

Colonial Prisons in Algeria during the Liberation Revolution (1954-1962)

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Abstract:

The present research paper focuses on colonial prisons in Algeria during the Revolution of Liberation. It gives their background from the definition and development since the French occupation up to the outbreak of the Revolution, including different types of colonial prisons, such as prisons for long sentences, and short sentences, and juvenile centers like Serkadji Prison, Lambèse Prison, and Sétif Civilian Prison. The methodology will be based on descriptive and analytical methods to get information from varied historical materials to document the events and interpret their effects. The findings unveil the inhuman conditions and forms of torture, including water and electric torture, that Algerian prisoners underwent. This is the case with an analysis of the impact of colonial policies on the Algerian population and how prison conditions influenced resistance during the Revolution. Overall, this research enriches our understanding of how colonialism impacted the past of Algeria and its continued influence on the present and future.

Keywords: Colonial prisons, Serkadji, Torture, Electricity.

ملخص:

تتناول هذه الورقة البحثية السجون الاستعمارية في الجزائر خلال ثورة التحرير، مسلطة الضوء على خلفيتها من حيث التعريف والتطور منذ الاحتلال الفرنسي وحتى اندلاع الثورة. تشمل الدراسة أنواعًا مختلفة من السجون الاستعمارية، مثل السجون ذات الأحكام الطويلة والقصيرة، ومراكز الأحداث، مع أمثلة بارزة كسجن سركاجي، وسجن لمبيس، وسجن سطيف المدني. تعتمد المنهجية على الأساليب الوصفية والتحليلية لاستقصاء المعلومات من مصادر تاريخية متنوعة بهدف توثيق الأحداث وتفسير آثارها. تكشف النتائج عن الظروف اللاإنسانية وأشكال التعذيب، بما في ذلك التعذيب بالماء والكهرباء، التي تعرض لها السجناء الجزائريون. كما تتناول الورقة تأثير السياسات الاستعمارية على السكان الجزائريين، ودور ظروف السجون في تحفيز المقاومة أثناء الثورة. يساهم هذا البحث في تعزيز فهمنا لتأثير الاستعمار على تاريخ الجزائر وتداعياته المستمرة على الحاضر والمستقبل.

الكلمات المفتاحية: السجون الاستعمارية، سركاجي، التعذيب، الكهرباء.

1- Introduction

Like all other colonial regimes, the French colonial regime was imposing its control over Algeria through prisons. Among the means used by the French colonial authorities in Algeria after the outbreak of the Liberation Revolution on November 1, 1954, was the creation of prisons and detention centers where any person suspected of having relations with the revolution was imprisoned. Right after the revolution started,

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spread, and the military actions against the colonial forces intensified, the French authorities hastened to adopt a string of military and political measures to find a solution in Algeria. It was one of these measures, the issuance of exceptional laws, including the Emergency Law, dated April 3, 1955, mandating the establishment of prisons. Moreover, the French regime isolated the revolutionaries, freedom fighters, as well as members of the National Liberation Army who participated in the Liberation Revolution from all supplies and assistance. To strongly back our question, we have posed the following questions:

Which colonial prisons did France operate most in Algeria during the Liberation Revolution? What was life for Algerians in the colonial prisons, and what forms of torture did they inflict on them?

2- Method and Tools:

The study follows a methodology that involves collecting information from various historical sources and references that cover the history of Algeria, focusing on documenting key events and figures using the descriptive approach. This approach relies on a precise description of historical events and phenomena as they occurred, while the analytical approach helps interpret this information by studying causes and effects and analyzing historical patterns and trends. Additionally, comparisons are made between historical events in Algeria and those from different periods or geographical regions to highlight differences and similarities, thereby enhancing the understanding of historical impacts on the present and future.

Prison ("Habes"), an ancient Arabic term, has retained its eloquence in our colloquial language, and our people hardly use the term "sijn" (prison). "Habes" refers to the dark place where the best Algerian fighters were once detained (Abd elmalek, 2010). In contrast, a "sijn" is defined as a place where a person sentenced to a deprivation of liberty is detained (Zamamouche, 2001).

A "sijn" is a place designated for deviants, characterized by architectural designs meant to confine individuals from society. It is usually constructed with reinforced concrete and has iron windows, and doors made of thick iron sheets. Those imprisoned some individuals have committed a crime or violated the laws governing society and, as a punishment, do not enjoy any civil rights.

