

 **Review ESSAY**

Alistair Horne. *A Savage War of Peace: Algeria 1954-1962.* With a new preface by the author. New York: New York Review of Books, 2006.

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Alistair Horne is an accomplished writer and the author of many books on French history; he is, indeed, one of the central conduits for popular British and American understanding of France in the contemporary era. *A Savage War of Peace* is brilliantly written and the only full length detailed history of the Algerian War in English, and it has acquired its own history since its appearance originally in 1977. Ariel Sharon, for example, is said to have kept a copy of the Hebrew translation on his nightstand. With the outbreak of the Iraq war there was a sudden demand for the book, particularly among the American military. Tom Ricks reported that copies were being purchased for as much as \$150 on eBay. I wish I had known, I would have gladly sold my copy. With this welcome reissue by the *New York Review of Books* the price is back to a reasonable \$19.95. President Bush undoubtedly got his copy for free; Horne himself has said he also sent one to Secretary Rumsfeld, at the time of Abu Graib, with the sections on torture underlined. The Secretary was not too pleased. Bush told *60 Minutes* in an interview that he was reading Horne on the recommendation of Henry Kissinger, who apparently has engaged Horne as his official biographer. All this led to a sardonic column on the subject by Maureen Dowd; not to be outdone Charlie Rose had Kissinger, Horne, Tom Ricks, and Andrew Bacevich on his show the next night for a round of discussion of Algeria, Vietnam, and Iraq. I will restrict myself here to Algeria, others more competent than I have plunged into the relationship of the Iraq war with the American Vietnam syndrome.¹

At the time of Horne's original writing books of a scholarly nature on Algeria, even in French, were rare. They are no longer. There are many studies that are more up-to-date than Horne in terms of scholarship in French and several new monographs in English that shed new light on specific aspects of the war. The leading French historian of the Algerian War is Benjamin Stora; unfortunately, until now, the only one of his many books that has been translated into English is his *Algeria, 1830-2000, a short history*. In English we have had some excellent recent scholarship on specific aspects of the war: *Uncivil War*, by James Le Sueur, deals with French intellectuals; *War and the Ivory Tower*, by David Schalk, with the anti-war movements in France during the Algerian war and the United States during Vietnam. Suggestive works on the cultural consequences in France of the war in Algeria have been written by Kristin Ross and Todd Shepard, and the war's international aspects have been closely examined, from a world perspective by Matthew Connelly, and from a more narrow perspective of French-American relations by the present author. A shorter alternative to Horne dating from the same period, in many ways more insightful, was written by John Talbott, *The War Without a Name: France in Algeria 1954-1962*. Two classics of the period of the war have been translated: the *Journal* of the Algerian writer, Mouloud Feraoun,

¹ Marilyn Young and Lloyd Gardner, *Iraq and the Lessons of Vietnam* (New York: The New Press, 2007).

and the well-known account of torture, *La Question*, by Henri Alleg.² But Horne will continue to be read despite all this scholarly work, if not in preference to it, because Horne bridges the gap between scholarly writing and very good writing, and because of the comprehensiveness of detail included in his work. Horne is a good read, if not an easy one, at 566 pages in small type, even if unencumbered by footnotes to sources. Official documents available today were closed when Horne wrote (he relied mainly on memoirs and interviews), but Horne can be read as a source: he appears to have interviewed almost everybody in France in an official capacity connected with the war not yet dead in the 1970s. This was a great many people of importance, if of necessity excluding the most important person, Charles de Gaulle.

Horne gives us thick description worthy of a novelist. Nowhere else in the historical literature is one likely to learn that in the Algerian spring, at the

“beguiling Roman site of Tipasa...the ruins are a blaze of contrapuntal colour: wild gladioli of magenta, bright yellow inulas and spiky acanthus thrust up among sarcophagi carpeted with tiny blue saxifrage and sprawled over by convolvulus with great pink trumpets. The ochre stones and iron red soil contrast joyously with the silvery-grey of the olives and absinthe and a peacock sea. ‘Here the gods themselves serve as tryst-places, or beds,’ says Camus. ‘Happy is he among the living who has seen such things.’ And happy, indeed (Horne goes on), were the *pieds noirs* who in the ‘good days’ owned summer villas—such as one might find in Brittany or Arcachon—at Tipasa or on other stretches of Algeria’s unspoilt coast-line.”

If Horne can be dithyrambic he can also be lurid. We get thick description as well of every kind of barbaric torture practiced in Algeria, from the water-boarding to the electric shocks on the genitals, and in the numerous massacres that characterized the war we feel ourselves being dragged on tours of the assembled corpses, almost ready to puke alongside of those who were actually there. Moreover Horne has a taste for the grotesque. I have not done a word-count of how many times we are told of “disembowelled” corpses with “slit throats,” a means of execution by which Muslims meant, we are told, to humiliate their victims by using their technique of slaughter of animals. And more than once we are told of mutilated bodies of French soldiers with their genitals cut off and stuffed in their mouths, pregnant women’s wombs torn open with meat hooks, their babies heads dashed against the wall and the almost-born dead fetus replaced in the open womb. A 73-year-old woman at Philippeville had her arms and legs hacked off, and so on,

² The books referred to above are as follows: Benjamin Stora, *Algeria 1830-2000: a short history* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001); James Le Sueur, *Uncivil War: Intellectuals and identity politics during the decolonization of Algeria* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001); David Schalk, *War and the Ivory Tower: Algeria and Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); Kristin Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the reordering of French culture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995); Todd Shepard, *The Invention of Decolonization: The Algerian war and the remaking of France* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006); Mathew Connelly, *A Diplomatic Revolution: Algeria’s Fight for Independence and the Origins of the Post-Cold War Era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); Irwin Wall, *France, the United States, and the Algerian War* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2001); Mouloud Feraoun, *Journal 1955-62* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000); Henri Alleg, *The Question* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006).

such that amid the descriptions of atrocities we might even miss the bland statistic that while the Algerians murdered about 100 Europeans in that massacre, the French machine-gunned over 1200 innocent Muslims in retaliation (this is the conservative French count; the Algerians claim and incredible 15-45,000). Horne almost invites us to conclude that the retaliation was justified by the massacre, whereas its scale, and the fact that it was carried out by French forces, might qualify it as a war crime. But what, if anything, does the barbarity of the massacre by Algerian Arabs tell us of the rage provoked by French colonialism? Horne is silent on this point. He does tell us of the alleged benefits the French brought to Algeria as a consequence of the colonization.

It is frequently difficult to see through all this to the underlying issues of the war. These, of course, are very different from Iraq. Algeria at the time of its struggle for independence had been a colony of France for 120 years, long since incorporated into France legally as French territory, as French as Normandy or Poitou, under the authority of the Ministry of the Interior, not the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (as were French protectorates like Morocco or Tunisia) or the Ministry of Colonies, as were France's African possessions. One million or more settlers of European extraction, mostly Spanish and Italian rather than French, but now French in culture, lived among 9 million Muslims, the settlers monopolizing the best lands with a small plutocracy controlling the economy, relegating the Arab and Berber populations to the margins. Citizenship and full rights as Frenchmen were reserved for the settlers, but including among the indigenous peoples the Jews, who were granted French citizenship in 1870, and those few French-educated Arabs and Berbers ready to renounce Islam and assimilate as Europeans. Horne is not insensitive to the demographic problem either; the Arab and Berber birth rate was far beyond the European, creating increasing numbers of unemployed indigenous youth and increased pressures on the insufficient amount of Arab-owned land. It was among the armies of youthful unemployed that the nationalist sentiments born early in the century flowered and matured into full-scale rebellion.

Horne sees many missed opportunities for reconciliation between European and Arab; they reappear with regularity throughout the book. The statute of 1947, had it only been faithfully applied; the government of Mendès France, overthrown in February 1955; the secret peace negotiations carried on by Mollet in 1956; de Gaulle's "peace of the brave," allegedly squandered by the general during the languid summer after his seizure of power in May 1958; the Si Saleh affair, in which a prominent rebel made ready to accept de Gaulle's terms for peace, only to be undercut by the de Gaulle himself, who was searching for negotiations with the provisional government, and so on. Even with full-scale civil war raging between the terrorist organization of the settlers, the "Secret Army Organization" (OAS), and the FLN, and independence on the way, in 1962, Horne pauses over the brutal murder of the French-educated Muslim writer, Mouloud Feraoun by the OAS to reflect that his death "symbolised the final snuffing out of the light of hope of a 'third force' of moderation and liberalism, that had flickered up occasionally during the war....As is so often the tragic path of revolution, it was the Montagne that triumphed over the Gironde."(p. 518).

