

The Press And The Setif Massacre

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Abstract

The events of May 1945 in Eastern Algeria heralded the outset of a new political era in the country's colonial history, as the nationalist movement would henceforth become more assertive and its discourse bolder. The present paper looks into the ways in which the international press responded to, and portrayed, these unfoldings. As the quality of the news reporting depends almost exclusively on the quality of the source and on the « information available at the gathering end of the line », it is of special interest to the study to look into the performance of the world press and the extent to which it gave credence to the French official stance in relation to both the nature and objective of the uprising. Using extra-journalistic materials, the paper attempts to highlight not only what the news outlets said the way they said it but also what they did not say, exposing therefore what is viewed as the most serious of all journalistic sins : that of « omission ».

What happened in Setif in Eastern Algeria in May 1945 must be seen in the context of the growth of Algerian nationalism. Political life in Algeria between the two World Wars had been enlivened by the activities of emerging nationalist parties. Despite their differences, these parties helped to "educate" the Algerian population to understand fully its contemporary conditions and future prospects.¹ The worsened socio-economic situation because of the Second World War opened the way for the Algerians politically to lay the foundations for a more coherent and more effective nationalist movement. Despite mounting pressure by the Vichy regime on their key leaders, the Algerians - led by the People's Party - waged a continuous campaign for self-determination. They declared their pro-Ally stance as inseparably linked with their right for self-rule.²

After France had fallen to German occupation, the Free French Government resorted to a policy of promises towards the overseas colonies. These colonies were pledged the right to self-determination as soon as the

War was over, provided that they stood on the side of France against Germany. The Algerians took such promises for granted as thousands of them were recruited to fight with the Allied forces on the European front.³ Promises of the "liberation" of subject people were frequently made; the Atlantic Charter emphasized the right of all peoples to self-determination; and the United Nations' Charter adopted at the San Francisco Conference in 1945 would stress the same right. These documents were, however, read differently by different sides.

As the war drew to a conclusion, France instructed its troops throughout the overseas dependencies to be prepared for potential "disturbances" in the colonies, sensing that the local peoples would inevitably ask for the fulfillment of war-time promises of self-determination. The German forces eventually surrendered on 7 May 1945. On Victory Day in Europe thousands of people throughout the world took to the streets to express their spontaneous delight. Yet, freedom was regained only in Europe; the war continued unabated on the Asian front and was ended only by the United States' use of the atomic bombs against Japan.

Convinced by the promises of the Atlantic Charter and those of the French during the war, Algerians took to the streets to stress their demands for a "new deal."⁴ The nationalist leaders, who obtained authorization to organize a march and lay a wreath in memory of the dead, believed that the "sacrifices of the Algerians" would have to bring a more democratic system to post-war Algeria.⁵

The marchers carried the Algerian flag alongside the flags of the Allied nations to demonstrate their attachment to the principle of self-rule.⁶ Ironically, however, on the day that victory for democracy was being hailed world-wide, undemocratic methods were being used elsewhere to quiet demands for the right to self-determination. Republican France, whose own legitimacy could be found in those war-time principles so frequently expressed, utilized authoritarian ways

and means to preserve its empire. While the Algerian troops, who had fought on the European front, were parading the streets of Paris under the warm cheers of the Parisian crowd, an estimated 45,000 of their compatriots - who were celebrating the same victory - were being killed in Sétif, Kherata and Guelma.⁷

With the end of hostilities in Europe, there was almost no resident press correspondent in the whole of North Africa. This was perhaps inevitable in the context of the War, but it consequently hampered the international press from reporting the events of V-E Day in Algeria on time and at first hand. Being dependent on French official sources for information, some news outlets dwelled largely on the Government's line. To minimize the effects of the killings on its image, France tried to keep a low profile on the situation,

blaming the uprising on the food shortage that had hit the country as a result of the War and the recent drought.⁸ These claims, for example, found echo in *The New York Times* which did quantitatively better than any other non-French newspaper in covering the Algerian events. The quality of news reporting, however, depends exclusively on the quality of the source and on the "information available at the gathering end of the line."

The French press, not surprisingly, also gave absolute credence to the economic argument. *Le Monde* stated that the "action of a minority of agents provocateurs was facilitated by the grain shortage which was due to the bad harvest caused by the drought."⁹ Most of the Western press, immediately after those events, went along with the official contention. Only the *Christian Science Monitor* questioned the Government's argument and hinted that the uprising was politically motivated: "Despite the veil of censorship with which the French government has surrounded the recent riots in Algiers, it is manifest that these disturbances had a serious character." This would have been of interest to readers of other newspapers had they been told about it, but they were not.

The economic factor undoubtedly played a significant part in leading the Algerians into open protest against the colonial system; but the major factor behind the uprising was their growing political awareness and their realization of the importance of the new circumstances provided by the Allied victory to which, they believed, they had contributed. In retrospect, evidence shows that their action represented a deliberate effort to manifest their demands for a "new deal".¹⁰ France was now being assertively asked to put its war-time promises into practice.¹¹ The policy of systematic repression exercised by the *colons* with the acquiescence of Paris, many historians argue, was a major reason behind the new nationalist bid for self-determination.¹²

Two weeks later, in an effort to make up for the lost ground, *The New York Times* told its readers that "the problems in North Africa are political as well as economic." Yet, despite this little divergence of opinion which did not touch the core issue of France's iron-fist response to the Algerian demonstrations, the paper continued its *entente cordiale* with the French Government. Failing to send a correspondent to Algeria, its reports gave the reader the impression that it was the Algerians who were to blame for the violence, and that the French army's reaction was justifiable: many French were killed and several officials "... slain... by the rioters." It simply relayed the official figure of 1,000 dead. In this, the paper's reporting did not differ much from that of *Le Monde* which had put all the blame on the Algerians, asserting, with due exaggeration, that many French had been "massacred" and their homes and farms attacked.¹³

The New York Times, steering closer to the rock of journalistic partisanship, sided with the official claim that a group of troublemakers incited by "German propaganda" was behind the nationalist action. It searched far afield for a possible foreign connection, finding it in the French view that those events were part of a "fascist plot" to destabilize the French empire.¹⁴ This idea was given force in some French news outlets, such as *Alger-Républicain* and *L'Humanité*, which blamed "Hitlerite elements" for the uprising.¹⁵

Every sign, however, seemed to indicate that the uprising had been incited from within Algeria and by provocations from the French police. It was the killing of the young demonstrator carrying the Algerian flag and the wounding of others that transformed the march into a riot which eventually turned into a popular uprising against the colonial system.¹⁶ Colon-organized armed groups, on the other hand, embarked on a wave of violence, killing many Algerians.¹⁷ The police, the Army, the Navy, the Air Force, and the Foreign Legion were all mobilized for large-scale operations of "systematic pacification."¹⁸ "At the time of this campaign," the distinguished French historian, Charles-Andre Julien, later wrote, "the Foreign Legion troops burned, looted and killed at leisure."¹⁹ The Cruiser *Duguay-Trouin* bombarded coastal villages; Douglas dive bombers made as many as 300 sorties a day destroying at least forty villages.²⁰ The colon daily *L'Echo d'Alger* summed up the general mood at the time with the slogan "*c'est l'heure du gendarme*."

Those attacks, which continued throughout May, claimed the lives of an estimated 45,000 people; 6,000 more were arrested, ninety-nine of whom were to be sentenced to death. The French authorities succeeded, to a large extent, in concealing the truth about the police and army conduct in Algeria not only from world opinion, but also from public opinion in France which would later be shocked as the realities of the May killings unfolded.

Because of the news blackout and tight censorship imposed by the authorities on information from Algeria, *Le Figaro's* Pierre Dubard, who had witnessed the French *coup de force* response to the Algerian demonstrations, was able to dispatch his report to Paris only eight weeks after the killings. The report presented a serious challenge to the official argument. As a result, the French official sources were, in the words of Phillip Knightley, "completely discredited; the danger of accepting statements at face value was amply illustrated, and the manner in which each newspaper's political line had influenced its version of the Setif attack had been clearly shown."²¹

Yet, the French press revealed the full scale of the May killings only as late as 1947. It was then that *Liberté* informed its readers that "thousands of innocent Algerians were murdered, villages destroyed and the hunt for the

nationalists began," with the full acquiescence of Paris.²² *L'Humanité* arguing along a similar line, stressed the excessive "ferocity" with which the police and army had responded.²³ *Alger-Republicain* went back to the subject in 1949, stating rather vigorously that "on 8 May 1945, 30,000 victims lost their lives to fascism and to the *colon* clan [who wanted]... to deprive the Algerians of the fruits of victory to which they had contributed."²⁴

