“WE MUST SHOUT THE TRUTH TO THE ROOFTOPS:” Gisèle Halimi, Djamila Boupacha, and Sexual Politics in the Algerian War of Independence

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TORTURE: HENRI ALLEG AND THE ALGERIAN WAR

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“We Must Shout the Truth to the Rooftops:” Gisèle Halimi, Djamila Boupacha, and Sexual Politics in the Algerian War of Independence

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On 3rd June, 1960, Simone de Beauvoir, a prominent French feminist, published an article in the newspaper *Le Monde*, which “aroused the most extraordinary storm, not only in France but all over the world.”¹ In the article, she detailed the story of Djamila Boupacha, a female Algerian nationalist, seeking Algerian independence from France, who was arrested for allegedly bombing a café and was subsequently tortured by French military forces. De Beauvoir emphasized certain aspects of Boupacha’s torture, particularly how she was “deflowered” with an empty beer bottle. The editor replaced the phrase “rammed the neck of a bottle into my vagina” with “belly,” but the “readers still understood,” since that sentence served as the focal point of the article.² The underlying sexual and racial aspects of Boupacha’s torture served as the crux of her entire trial, as well as the public opinion campaign on her behalf.

This paper deals with sexual politics. More specifically, it analyzes discursively the place of gender and sexuality as political tools during the French Algerian War (1954-1962) in general, and Djamila Boupacha’s trial (1960-1961) in particular. My paper will focus on the 1962 book *Djamila Boupacha*, written by Gisèle Halimi, the French lawyer who served as Boupacha’s legal counsel. Since this text presents one of the most detailed accounts of French sexual torture in the Algerian War, it is significant as a case study for discursive analysis. Halimi’s account of the Boupacha case illuminates the French Algerian military and legal perspectives on race and gender during the trial, as well as Boupacha’s preoccupation with the Algerian social and symbolic ramifications of losing her virginity due to torture. Ultimately, Halimi’s own perspective as a French feminist shapes how the overall narrative is presented. I argue that sexuality is crucial to the political and legal articulation of the Algerian conflict itself,

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and that it informs racial and class categories and prejudices. The Boupacha case study illuminates the sexualization of the Algerian conflict as a whole.

There are four major types of sources that illuminate sexual violence and sexual politics in the Algerian War. First, many books and articles provide theoretical explanations for why wartime rape and sexual torture occur, often based upon transnational comparisons and drawing from political science and anthropological fields of research. Second, some sources detail sexual politics in Algeria, female participation in the Algerian War, and these women’s experiences with rape and torture. Third, a few sources directly address the Boupacha trial, focusing on the political ramifications of Gisèle Halimi’s and Simone de Beauvoir’s involvement, as well as the sexual aspects of the case. Lastly, a number of sources detail Halimi and de Beauvoir’s political endeavors as feminists in France. Although all of these sources provide insight into ways in which sexuality and race become enmeshed in wartime conflicts, my study provides an in-depth analysis of sexual politics regarding the Boupacha trial, and the ways in which all institutions involved (e.g. French Algerian legal and military officials, Algerian nationalists, and feminists) articulated the case in sexual and racial terms.

The Algerian Revolution, fought between Algerian nationalists against French colonialists, officially began in November, 1954 and was spearheaded by the Front de Libération Nationale (FLN), with the goal of attaining Algerian independence from France. The FLN’s military arm, the Armée de Libération Nationale (ALN), avoided set-piece battles against the French military and focused on broad, decentralized, and lengthy guerrilla campaigns, despite logistical difficulties. The fighting ended with the signing of the Evian Accords, a cease-fire agreement, in March, 1962, thus allowing Algeria her independence.³

