

Sixty Million Frenchmen Can't Be Wrong

(why we love france, but not the french)

**Jean-Benoît Nadeau
& Julie Barlow**

Algeria:

The Unacknowledged War

Four months after our arrival, a friend of ours, Éric Marsault, invited us to his parents' for Easter weekend. The family almost adopted us, and their house in the village of Fresnes, in the Loire Valley, became something of a second home to us. Éric's father, Jean-Marie, was a *bon vivant*, a gourmand, and avid accordion player who used to have his own band. But he had been a soldier once. Tucked among the various stuffed fish decorating the walls of Jean-Marie's den was a photo of him and his captain, and a frame with several war medals, a newspaper clipping, and a crest of the *lère DBFM—Première Division Blindée des Fusiliers Marins* (First Armored Marines Division).

Like most men of his age, Jean-Marie had fought in the War of Algeria in 1956–57—he actually returned a sergeant—and like most, he doesn't talk much about it. Yet as the memorabilia in his office attests, Sergeant Jean-Marie Marsault hasn't forgotten the war. He still mourns his commanding field officer and three of his best friends who died in a skirmish in 1957.

Outside of France, very little is known about the war in Algeria (1954–62). It was certainly one of the most traumatic events in recent French memory, at least as traumatic as World War II. It is no exaggeration to call it the Vietnam of the French—in many ways, this is even an understatement.

The conflicts resemble each other in striking ways. Both were colonial, or neo-colonial, wars. In both cases, two powerful countries were defeated by an enemy considerably inferior in means—the French sent 1.3 million troops to fight against about 330,000 Algerian guerrillas, and lost. And at home the populations of both countries were split over the war, with huge segments opposed to their country's military campaigns abroad to begin with.

That's where the similarities end, though. Imagine if, at the time of the Vietnam War, there had been one million American settlers who had lived in Vietnam for four generations. Imagine if Vietnam had not been "foreign territory," but a part of the United States, a fifty-first state—and if North Vietnamese terrorists had killed twenty-five hundred American civilians in the United States. And just imagine the scenario of the U.S. Army becoming so displeased with its own government's conduct in Vietnam that it attempted to overthrow the American government by staging a coup in Washington. This is exactly what happened to France during the war in Algeria.

Few books and even fewer films tell the story of this war. The French government did not even call it a war until that term was accepted in a vote on June 10, 1999, thirty-seven years after the 1962 cease-fire. Until then, it had been known officially as an *opération de maintien de l'ordre* (a law-and-order operation) to contain Muslim nationalists in French territory. But a war it was. At the height of the operation, in 1959, five hundred thousand French troops were stationed in Algeria. During the conflict, twenty-five thousand French soldiers were killed, and probably ten times more Algerians.

Four decades later, the War of Algeria remains an open wound in France's national psyche. For the French, the physical hardship of World War II may have been greater, but the psychological consequences of Algeria were at least as terrible, partly because, unlike World War II, the war in Algeria was not a "noble" one by any stretch of the imagination. France's attempts to "pacify" Algeria were shockingly out of step with the times; in the rest of Africa the decolonization movement was in full swing. Unlike World War II, the War of Algeria offers no psychological refuge in

a "Resistance," whether real or mythical. The millions of men who fought as conscripts or voluntary soldiers in Algeria were either obeying orders or willfully fighting for the cause of a French Algeria. Some of the French who opposed retaining French Algeria protested, but that was all.

The French never speak as openly about Algeria as they do about World War II. But while we were in France, two events brought some unpleasant memories to the surface.

The first was the 1999 trial of Maurice Papon, a former high-ranking civil servant in the Vichy government and former Budget Minister from 1978–91, who was accused of having signed the deportation orders of Jews during World War II. Papon was also head of the Paris police in October 1961 when a disputed number of Algerians were beaten and drowned in the Seine following severe rioting. The French government has always placed the official death count at six, but in his book *La Bataille de Paris: 17 Octobre 1961*, author Jean-Luc Einaudi claimed that as many as three hundred had actually died. Papon interrupted his own trial to sue Einaudi for defamation—and lost, ruining his own reputation and doing inestimable damage to the reputation of the police. (In the end, Papon was found guilty of complicity for a crime against humanity, and sentenced to ten years of jail. In September 2002, a court of appeals released him on grounds that he was too sick to stay in jail. But President Chirac—the first president to acknowledge France's responsibility in the Holocaust in 1995—asked to overturn the appeal.)