The Historical Development of Prisons in Algeria During the French Occupation:

- **Stage 1858-1860:** The responsibility for overseeing all affairs related to Algeria, including prison administration, was assigned to the Minister of War at that time.
- **Stage 1860-1874:** During this stage, the Ministry of War was abolished, and France issued the decree of November 24, 1860, returning the responsibility of prisons to the Governor-General.
- **Stage 1874:** In 1870, France succeeded in annexing Algeria, considering it a part of France. Consequently, based on the decree of May 26, 1874, the prisons were placed under the Ministry of the Interior.

- **Stage of the Decree of June 4, 1898:** The responsibility for prisons was returned once again to the Governor-General. This decree reorganized the prisons and established a special administration for their management, headed by a director directly accountable to the Governor-General. The director was assisted by a technical office comprising many sector employees.
- **Stage of February 3, 1912:** The prison administration was abolished, and the prisons in Algeria remained unaffected by the French administration. However, prisons in France were placed under the Ministry of Justice by the decree of March 13, 1911.
- **Stage of 1947:** In this year, the Organic Law of Algeria was issued, and the prisons were placed under the Ministry of Justice in Paris.

Following the outbreak of the Revolution of Liberation on November 1, 1954, there was a need for urgent issuance of regulations governing prisons during the period of revolution in order to counter the revolution. The Governor-General and the Resident Minister were granted broader powers culminating in the issuance of the decree on March 17, 1956. It gave the Resident Minister the power to establish special detention centers alongside existing prisons (Welch, 2003).

3- Results and Discussion

3-1 Types of Colonial Prisons in Algeria

Prisons in colonial Algeria were found in almost every region of the country, except for the south, or so it is believed. This is quite understandable as the spread of prisons was associated with the liberation struggle and colonial repression in this country (Jabari & Yusuf, 2023; Welch, 2003).

The colonial authorities, that were in Algeria then, had established a prison system that almost looked like the one in France. The French Ministry of Justice created a sort of directory of the prisons of Algeria that had set, in 1945, different parts: prisons for long-term sentences, prisons for short-term sentences, points for juvenile detention, and deportation camps.

3-1-1 Prisons for Long-Term Sentences

These are large prisons where individuals sentenced to more than one year are incarcerated. These prisons include the following categories:

✓ **First Category:** Central Prisons: There are four central prisons in Algeria: El Harrach, Berrouaghia, Chlef, and Lambèse. The latter closely resembled prisons in France. The Berrouaghia Prison was known as the "Agricultural Penal Colony" because the inmates worked in agriculture and farming. The central prison in El Harrach was called the "Penal Complex" due to its multiple specializations.

✓ **Second Category: Penal Centers:** There are three penal centers: Algiers, Constantine, and Oran.

3-1-2 Prisons for short-term sentences

This refers to when the sentence is less than one year in prison. In Algeria, there were two categories of such sentences:

- **The first category: Labor Prisons:** These are referred to as "Disciplinary Detention Houses" and include two sections:

- **The first section:** Includes prisons with a significant capacity, such as the prisons in Algiers (Serkadji), Oran, and Constantine.

- **The second section:** Includes a group of medium-sized prisons, with one prison in each of the following areas: Batna, Blida, Annaba, Bejaia, Guelma, Mascara, Mostaganem, Oued-el-Ahmar (Chlef), Philippeville (Skikda), Setif, Sidi Bel Abbes, Tiaret, Tizi Ouzou, and Tlemcen.

- **The second category: Attached Prisons:** These are specific to Algeria and has no equivalent in France. They house individuals sentenced by the Magistrate Court to prison terms not exceeding two months.

3-1-3 Juvenile Centers and Dimension Centers

They are as follows:

- **Juvenile Detention Centers:** These are places for incarcerating minors under the age of 16.
- **Deportation Center:** Located in the city of El Oued, this center houses dangerous individuals (Heba Abdulaziz, 2009)

3-2 Models of French Prisons in Algeria During the Liberation Revolution

• **Serkadji Prison:** Serkadji Prison in the capital is one of the colonial prisons used by France as a center for persecuting the Algerian people. Its history dates back to the time of Khair al-Din Barbarossa. The colonizers inherited this institution and reopened it during the Revolution to make it a harsh penal facility for those who rebelled against France. Although this prison was primarily intended for Algerians, it also housed many French and European supporters of the Algerian cause.