Women played a major role in the Algerian War. New tactical strategies employed by the FLN required a wider array of combatants for the Algerian cause. Within the FLN, more than 10,000 female militants served several functions in fighting French authorities, both directly and indirectly. Although less commonly than in other roles, women often personally committed acts of violence, especially in the case of planting explosives in public areas. This was accomplished by the female’s unique role as an infiltrator; militants were often able to inconspicuously bypass security and leave timed bombs in cafés and transportation facilities. Along with direct handling of weapons and sabotage, women also provided vital support roles in the execution of FLN missions. Most women did not become involved in planting bombs but instead transported and delivered weapons to FLN assassins. Due to their inconspicuous appearance as non-combatants, the FLN often relied upon female militants to enable attacks against French authorities. Along with arming militants, women played other important auxiliary roles on behalf of the FLN, such as giving first aid care for the wounded, providing food and shelter for combatants, and contributing intelligence on French activities. In all of these ways, women were truly in the center of the Algerian conflict, utilizing multiple roles to complement the FLN’s insurgent strategy of guerrilla warfare.

As the recognition of female participation in the FLN grew, French military policy shifted to target suspicious Algerian women. Originally, the French military viewed women as passive accomplices in the resistance and thus conducted routine frisks as early as 1956. These

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5 Mortimer, “Tortured Bodies, Resilient Souls,” 104; *Algeria: Women at War*, VHS, directed by Parminder Vir (Great Britain: Channel Four Television, 1992)


checks typically involved inspecting a woman’s pubic mound in order to determine whether they had likely had sex with a male militant (a “shaved pubis” meant they were guilty, based on French assumptions about Algerian culture). Over time, however, the army recognized that female militants were becoming more actively involved in supporting FLN activities, and resorted to more violent tactics for interrogation and intimidation. From 1957 onwards, Algerian women were increasingly arrested and tortured in ways specific to their female anatomy; electric conductors were often applied to one’s breasts and vagina. Additionally, rape became a common weapon as part of torture and subjugation, often collectively conducted by small groups of soldiers in raids. Although rape was officially forbidden in the army, very few soldiers were punished and officers often condoned rape as an unofficial policy.

Why did members of the French military use sexual violence in the Algerian War? There are a number of motives. Desire was a component; however, subjugation and humiliation of the female victim, who became sexualized and objectified by virtue of her gender, were crucial objectives. Race was also a primary component in the justification of torture, the pacification of “Arabs.” In military camps, sexual torture was often conducted as part of interrogation, with the goal to collect intelligence on revolutionary activities from the female captives. The military’s use of rape had broader goals as well. Rape was used as a weapon to subvert the assumed values of sexuality in Algerian communities, in which men were supposed to uphold

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women’s virginity and purity.\textsuperscript{14} Through this logic, rape not only psychologically harmed an Algerian woman through physical and mental trauma, but also turned her into a pariah in her community due to the loss of her virginity. Furthermore, this loss of purity tarnished the reputation and masculinity of Algerian men, who were unable to guard their women from sexual transgression.\textsuperscript{15} Thus, through sexual torture and rape, French military officers were able to inflict physical and psychological harm against many female Algerian nationalists as well as their communities.

Djamila Boupacha was one such militant, who unlike many of her peers became an international symbol due to public awareness of her victimization from French military torture practices and the French Algerian legal system. Born 9 February, 1938 in Algiers, Boupacha was just twenty-two years old at the time of her arrest by French authorities due to her alleged activities with the FLN. Initially “sympathetic towards the aims of the FLN” though not an active participant, Boupacha worked as a trainee at the Beni Messous Hospital.\textsuperscript{16} Despite her skills, however, she was notified that due to her race as a “Moslem”—an ethnic distinction used by French colonials to distinguish “native Algerians” as opposed to “European Algerians”\textsuperscript{17}—she would be prevented from taking a certificate of training. After this point, she joined the FLN and began stealing medical supplies from the hospital. Later on, her tasks included “liaison work,” intelligence gathering, and sheltering “members of the Resistance.”\textsuperscript{18}

On 10 February, 1960, a large number of French troops raided the Boupacha household and arrested Boupacha, along with the rest of her family. She was taken to El Biar, a military

