twelve intellectuals was published in L’Humanité, 31 December 2000. The signatories were Henri Alleg, Josette Audin, Simone de Bollaïdère, Nicole Dreyfus, Noel Favrelière, Gisèle Halimi, Alban Liechi, Madeleine Rebérioux, Laurent Schwartz, Germaine Tillion, Jean-Pierre Vernant, and Pierre Vidal-Naquet.


19. Branche mentioned the intimate nature of the conflict during the Algerian war, but she does not develop a consideration of this intimacy as it specifically related to acts of torture. Branche, La Torture, 15.


23. In another context, Ann Laura Stoler has emphasized the importance of the intimate sphere in the maintenance of colonial relations, and my argument here owes much to her conception of the problem. See Ann Laura Stoler, Carnal Knowledge and...