One of the most notable features of Serkadji Prison, despite being a civilian prison, was the extreme harshness of executions that prisoners experienced. As Jacqueline recalls, "For us, the indescribable horror was the executions." Most testimonies from those who were imprisoned at Serkadji agree that every prisoner, immediately after being detained, was subjected to interrogation under torture, and many Algerians faced execution by guillotine. Martyr Ahmed Zabana was the first to face the guillotine; after

his arrest in November 1954 following a clash near Saint-Denis in "Sidi Bel Abbes," he was sentenced to death by the permanent military court of Algeria and was executed on June 19, 1957. During this period, prominent intellectuals who fell victim to this prison included the revolutionary poet Mahmoud Zakaria, who witnessed the execution of martyr Zabana (Bachir Kacha, 2007). Student Abdel Rahman was also executed on April 24, 1958, along with other Algerians and French who fell victim to this prison.

- **Lambèse Prison:** Lambèse Prison in Tazoult, Batna Province, is considered one of the most prominent colonial penal institutions and the largest prison in eastern Algeria. Although it was originally built by the Romans, French colonization, for repressive and punitive purposes against the people, modified it under a decree issued in January 1950. It then housed approximately 507 cells and around 800 guards, with an estimated prisoner population of about 12,000 Algerians (Nouredine, 2002), which exceeded its capacity. This prison often attracted inmates sentenced to hard labor, and upon their arrival, guards would be waiting to deliver kicks and punches without any mercy. Algerians in this prison experienced all forms of psychological and physical torture.

- **Other Prisons:**

- **Sétif Civilian Prison:** This central prison in Sétif was established in 1902 and was designated for general criminal prisoners. During the Liberation Revolution, it housed around 200 prisoners, with political prisoners constituting 95 percent of the inmate population during the last two years of the Revolution. The prison was structured into five sections, each with a number of rooms. One of these rooms was designated for women, another for political isolation and medical care, in addition to cells used for torture (Belaidi & Ouzbiri).

- **Koudiat Prison:** Koudiat Prison, one of the notorious French penal institutions during the Liberation Revolution, is located in Constantine Province. Colonel Taher Zoubeiri describes it as being built of concrete, including its floor, and containing a special room known as the "armored room," where prominent prisoners such as Sheikh El Haddad were held. The inmates included those sentenced to death, political prisoners, and general criminal detainees. One of the notable Algerian fighters who was imprisoned at Koudiat was martyr Mustafa Ben Boulaid, who was captured on June 21, 1955, after escaping from a prison in Tunisia. He was transferred to Constantine, where he was sentenced to death for disrupting public order, conspiring against France's security, and forming a criminal group. Despite the prison's fortifications, he managed to escape with 11 of his comrades on November 10, 1955.

- **Moran Prison:** Located in the area of Qasr el-Bakhar at the heights of Mount Bougar in the Minif region, Médéa Province, Moran Prison was notorious for its brutal treatment of fighters captured during battles between them and French forces. This

prison was considered one of the worst French prisons, where inmates were exploited in the most inhumane ways.

- Prisoners were placed in rooms they had built themselves while performing hard labor, and sometimes those who disrupted order inside the prison were put in tents that offered no protection from the summer heat or winter cold. They were forced to break stones daily under the scorching sun and carry sand from Bouguelz to their prison, especially those who rebelled against the colonial administration. Many of them faced death due to the harsh labor conditions.

- Balhadi Prison: In 1906, a military barracks was established in the city of Khenchela, which later became known to the local population as Balhadi Prison. France used it as a forward base in the desert, initially intended to supply its forces, assert control over the southwestern region, and secure the Algerian-Moroccan borders. Over time, it transformed from a mere observation post into a prison and torture center, especially with the expansion of the Revolution. One notable event was when a group of revolutionaries seized the prison's weapons and used them to support the Revolution. Another significant incident was the successful escape of the condemned activist Ridouane Ould Khaldi in 1957, facilitated by a group of revolutionaries.

- Kouif Central Prison: Located in the city of Kouif, Tebessa Province, which is home to a significant phosphate mine, Kouif Central Prison was established by the French to secure and manage the workers for the mine. Built in 1930, the prison initially served as a dormitory for prisoners after their work shifts, consisting of two large corridors. In 1952, the French company ceased using prisoners for labor, and the prison was closed until the outbreak of the Liberation Revolution. It was reopened in 1955 and repurposed for interrogating and torturing detainees, who were either transferred to other prisons or released (Belaidi & Ouzbiri).

- During the Liberation Revolution, this prison received thousands of Algerians and played a significant role in terrorizing the population and instilling fear and panic. The prison witnessed numerous large-scale arrests, criminal activities, and brutal torture (Belaidi & Ouzbiri).