\textsuperscript{14}Branche, “Sexual Violence in the Algerian War,” 253.
\textsuperscript{16}De Beauvoir and Halimi, \textit{Djamila Boupacha}, 53-54.
\textsuperscript{18}De Beauvoir and Halimi, \textit{Djamila Boupacha}, 53-54.
barracks, and underwent extensive interrogations, punctuated by beatings and a severe kick in
her ribs, which caused a “hemithoracic displacement.” On 17 February, Boupacha was
transferred to the prison Hussein Dey, where she was repeatedly tortured in a variety of ways,
including electroshock on her face, nipples, and genitals, water torture in a bathtub, and lit
cigarettes ground in her skin. Although this extreme and humiliating torture was intended to
force Boupacha to forsake the FLN, she remained resolute in her loyalty. Eventually, a group
of French officers penetrated her vagina with an empty beer bottle, leaving her “passed out in a
pool of her own blood…she was a virgin.” Her torture came to an end on 15 March, 1960, when
she testified before the Palais de Justice in Algiers, accused of planting a bomb at a University
restaurant on 27 September, 1959. Although during her testimony she confessed to the bombing,
she claimed that under detainment, she had been tortured by military authorities, concluding, “I
insist on being examined by a doctor.” Her allegation of torture by French officials kept the
Boupacha case open. At this point, the French lawyer Gisèle Halimi took on her defense.

Born 27 July, 1927 in French Tunisia, Gisèle Halimi, known as a prominent feminist
lawyer and politician, had studied law in Paris and begun practice in 1949. During both her
childhood and early career, she was discriminated against due to her Tunisian background; these
experiences of colonial prejudice influenced her to pursue law with the aim of combatting
injustice and inequality within French legal and political institutions. She gained fame in
France for taking high-profile cases, defending numerous FLN militants and Algerian
nationalists from 1954 to 1962, focusing on revealing the French military’s use of torture for

21 De Beauvoir and Halimi, *Djamila Boupacha*, 35-40, 43-44.
22 Kelly Oliver, ed., *Contemporary French Feminism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 31; Raylene
23 Imogen Long, “Ecrire Pour me Parcourir: Gisèle Halimi’s Parcours and the Role of her Autobiography,” in
*Parcours de Femmes: Twenty Years of Women in French*, ed. Maggie Allison et al. (Bern, Switzerland: International
Her most famous case, however, was the defense of Djamila Boupacha in 1960. Halimi sought to break the usual cycle of trial and execution, which was common for many Algerian nationalists, by bringing Boupacha’s case to the public sphere and denouncing the use of French torture, especially against Algerian women. Using public opinion as a political tool, Halimi sought to bring Boupacha’s case to the French public eye and prevent her disappearance and eventual execution by military authorities. From her first day on the case, Halimi worked to adjourn Boupacha’s trial in Algeria, which was managed by the military, and relocate the trial to the French mainland, where the trial would become a civilian case.

To accomplish this, Halimi worked with Simone de Beauvoir, the prominent French feminist writer and author of *The Second Sex* (1949), to publicize Boupacha’s case in France. De Beauvoir began by writing an article for the newspaper *Le Monde* in June, 1960; her direct and shocking account of Boupacha’s ordeal attracted massive responses in France and abroad. The success of de Beauvoir’s article led to the formation of the “Djamila Boupacha Committee” in the same month to publicize and “condemn the practice of torture,” defend Boupacha from her criminal charges, and effectively punish her torturers. Along with deploring Boupacha’s illegal torture, Halimi and de Beauvoir sought to extend the issue’s significance to all women, advocating for greater protection of women’s rights. In an additional effort to rally public opinion, the Committee decided in June, 1961 to publish a book to serve as a narrative testimony of the Boupacha case for public awareness and as “a weapon” for “disseminating the truth as

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widely as possible.”31 In 1962, Halimi wrote *Djamila Boupacha: The Story of the Torture of a Young Algerian Girl Which Shocked Liberal French Opinion*, with an introduction by Simone de Beauvoir.32 The book’s preface expressed ambivalence about the outcome of Boupacha’s case. Under the Evian Peace Accords of March, 1962, which officially ended the Algerian War, Boupacha was released along with all other prisoners of war. However, through this agreement, her torturers also gained immunity from prosecution. Although Boupacha would no longer be tried for supporting the Algerian independence movement, she also would no longer be able to “bring her torturers to justice.”33