All this makes for good drama and better prose, but bad history. The reality, long since recognized by scholars, is that two separate nationalities had crystalized in Algeria well before the war began in 1954, in fact by the Setif uprising in 1945, with which Horne begins his book, and which was also repressed with horrendous brutality. Assimilation was a myth, especially from the perspective of the colons, who lived in fear of being absorbed by ten times as many Muslims, but

also from that of metropolitan France, which had no intention of integrating nine million Arabs into the French body politic. De Gaulle himself, who cynically used the slogan of "integration" for a time, where Arabs were concerned, was a racist, pure and simple. "These people are not like us," he said, regarding them as impossible to assimilate. What was in place in Algeria was a dying colonialism, the agonizing death of a settler colony; the war could have been settled earlier than it was, but certainly not without a good deal of the violence and the final separation that occurred. It was apparent from the outset that an independent Algeria would expropriate the extensive lands and wealth of the settlers: the war for independence was also a social revolution. Even John Foster Dulles saw at the war's outset that from the French perspective the war could not be won. As Horne himself notes, Mendès France, who settled the Indochina war and gave autonomy to Tunisia, when the rebellion broke out in Algeria, said the only negotiation possible there was war. This is hardly consistent with reconciliation.

One strand that emerges clearly in Horne's study is that from the emergence of the FLN (National Liberation Front) and the beginning of the war on "Toussaints," all-Saints day, Nov. 1, 1954, through the Evian agreements that ended the conflict on March 19, 1952, rebel demands never varied. These were full independence from France, the integrality of all Algerian territory, including the Sahara desert (which the French tried to separate from the rest of Algeria, especially after oil was discovered there), and unique Algerian citizenship for all inhabitants. The rebels would accept no dual citizenship or protections for the settler population, the "colons" as they were commonly called, "*pieds noirs*" colloquially, could accept Algerian citizenship and equality with everyone else or leave. One could have predicted, and some did, early in the conflict that given these terms the settlers would in fact leave. All during the conflict the rebels rejected French calls for a cease-fire to be followed by negotiations and elections, understanding that once they laid down their arms, if the negotiations failed, the war could not afterward be easily restarted. Moreover, the FLN claimed from the start unique status as the sole spokesman for the Algerian national movement, rejecting all French efforts to find other Algerian interlocutors. The rebel demands were all incorporated into the final agreements in 1962, indicating a full victory for the FLN and a defeat for the French. Indeed the French did much better in negotiations at Geneva ending the Indochina War in 1954 despite their prior humiliating military defeat at Dien Bien Phu, than they did at Evian.

This is ironic because militarily, in Algeria, the French did not lose. There was no Algerian equivalent of Dien Bien Phu. That would seem to be the consensus, asserted by Horne, and repeated by such prominent contemporary scholars of the war in France like Benjamin Stora, who still asks why the French left Algeria since they in fact "won" the war on the ground. France certainly won the "battle" of Algiers, the first manifestation of urban terrorism in the context of guerrilla war, and hence the object of particularly close study by the American military, who viewed screenings of the dramatic Luigi Pontecorvo film before they undertook to read Horne; both the film and the book are being watched and read not for the lesson they were designed to give, but for the contrary aim of discovering how to conquer guerrilla insurrection in an urban setting, presumably applicable to Baghdad. This is unfortunate since the Battle of Algiers was won by the systematic use of torture. Ted Morgan's *My Battle of Algiers* puts it more bluntly than Horne, who says that the torture in Algiers was responsible for winning the battle but losing the

war.³ The French won the Battle of Algiers by the scientific application of torture, says Morgan, they needed no large infusion of troops, 6000 paratroopers were enough; by systematic torture they “dismantled the bomb networks by tracking down the leaders.” The problem in Iraq is not that torture is ineffective, as Horne believes, it is rather, says Morgan, that torture has been used there in “sensationalized but ineffective ways.” But Morgan agrees with Horne that torture dehumanizes the victim while it corrupts the torturer, and turns public opinion against the war.

Certainly torture corrupts the torturer, but does it necessarily turn the public away from support of the war? It is not clear that the French public wearied of the war primarily because of the revelations of torture, although they played a role, but for other reasons. These included the mass mobilization of draftees and the casualties, the mobilization of intellectuals against the war (121 signed a manifesto justifying illegal action to oppose the war), and the fact that the terror was brought home to France itself: bombs went off with increasing frequency as the war went on and mass demonstrations grew in numbers and violence. But de Gaulle concluded that he needed to finish with the war because of international world-wide pressures as well; despite losing the war on the ground the Algerian provisional government clearly had the support of virtually all the Arab and Berber population, as well as diplomatic recognition by most of the Muslim, communist, and third worlds, and the prospect of arms and support from Russia and China, while de Gaulle's appeals to the Americans and his NATO allies for support came up empty. In fact the Americans pressured relentlessly for the war's end and the election of Kennedy, who had spoken out against the French in Algeria in 1957, boded ill for the future of French-American relations.

Moreover, the military victory, if it was that, was hollow. The French had achieved relative pacification, which meant simply that the number of violent incidents per month was at or near a tolerable level, 200 per month, where it had been as high as 1500. But this was at the price of herding nearly 2 million Muslims into fortified villages that Horne brilliantly describes as little better than concentration camps of World War II, while upwards of 500,000 conscripts remained on the ground to keep the fragile peace that there was. This was a situation that could not be sustained. It was a victory that came unraveled as Algeria itself descended into open warfare between settlers and Muslims with the French caught in the middle, at the end battling both, in what also became a Franco-French war civil war. At the war's finish Algeria looked very much like Iraq today, with the Americans caught between Shia and Sunni, battling both in an effort to achieve pacification on behalf of an ineffective puppet government. Mercifully, Americans are not yet fighting each other about the war, except in Congress.

Despite all this Horne maintains that de Gaulle deserves the gratitude of his countrymen for ending the war. The French consensus is to laud de Gaulle also, which I find bizarre, because the war ended as badly as it could for the French, who conceded everything while watching virtually all the settler population flee their homes amid scenes of incredible violence, terror, and massacre. The dimensions of the final orgy of violence resulted from the dilatory pace with which de Gaulle proceeded to negotiate an end to the war; in fact de Gaulle fought the war for almost four years,

³I put quotes around “battle” because, as Henri Alleg pointed out in an appearance at NYU's Institute of French Studies (April 18, 2007), there in fact was no battle at all, simply isolated acts of urban terrorism and a massive police crackdown helped by the military. See Ted Morgan, *My Battle of Algiers* (New York: Harper Collins, 2005).

much like Nixon in Vietnam, before he finally ended it. This was a longer period than the Fourth French Republic that preceded de Gaulle, and it is arguable that had he made the necessary concessions and ended the war a year earlier, after defeating the final rebellion of the military against him in April 1961, he would have avoided giving time for the settlers to rally in the "Secret Army Organization" (OAS) that with its final sadistic orgy of terror permanently poisoned European-Arab relations and provoked the carnage, terror, and flight of the European population that occurred. To defend de Gaulle is to argue that while the war ended in the worst way possible, the worst way was also the only way it could have ended, and that only de Gaulle could have done it at all. Now de Gaulle perhaps deservedly enjoys saintly status among the French today for his heroic call to resist the Nazis after the French defeat in 1940, creating the Free French and saving the nation's honor. But it does not follow that his exit from Algeria was artistry in politics, as Stanley Hoffmann once argued, or even methodically planned and implemented as he claimed later in his memoirs.⁴ Horne believes he had to take as long as he did to exit Algeria because he had to tame the army first, which had brought him to power because it had believed that he would keep Algeria French, and which twice rebelled against him when it began to appear that he would not in fact keep his promise. I have argued extensively against this view elsewhere; I will only say in this context that neither the Challe plan, which gathered the Muslims in fortified villages, "strategic hamlets" as they were called in Vietnam, nor the Plan of Constantine, which invested billions of francs in a crash program to industrialize Algeria and win Muslim "hearts and minds," seem to me to be consistent with plans to exit Algeria. De Gaulle did not mean to integrate Algeria fully with France; but when he finally offered "self-determination" in September 1959 it was in the context of "association", rejecting what he called "separatism" instead of independence, meaning in his mind chaos. Association meant for de Gaulle the creation of a new relationship that we would recognize today as neo-colonial or "post-colonial," a relationship in which France still called the shots. The rebels saw it that way too, which is why the war went on until March 1962.

Be that as it may, it is no doubt a mistake to simply dismiss comparisons with the Iraq war on the grounds that the United States invaded an independent country, whether to prevent the building of weapons of mass destruction and their transmission to terrorist groups like Al Qaeda, or to accomplish regime change. Iraq, like Algeria, has a colonial history, with the Anglo-Saxon world, directly with the British, indirectly with America through its oil, and one does have to ask with Rashid Khalidi whether the current invasion is not historically rooted and intent upon reestablishment of a client regime that would permit the indefinite placement of military bases, fourteen of them, to be exact that would replace those currently in Saudi Arabia and afford access to the oil concentrated in both countries.⁵ The United States does not seek to colonize Iraq in the traditional sense but it is arguably seeking something like de Gaulle's idea of association. Interestingly, Horne does not ask about the goals of the Iraq war, limiting himself in the preface to the new edition of *A Savage War of Peace* to vague generalizations about whether it is a good idea to tangle with resistance in another Arab culture, which has gone quite beyond Algerian techniques in its use of suicide and car-bombs and itinerant explosive devices, and which is

⁴ Stanley Hoffmann, *Decline or Renewal? France Since the 1930s* (New York: Viking Press, 1974); Charles de Gaulle, *Memoirs of Hope: Renewal and Endeavor* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1971).

⁵Rashid Khalidi, *Resurrecting Empire: Western Footprints and American's Perilous Path in the Middle East* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2005).

apparently capable of slitting as many throats and occasionally beheading its victims if not cutting off their genitals. He also offers, as uncomfortable comparisons, three reasons that we are likely to lose in Iraq: the targeted selective terror of the resistance against collaborators as well as occupiers, the porous nature of frontiers, and finally the use of torture, which has already boomeranged against Washington and turned Abu Graib and Guantanamo into causes célèbres in much of the world. Giving the French their due, in that while they used torture extensively they at least did not try to justify it, as the Bush administration has done, I will say again that the tragedy is that the torture, revolting as it was for many in France, was not what lost the war, and no doubt it did win the Battle of Algiers. As for the open frontiers, they are blamed in all wars of insurrection, but the French managed to control them in Tunisia and Morocco, not to mention the British in Ireland, where there were not any to begin with, or the Americans in Vietnam with their bombs, but these wars were all lost anyway. In the end it is the occupiers' inability to control the terror, which requires the political control and compliance of most of the population in order to prevent, which is likely to be the key problem. Insurgency warfare is undefeatable by military means alone, since it is inherently political; and in today's post-colonial world a foreign army can no longer easily control a hostile population, no matter how powerful that army may be.

If Algeria has a lesson for Iraq, it lies in the comparative nature of the task: if 500,000 French soldiers could not pacify a population of nine million Arabs, how can 160 or 170,000 Americans pacify a population of over twenty million Arabs (excluding the Kurds in Iraq, who are pro-American and control themselves). The very idea that the Americans could have won over Iraqi "hearts and minds" by a tactic of "shock and awe" should have been seen at the outset as absurd. The better comparison between Algeria and Iraq lies in looking at American policy in both wars. In the case of Algeria, fifty years ago, a Republican administration wisely concluded that Algeria needed to be independent. Since it valued its alliance with France, fearing that France would defect in the cold war, it remained formally neutral, but pressured France, as best it could, to accommodate the rebels, in whom it saw Arab nationalism, rather than communist revolution. When the British and the French declared war on Arab nationalism, following Nasser's nationalization of the Suez Canal in 1956, Eisenhower refused to follow, and when they initiated military action against Egypt, in alliance with Israel, he angrily mobilized the UN against them and forced a halt to their operations. Although the British and the French, during the Suez crisis, claimed to be concerned about international operation of the canal, their real aim was regime change in Egypt; they wanted to oust Nasser, in whom the British saw a mini-Hitler, while the French saw the voice of Arab nationalism and an external cause of the rebellion they faced in Algeria. Eisenhower saved them from their folly, and saved American policy in the Middle East. He did not hesitate to force the Israelis back from the Sinai inside their 1948 frontiers either, despite the "Jewish lobby."

The contrast here with the start of the Iraq war is evident. The situation was similar but the roles were reversed. Ostensibly trying to enforce UN strictures against Iraqi weapons of mass destruction, Washington's real aim was regime change in Iraq; once the French understood that, with the support of the Germans (and the Russians and the Chinese) they tried to save Washington from its folly. The difference is that Washington, the superpower, called the shots in both crises. It could stop the British and the French in 1956, but the British and the French could not stop Washington in 2003, indeed the British had long since giving up trying to restrain Washington, concluding that the better part of valor was to go along. The French and Germans succeeded in

mobilizing the UN against the U.S. and Britain, but to no avail; indeed, Washington had as an ulterior aim exposing the UN as an empty shell. Where de Gaulle challenged the postwar structure that Washington built in the immediate postwar period, based on the promotion of European unity, an integrated NATO military command, and a strong United Nations, it was Washington itself that repudiated the postwar order in 2003, dividing Europe, ignoring NATO, and flouting the United Nations. The invasion took place, and the question now is for how long we will have to pay the piper. One can perhaps end on a happier note. Algeria and the two Vietnam wars all took about eight years and all required, if not regime change, crises and changes of government in the occupying power before they ended. The French war in Vietnam brought Mendès France to power, the Algerian War brought de Gaulle. The American war in Vietnam destroyed Lyndon Johnson, and the Iraq war promises to do the same to Bush in the sense that whoever follows him is likely to end it. Insurrectionary war is a race against time for the occupier, which needs a victory before its public wearies. The insurgents operate under no similar time constraints.

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