But the revelations of the Papon trial were just a footnote compared to the earthquake that shook France when the memoirs of retired general Paul Aussaresses came out in 2001. In *Special Services, Algeria 1955–57*, Aussaresses confesses that he used torture to get information and spread fear among the enemy during the war in Algeria. Although French communists had denounced the use of torture during the war, it was the first time a high-placed French military officer admitted that torture was used regularly and a lot of people knew about it. Aussaresses, who looked the part with his bony face and patched eye, even stated in an interview that he would do it all over again if he had to. The French president stripped

Aussaresses of his *légion d'honneur* medal, and the press published a flurry of articles with testimony and confessions of other military personnel during the period. Aussaresses's book was a reminder that few of those involved in this conflict came out of it with clean hands.

The story of French Algeria started in the 1830s, when France arrived in the North African country with the official pretext of cracking down on piracy in the Mediterranean. Like other countries at the time, France wanted to extend its influence and boost its prestige by acquiring foreign territory. France also wanted to get a hand on Algeria's rich agricultural shores and resume colonial expansion, which had stopped when France forfeited New France to the British in 1763.

However, France would not only settle in its new colony: it would make Algeria part of France.

By 1954, Algeria was the home of one million "Europeans"—referred to this way because half of them were of either Spanish, Italian, or Maltese origin. Writer Albert Camus, whose mother was Spanish, is the most famous of these settlers, who later came to call themselves *Pieds-Noirs* (Black Feet), a reference to workers in the coal bunkers of Mediterranean ferries. *Pieds-Noirs* were the French born in Algeria, as opposed to immigrants from France and native Muslims, and they developed a distinct identity. For one, 80 percent of Europeans in Algeria lived in cities, making them twice as urban as the rest of the French.

The main push for settlement took place between 1848 and 1890 and was carried out pretty much in the fashion of the times—basically, the same way Europeans had settled the western United States, Canada, and Australia. The French seized the best land, bulldozed the Muslims into the worst corners of the country, and installed themselves in some seven hundred towns specially created for the settlers. However, contrary to what happened elsewhere, demographics worked against North African settlers. Between 1830 and 1954, the Muslim population in Algeria tripled from three to nine million. Settlers feared being overrun.

In 1848, the French government declared Algeria part of France—the way Hawaii and Alaska are part of the United States. From then on,

Algeria would not be administered by a single colonial ministry; each French ministry would be responsible for its own affairs in Algeria. The settlers elected their own representatives to the National Assembly and the laws of the Republic were applied there. In 1870, the thirty thousand Jews living in Algeria obtained the same civil and political rights they were granted everywhere else in the Republic. And in 1889, the children of European immigrants in Algeria were granted French citizenship, as was customary in France.

However, the French status was never extended to the Muslim population, whose faith was regarded as incompatible with French customs. The *indigènes musulmans* (Muslim natives) in Algeria had no civil rights; they were mere subjects of the Republic. Over the years, only several thousand Muslims managed to acquire French citizenship. They did so by proving they lived according to French mores, or by performing "exceptional service" to the Republic, in the army or as civilians.

The French government and some high civil servants did see that disaster was looming and periodically tried to improve the lot of Muslims by giving them more political and civil rights and improving services. But the government had to contend with resistance from the European settlers, who lobbied successfully to remove the most pro-native administrators. The settlers' interest was clear: they needed impoverished Muslims to work as cheap labor in their businesses and on their farms. If the government in Paris had managed to break the settlers' resistance to reforms early enough, there might never have been a war in Algeria. But the Muslims never got anything better than the right to manage their local affairs. Muslims in Tunisia and Morocco had retained some capacity of self-government within the French protectorate system, and there had never been as many European settlers in those countries as there were in Algeria. The Muslims' situation in Algeria just kept deteriorating. By 1940, only 8 percent of native Muslims had a formal education of any sort. Settlers' land plots were on average eight times bigger than the Muslims'.