**The Perspectives of Boupacha’s Prosecutors**

At the time of Djamila Boupacha’s trial, the French Algerian legal system was structured to the military’s specifications, in order to efficiently convict suspected Algerian militants and cover up accusations of torture. The Committee of Public Safety in French Algeria, created in May, 1958 and headed by both civilians and military officials, served as an important authority in the Algerian legal system, though its power served more as a tool for the judiciary rather than a check.34 Just two years later, another major change was made in the legal system which placed greater juridical authority in military hands. In February, 1960, the military tribunal system was restructured, with the result that civilian magistrates became entrusted to handle cases concerning the security of the state. Despite their status as French citizens, all Algerian nationalists under trial were now tried in military rather than civilian courts.35 This system made it very difficult for Gisèle Halimi to adhere to traditional legal procedures in the Boupacha trial. It appears that the purpose of these judicial reforms was twofold: this system allowed the

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35 Surkis, “Ethics and Violence,” 42.
military to quickly and effectively torture and convict suspected militants, while absolving the perpetrators of torture from legal prosecution. Halimi’s memoir demonstrates that the French Algerian military, working in conjunction with the judicial system, defended this system by overlooking the actions of Boupacha’s torturers while simultaneously discrediting Boupacha’s claim of torture.

Officials within the French Algerian military and judiciary consistently tried to absolve Boupacha’s torturers from any blame. M. Patin, the President of the Committee of Public Safety and the presiding magistrate over Boupacha’s case, justified the torturers’ actions to Halimi and de Beauvoir.36 First, he implied that the perpetrators’ inexperience and indiscipline called for the ‘boys will be boys’ adage, calling them “a lot of inexperienced youngsters…hardly more than recruits, really, you know how it is.”37 Next, he said, “[de Beauvoir’s Le Monde article] has distressed the officers out there considerably…They’re all real gentlemen…Well-bred fellows…absolutely out of the top drawer…One of the ones I saw is an agricultural engineer.”38 Patin thus implied that Boupacha’s torture at El Biar and Hussein Dey was insignificant because the French male torturers came from superior economic and educational backgrounds, compared to Algerian women. He argued that these officers should be pardoned due to their class and social status as European Frenchmen. Even the accused openly denied torturing Boupacha; according to their testimonies, “they were all highly astonished, almost hurt” that they were being implicated, even claiming that Boupacha’s confession was “interspersed with friendly chit-chat and jokes between her and her captors.”39 The military and judicial system in French

36 De Beauvoir and Halimi, *Djamila Boupacha*, 45.
38 De Beauvoir and Halimi, *Djamila Boupacha*, 96.
Algeria crafted a system of lies to deny all accusations of torture, using social class distinctions to defend Boupacha’s torturers.

M. Patin also denied Boupacha’s accusation of torture by comparing her ordeal to torture practices in other French colonial struggles. After hearing about Boupacha’s “deflowering” from a bottle, Patin cheerfully said, “We’re not concerned with real torture, then – the kind of thing they used to do in Indo-China…Penetration per anum, very violent…generally fatal.” Disregarding French laws against torture, Patin discredited Boupacha’s ordeal because as a woman, rape was not “real torture” and was not fatal. Demonstrating a gender hierarchy regarding sexual torture, he argued that violence inflicted upon women was insignificant compared to similar practices against men. Additionally, Patin openly admitted to French torture being conducted in another colonial conflict in an attempt to deny torture in Algeria. According to Patin, the French military’s extreme torture practices in Indo-China overshadowed any transgressions committed in Algeria.

Along with legal officials, the doctors who medically examined Boupacha—as instructed by the Algerian magistrate M. Berard—went to great lengths to complicate her defense, denying that torture was the cause of the loss of her virginity. The first doctor, Dr. Levy-Leroy, wrote that he examined Boupacha “completely naked” on 15 March, 1960, stating that he observed a number of scars possibly related to torture, including “certain menstrual troubles of a constitutional nature,” which correlate with the effects of Boupacha’s bottle-torture. However, he contradicted his testimony in a June hearing by claiming that she “remained in her shift” and that she “did not tell him about the sexual aspect of her ordeal,” clearly covering his tracks.

That same month, