Chapter 5


The Algerian war started in November 1954 and ended with the Evian Accords of 1962 by which Algeria was granted independence from France. Giving independence to colonies had never been easy for the French. It was even harder for France to give up Algeria than other territories because more than a million French settlers had lived in Algeria for a century and a half, and Algeria was considered as part of France itself, not a colony or a protectorate as with other colonial possessions. The process towards independence required a painful re-assessment of French history and of the perception of Algeria as no longer part of France. It was carried out by General Charles De Gaulle against the will of French military officers and of the European population in Algeria, and resulted in the repatriation to France of most of the French settlers.

The war was fierce, bitter, cruel: the Algerian rebels committed many atrocities against the French military, civilians and other Algerians who had chosen France’s side. The French troops committed collective reprisals, summary executions and systematic torture. The extent to which torture was practised by French officers and soldiers in Algeria became widely known and acknowledged in France only after almost 40 years following Algeria’s independence.
So much has been written about the Algerian war, and more recently, about French war crimes and torture in Algeria, that this Chapter will focus on, and summarize, only a few significant events and trials.

Brief Historical Notes

Algeria, situated in North Africa between Morocco and Tunisia, extends over 2,381,741 square km (including petroleum-rich and desert part of the Sahara). Its first inhabitants were Berber-speaking people. Following Roman invasions, it was conquered, in part, by the Byzantine Empire which was, in turn, ousted by Muslim Arabs in the 7th–8th centuries. Algeria came under Ottoman domination in the 15th century and was ruled, as from 1671, by the Dey of Algiers.

In 1830, an expeditionary force of 37,000 French soldiers occupied Algiers: a few weeks later, the Dey signed an Act of Capitulation. The conquest of the entire country took more years: all resistance was crushed in 1885. A large scale colonization followed, deemed a tool to consolidate the conquest. Colonization by Europeans (half French, others mainly Spanish, Italian and Maltese) began around 1840, with the support of state subsidies. After the French defeat by the Germans in 1870, a number of inhabitants of Alsace-Lorraine settled in Algeria. By 1880, European settlers numbered about 375,000 and they controlled most of the better farmland. In 1954, when the war started, Algeria had a total population of 9,530,000, including 8,450,000 Muslims (89 per cent). In 1848, the French Constitution had declared Algeria a French territory. Only the settlers were represented in the Parliament. In 1900, the country was given administrative and financial autonomy and placed under the authority of a Governor-General appointed by the French government. In 1926, the first independentist movement was created, calling for a fully-independent, Muslim-controlled Algeria. Another movement sought assimilation with France and the equality of Muslims and Europeans in Algeria, a claim which was never fulfilled.

In World War II, Algeria first came under the Vichy regime until the Anglo-American landing in North Africa of 1942, when it became the Allied headquarters and served as the seat of General De Gaulle’s Free French government until the Liberation of France from German occupation in 1945.

On the day of the German surrender, 7 May 1945, an independentist demonstration in Sétif and surrounding region developed into riots, which was brutally crushed by the French Army: 88 to 105 settlers had been killed