The situation proved to be fertile ground for the rising independence movement, which slowly gained momentum. Until the mid-1930s, Algerian Muslims had asked for the obvious—equal civil rights—but after

decades of refusal and arrest, the native Muslim population became more stridently nationalist. Things did not improve under the control of the racist Vichy government. Before the Liberation, de Gaulle's plan was to grant Algerian Muslims citizenship and civil rights after war, but after five years of crippling war, the government in Paris was too weak to break the settlers' lobby. In 1947, when the French government finally granted equal political rights to the Muslim natives, it was too little too late.

Some date the beginning of the Algerian war to May 8, 1945, the day Germany capitulated. On that day, a crowd of ten thousand demonstrators gathered in the Algerian town of Sétif to demand the liberation of Messali Hadji, a nationalist leader who had been arrested two weeks earlier. When one of the demonstrators waved an Algerian flag, French *gendarmes* tried to pull it down and a riot broke out. Nobody knows who fired first, but dozens of Europeans and Arabs died in the massacre, and the strife spread across the rest of Algeria. Facing a rebellion, the French government sent the army and created local militia units to repress it. In the following two months, fifteen hundred Arabs were supposedly killed—although historians now agree that the figure was probably closer to eight thousand.

Nothing serious happened for the next nine years, but Algerian nationalism had reached the point of no return. In 1954, Algeria was the world's last remaining Arab colony. The most extreme faction of the nationalist movement, the Marxist FLN (*Front de Libération Nationale*) organized its own secret army, though it could only arm about eight hundred men. On October 31, 1954, the FLN launched seventy simultaneous attacks against police stations, sentry posts, and isolated farms—and this is generally recognized as the first day of the War of Algeria.

The eight-year conflict went through many phases. The FLN was most effective as a guerrilla army in the rural areas, where it got support from local populations. Algerian fighters were never a match for the French army, so they concentrated on skirmishes, guerrilla warfare, and terrorism, both in Algeria and in France. In total, 330,000 Algerian fighters were involved at one point or another, and half of them were killed. The biggest push was in the six-month battle of Algiers, in 1957, which was in fact a

series of continual skirmishes and terrorist raids that the French army eventually broke. In 1958, the French built electric fences along Algeria's border with Tunisia, cutting the FLN from its main supply route.

In strictly military terms, the FLN's secret army had been defeated. It never managed to hold any ground against the French army. But politically, the FLN won, partly because of their terror campaign, but more importantly because their denunciations of France's behavior gained the sympathy of the United Nations, and the French almost found themselves in diplomatic isolation. The two superpowers of the time, Russia and the United States, both stood for an openly anti-colonialist policy.

The French army's military victories only boosted the FLN's diplomatic success. The conflict was brutal, almost of another age. The French army used all the means of repression conceivable at the time. Both sides used torture and terrorism and massacred women and children. In 1956, the French intelligence services even went as far as to hijack a Tunisian commercial flight in order to capture five FLN leaders on board. It worked, but the FLN had no trouble convincing the international community that the French were the villains.

While they fought the enemy, both sides had to deal with severe infighting in their ranks. The Marxist FLN was conducting a war against the French army, but also against the more moderate segments of the Muslim population who wanted to reach a peaceful agreement with the French and non-Marxist factions who were attempting to negotiate with the French government. At stake in Algeria was the question of who would go on to form the independent government. The FLN won, but their internal terror campaign cost at least ten thousand Muslim lives. After the war, most of the thirty thousand *harkis* (Muslim auxiliary troops in the French army) who remained in Algeria instead of taking refuge in France were hacked to death.

Infighting did not cost as many lives on the French side, but it did bring France to the brink of civil war, not once, but twice. For the most part, these divisions were the result of the French governments' ineptitude. From 1946 until 1958, France changed governments twenty times, removing any possibility of a coherent policy. Each new prime minister stressed

his resolve to hang on to French Algeria, then appointed a new set of generals, diplomats, and representatives to deal with the issue. Soon enough, Parliament ousted the government over an unrelated issue, and the cycle continued.

All the while, the Europeans of Algeria became restless and increasingly defiant of the government. On one hand, settlers appreciated the fact that the French army was acting with more resolve than it had during the War of Indochina (1945-54), where they were defeated by Ho Chi Minh's Vietminh. But they could not accept the fact that while the French army was fighting, the French government was trying to negotiate a settlement. However, the majority of the French in Europe did not support the war. Some actively opposed it, especially on the Left, and most French were simply indifferent. The government's dual agenda of trying to win militarily while negotiating a settlement was understandable, but the Europeans in Algeria felt betrayed. The most enlightened among the settlers realized that much of the Muslim revolt was fueled by poor living conditions and high unemployment, but they also blamed the French government for this. The situation required a strong hand in a velvet glove, a formula France's frequently changing governments could not offer. Europeans in Algiers became more and more strident in their protests at the same time Muslim nationalists did.

The French government also lost control of the army. Many officers, who had been in Algeria for a while, began blaming the government for the situation, too. That was new. In spite of France's agitated political history over the previous two hundred years, the French military had traditionally been very deferent to the government—except in the cases of Napoleon in 1799 and de Gaulle in 1940. Many soldiers, veterans of Indochina, did not accept the fact that politicians were busy conferring with the enemy while they were losing men in battle.

In the winter of 1958, rumors of a military coup started circulating. Generals let their view be known: France needed a strong leader to get the country out of the Algerian mess. The name of de Gaulle—who had been retired for twelve years—began to circulate. In April 1958, the government changed once more. Both the French in Paris and the Europeans in

Algiers answered with barricades. A group of protesters took over the government's palace in Algiers and declared the creation of a *comité de salut public* (a committee of public salvation)—an allusion to the revolutionary government of 1792-94, which ran the New Republic and defended it against foreign invasion. The army interposed and appointed General Massu, a moderate faithful to de Gaulle, as head of the committee. Then, on May 13, the commander in chief in Algeria, General Raoul Salan, demanded the return of de Gaulle as France's president.

De Gaulle could not be ignored anymore, and he declared himself ready to assume power if Parliament was willing to give him a mandate. On June 1, Parliament voted him prime minister and granted him state-of-emergency powers for six months, as well as the mandate to draft a new constitution. On June 13, de Gaulle went to Algeria and made the famous speech where he declared: "*Je vous ai compris!*" (I have understood you!) His words calmed both the army and the European population, though he never said exactly what or who he understood. De Gaulle then proceeded to reshuffle the army's command both in Paris and in Algiers, in order to break the defiant spirit that had grown among the generals.

De Gaulle accomplished two things. First, he understood that he could not resolve the Algerian quagmire without solid political institutions at home, so he dedicated his time to changing the Constitution first and working to gain the support he needed to get the change accepted. (What he did is described in detail in the next chapter.) Then he invested several billion francs in the economic development of Algeria, in the petroleum extraction industry in particular, which created dynamism in the local economy and satisfied the local Europeans.

The honeymoon lasted a year, until de Gaulle began floating ideas that made it clear he wanted to seek a compromise with the Algerians rather than crush the rebellion. De Gaulle had always demonstrated an extraordinarily good instinct for understanding what France's best interests were. He knew that, in light of the decolonization movement going on elsewhere, the war in Algeria risked damaging France's prestige and reputation beyond repair and undermining its position as a major power. Algeria could not remain French.

By 1960 he was speaking openly about self-determination and the possibility of a referendum in which the whole French population (including native Muslims) could choose between giving Algeria independence, granting it autonomy within France, and/or keeping a French Algeria with a fully integrated Muslim majority. The French supported the referendum idea, but the *Pieds-Noirs* responded with violence, riots, and barricades. The army was having as much difficulty policing the white settlers as controlling the Algerians.

In 1961, European settlers decided that they would not trust Paris to defend their interests and created the *Organisation de l'Armée Secrète* (OAS). For the next year and a half, the OAS carried out military operations and assassinations, bombed the Algerians, and committed terrorist acts in France. The OAS killed a total of about five thousand people in Algeria and Paris.

On April 21, 1961, four retired generals who favored a French Algeria staged a coup in Algiers and attempted to seize power. Panic overtook Paris. Nobody knew who was involved in the coup and rumors circulated that paratroopers would be sent to attack Paris. The coup went nowhere, though, thanks to the personality of de Gaulle. In a TV appearance, wearing his uniform, de Gaulle appealed to soldiers in Algeria to not support the coup. He concluded in his peremptory style: "*Français, aidez-moi*" (Frenchmen, help me). Rank and file soldiers and most officers remained faithful to the general and the coup attempt failed.

Two of the rebel generals, Raoul Salan and Edmond Jouhaud, escaped, went underground, and joined the OAS, which they ran for a year until they were captured in March 1962. Meanwhile, de Gaulle's government fought to maintain control over the army and the police in Algeria and remove elements sympathetic to the OAS.

Throughout 1961, de Gaulle's government conducted secret talks with the FLN. They finally reached an accord in the spa town of Evian, and a cease-fire was called on March 19, 1962. Two weeks later, 90 percent of the French population in France voted in favor of the accord, which granted total independence to Algeria. However, among the 10 percent of the population who disagreed with granting Algeria independence, the grudges were deep, and would last many years.

Realizing that it was fighting for a lost cause, the OAS changed its strategy and decided to fight a defensive battle in Algeria to protect settlers from the threat of massacre by Muslims, which was real. But the OAS also conducted terror operations in Paris, including two assassination attempts on de Gaulle—this was the backdrop for the famous novel and film *Day of the Jackal*.

The French infighting over the question of Algeria produced deep fault lines in the society that are still visible today. Communists and socialists, with their powerful anti-colonial discourse, were vindicated. From this time on, a sizable segment of the French population became militantly and stridently anti-colonialist and denounced neo-colonialism in any form.

José Bové's antiglobalization campaign follows directly in this tradition of French left-wing politics. The McDonald's dismantling was not his first taste of organized protest. In 1989, Bové and other Larzac farmers went to the French territory of New Caledonia to show support for the independence movement there and help organize a clandestine radio. In 1994, Bové protested the creation of the World Trade Organization in Marrakech. In 1995, he went to French Polynesia to protest nuclear tests, and he managed to get onto Greenpeace's Rainbow Warrior. In the spring of 2002, Bové was in Ramallah among the last four European protesters to make it inside Yasser Arafat's compound with a truckload of food and medical supplies, before the Israeli army closed the perimeter. What his protests have in common is a deep rejection of anything resembling colonialism or neo-colonialism in any form—a direct product of the wounds of Algeria.

But the ideological impact of the events in Algeria is almost anecdotal in comparison with the population movements that ensued. In 1962, 99 percent of the one million European settlers packed their bags and took the boat back to France. The government began offering free rides in May, and by July most of the settlers were gone, leaving behind all their possessions except a few suitcases. They moved back "home," but home was not home anymore: most had no family at all, and had no one to meet them in the ports of Marseilles and Toulon. The settlers were refugees in their own country. The government paid two billion dollars to reinstall them and

another twelve billion in indemnities, but some members of this group still harbor strong resentment against the French government and the "Arabs" for ruining their lives.

Meanwhile, the French government maintained its special ties with Algeria, including all cooperation programs. The hundreds of thousands of Algerian nationals who came to work in France as immigrant workers did not even need a visa. Many stayed and had to mingle with former settlers and even former Muslim auxiliaries of the French army who had also been repatriated.

The war also produced powerful resentment among those who had embraced the cause of French-Algeria, whether they were *Pieds-Noirs* or old-stock French from the mainland. The most prominent member of this latter group is Jean-Marie Le Pen, founder of France's extreme right *Front National* party. Born and brought up in Brittany, Le Pen belongs to the class of Frenchmen who seek revenge for France's humiliations. The foreign press often accuses Le Pen of being a Nazi, but nothing could be further from the truth: Le Pen's beef is Algeria and Indochina. The fact that Le Pen captured 19 percent of the vote in the second round of the 2002 presidential elections—his highest score ever—shows how resentment about Algeria is still lingering in France thirty-seven years after the end of the war. (More on Le Pen in the next chapter and chapter 21.)

Tensions between repatriated settlers and new immigrants explains some of the anti-immigration sentiment in present-day France. Yet in spite of these open wounds, tensions have never spilled over the limits of democracy. France certainly has Charles de Gaulle and his new Constitution to thank for that.