- **The Red Prison:** Located in the city of Ferjass, Mila Province, construction of the Red Prison began in 1952 and was completed in 1956, built by the hands of tortured Algerian nationals (radio, 2020). It served as a pathway to death and liquidation for many revolutionaries and ordinary Algerians. Various forms of repression and torture, reflecting the brutality of French colonialism, were inflicted within this prison (Belaidi & Ouzbiri).

The prison was named "The Red Prison" due to the red color of its walls. It is divided into four main sections, each containing several cells of almost identical size but serving different functions. Above these sections, beyond the main entrance, is a surveillance and guard platform that allows for internal control of the prison and

monitoring of surrounding areas, particularly to the south, east, and west. The northern part of the prison corridor contains three cells designated for the "Red Hand" gang(Bar, 1959). The western part of the corridor features tanks filled with dirty water, used for torture during intense interrogation sessions(Ali, 1954).

3-3 Some of the Methods of Torture in Prisons during the revolution Liberation

One of the most dangerous methods employed by French forces in Algeria during the Liberation Revolution was the use of torture. Leaders of the occupying army and French troops admitted to practicing torture in various forms on Algerians of all ages and groups.

In 1958, French authorities established a specialized torture school in the city of Skikda, named "Gendarme," and torture became a part of military training across various French military units operating in Algeria. Every village or town had administrative centers [S.A.S] dedicated to these practices, along with the Secret Army Organization (O.A.S). French authorities also created units within the French army responsible for the arrest, interrogation, and torture of Algerians, including:

- Information Centers at the level of military sectors (A.A).
- Operations and Protection Units at the level of military areas (O.P).
- The Second Recruit is located in areas with specialized administrative centers (A.S).
- Mobile Group Headquarters for Rural Police (G.M.P.P).

Torture centers operated by the French army were widespread across the country. In the First Wilaya, there were approximately 219 centers; in the Second Wilaya (North Constantine), there were 122 centers; and in the Third Wilaya, there were about 173 centers. Algiers alone had nearly 23 specialized torture centers.

Examples of torture within prisons include:

Electric Torture: Electric torture was widely used, as confirmed by those involved in such heinous practices, including General "Aussarès," who stated, "This method was preferred by his soldiers." This preference was due to the severe effects it had on detainees, which concealed signs of torture during inspections by international committees like the Red Cross. Additionally, it caused extreme pain that compelled individuals to confess regardless of their endurance. The process involved several forms: placing the person on a metal table and spraying their body with water to intensify the sensation of electrical pressure, initially applying the electric wires to the ears and then to the genital area in the second stage, with the duration often exceeding one minute and repeated. The device used for generating electric power was known as a "Gégène"(Ali, 1954).

Torture by Fire: Fire is a means that does not burden soldiers much but causes severe pain to the tortured due to the disfigurements it leaves behind (Boualem, 2007). This is done by stripping the person of their clothes and starting the torture by placing lit cigarettes on various parts of the body, or by smearing some parts of the body with fuel and setting it on fire to cause severe burns, pushing the person to confess without feeling (Mohamed, 2004).

Torture by Glass: Soldiers inflict this on detainees' bodies by removing eyebrow hair and eyelashes, shaving half of the mustache, plucking head hair, and peeling the skin. It also involves driving nails into detainees' bodies, skinning them, putting salt in the wounds, removing nails and teeth, gouging out eyes, amputating fingers, ears, and genitals, forcing the detainee to sit on the edges of iron bars or bottles, or making them walk on glass (Ahsan, 2010).

Torture by Rope: This involves binding the prisoner's upper and lower limbs together and then lifting them for a prolonged period, which can cause fractures that lead to death (Ali, 1954). It also includes strangling the prisoner by two soldiers until death in order to force a confession.

Torture by Water: This method is used in three successive stages. First, water is introduced into the stomach, causing sharp pain that makes the person unable to remain silent and may lead to nausea. In the second stage, the person is placed in a sink at night when the weather is cold. In the third stage, the person is bound to a long board and tilted downward so that their head is submerged in the sink for a specific amount of time, then lifted back up. This process is repeated until a confession is obtained (channel, 2018.)

Torture by Drugs: One of the vile methods used by French colonialists was forcing detainees to use drugs to coerce them into confessing and implicating themselves and some political leaders of the revolution. These confessions were then used as evidence in show trials (Ali, 1954).

Use of Trained Dogs: This dangerous method involves filling a space the size of a small room with broken glass, placing the prisoner inside, and then releasing trained military dogs that chase and bite the prisoner's body after being left unfed for two days. The prisoner finds themselves unable to escape, not knowing how to act—either fleeing from the dogs and their deadly fangs, which will ultimately kill them, or surrendering to the reality of being unable to run on the broken glass after their bare feet have been torn apart.

3-3 Life Inside Prison

3-3-1 Suffering: Prison, regardless of the times and systems it is subjected to, is inherently designed to create an environment of suffering for the prisoner. Even under the best circumstances, this suffering is limited to the restriction of individual freedom, followed by a series of pains defined by the conditions in which the prisoners live.

3-3-2 Daily Boredom: For example, inside the Serkaji building, where movements are restricted and activity is nonexistent, a day for a prisoner turns into a month, and a month into a year. Except for meals and a short daily stroll, the prisoner remains in their cell or bed, immersed in thoughts—sometimes recalling their children left to their fate, and other times dreaming of a dignified life in a free homeland. This situation can drag on so long that the prisoner feels even the smallest movement as if it were an earthquake. There was a day when the ovens malfunctioned, and instead of the usual meal, sandwiches were served. The prisoners rejoiced because something had changed in the prison (Jariya Kashir, 2003). Only the political struggle of the prisoners breaks the daily routine, and any improvement in conditions, no matter how minor, is seen as a victory.

3-3-3 Nutrition, Hygiene, and Health: The meals provided to the prisoners were below acceptable standards, both in quantity and quality. As veteran Ali Alwan says, "We used to see worms in the plate and we would eat..." In the morning, prisoners would get a cup of coffee with a piece of bread, while at lunch they would receive a small amount of rice porridge, potatoes, or pasta. Dinner was limited to a small amount of soup. "Prisoners would get a piece of meat or fish twice a week, which was often inedible. Also, the half-loaf of bread each prisoner received daily was often moldy, and the prisoner had to scrape off the mold and eat it," adds Ali Alwan. Those sentenced to death would receive an improved meal, but what kind of improvement? "They would give us a salad made of thorny weeds that animals eat."

Prisoners live in conditions where maintaining cleanliness is difficult, and what particularly concerns them is the presence of toilets within the sleeping quarters, especially since the ventilation standards set by French prison law require six cubic meters of air per hour per prisoner (Jariya Kashir, 2003).

Overcrowding, poor ventilation, and high humidity have created conditions suitable for the spread of dangerous pests such as lice, fleas, and mosquitoes, leading to a series of epidemics including typhus, which affected 500 prisoners in the early 1940s. Tuberculosis also claimed the lives of 160 prisoners during the same period (Moine, 1972). Records show that several prisoners died in the "sick room," as happened, for example, an executed prisoner named Zarai Lazzhar, who was convicted of attempting to kill an officer and illegal possession of weapons, military equipment, and explosives.

This veteran, may he rest in peace, died in the sick room on August 12, 1957, due to heart attacks, according to the records.

3-3-4 Disciplinary Measures: Every political prisoner is subject to punishment for the slightest reasons(Moine, 1972). The methods of punishment vary, including verbal abuse, threats, deprivation of outdoor exercise, denial of visits and mail, pouring cold water on the prisoner, as well as beating with sticks and placing the prisoner in underground cells. A prisoner may receive all of these forms of punishment or a combination of some of them

3-3-5 Executions: Those sentenced to death spend their days crammed five or six into cells meant for one person, with their hands and feet shackled(Jariya Kashir, 2003). The prisoners did not know the date of their execution or the identity of the person who would carry it out. All they knew was that executions took place at night just before dawn, as if the executioners were trying to hide their crimes. This resulted in psychological preparation for all those sentenced to death, leading them to consume large amounts of coffee and stay up all night to avoid being surprised by the executioners who might come for them while they were asleep. The guards took great pleasure in opening the cell door and pretending that the time of execution had come, relishing in the terror seen on the prisoners' faces.

4- Conclusion

At this point, we have concluded our examination of the scandals and crimes of French colonialism. The examples of prisons and methods of torture we have discussed are just a small glimpse into a much larger and more complex issue. This topic remains rich and extensive for those interested in uncovering further colonial abuses. The research is ongoing because it highlights colonial crimes and reveals the true and brutal nature of the colonizers. Despite the many years since Algeria achieved independence and the costly freedom it entailed, the nightmares of colonial crimes continue to haunt our mothers and fathers. This remains a debt on our shoulders until France acknowledges its barbarism and cruelty.

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