It was in June 1945 that *The New York Times*' readers learned for the first time that "French ground and air forces killed or wounded more than 10,000 Arab rebels," when the paper picked up a story from the Rome edition of the American Army newspaper *Stars and Stripes*.²⁵ Although *The New York Times* seemed now prepared to recognize the scale of French violence, as J. Galtung and M.A. Ruge have argued there are different ways of presenting an event, and particularly many ways of presenting "fights for independence".²⁶ By using the term "rebels", for example, the paper gave the impression that the victims of the May killings had been armed, whilst evidence shows that they were civilians taking part in a passive march. To them, as some survivors now testify, this was a method that fell within the democratic spirit traditionally preached by Republican France to make a bid for a new deal. *The New York Times*, veering towards a more detached stance, told its readers about "the most effective counter-measures" against the Algerians which had been taken by the French airmen, who "flew as many as 300 sorties in a single day with medium and heavy bombers obtained from the United States." To the paper, however, this tactic seemed justified "[b]ecause of the difficult terrain".²⁷

The paper did considerably better a year after V-E Day and its immediate aftermath when, in April 1946, it reflected on the means adopted by the French authorities. It seemed to have freed itself from the monopoly of the French information services, although its Algeria-related reporting was still coming only from Paris. Offering its appraisal of the situation in hindsight, it drove home inescapably the fact that "[t]he French used not only troops but gunboats in suppressing the uprising with the utmost severity."²⁸ It also informed its readership that the nationalist action had been politically motivated and carefully planned, contrary to its previously held view that it had been spontaneous and mainly motivated by the economic difficulties facing the local population after the War.

The concerted marches, the highly calculated timing of the nationalist rallies, and the display for the first time of the Algerian flag evidenced the political nature of the May uprising. Meanwhile, the paper's readers learned about the French Government's attempts to conceal the truth about the police and army response to the nationalist protest: "...between 7,000

and 8,000 natives (the figures cannot yet be established) were slaughtered in the drastic reaction, including bombing and mass executions."²⁹

Although these represented positive developments in *The New York Times'* perception of the crisis, the nationalist version was not presented to its readers until eighteen months after the uprising, in the form of a letter published on 30 December 1946. Written by the Secretary of the Committee for Freedom of North Africa, Dr. Mohamed Aboul-Ahrass, it was given the title "North African 'Iron Curtain'." Dr. Aboul-Ahrass pointed to the "iron curtain" France had woven around its North African colonies to conceal the conduct of its troops in Algeria which had resulted in "bloodshed, terror and revolt." This, he added, was played down if not completely ignored by the American media. Using American bombers given the free French through Lend-Lease to help the fight against Germany, "40,000 Algerians were slain, 200,000 imprisoned and 3,000 native homes strafed and pillaged...." He concluded his letter by reminding readers of North Africa's contribution to the Allied victory: 65,000 North African soldiers "... laid down their lives and hopes so that aspirations of men like Willkie and Roosevelt might become realities."

The aim of the French *coup de force* response to the Algerian initial demonstrations seemed to be twofold: to deal a decisive blow to the nationalist movement and its apparatus, and to establish a precedent that would possibly deter the local people from similar showdowns in the future. But, ironically enough, this only helped to increase local discontent and to radicalize nationalist attitudes towards Algeria's relationship with France.³⁰ Indeed, moderates like Ferhat Abbas became "federalists" or "autonomists" and Algerian nationalism took a new turn.³¹

The events of May 1945, in short, represented a decisive turning point in the evolution of Algerian nationalism. They had a significant impact on the attitude of young Algerians, especially members of the Seventh Regiment of Algerian *Tirailleurs* who had fought with distinction on the European front during the War. They had just returned to eastern Algeria, when they learned of the killings of Setif, Kherata, and Guelma. Most of them henceforth became convinced of the necessity to pursue a military course of action. Some would eventually become prominent leaders in the Algerian revolution which was to be officially declared on 1 November 1954. "Everyone of the 'new wave' of Algerian nationalists prominent in the National Liberation Front today," wrote Edward Behr in 1961, "traces his revolutionary determination back to May 1945...each of them felt after May 1945 that some form of armed uprising would sooner or later become necessary." Without expecting news outlets to be prophetic, this was not perceived by the contemporary press. Most of the press would, indeed,

resume coverage of the Algerian situation only in 1954 with the official outbreak of the War of Independence, despite the gravity of what had happened in the interim.

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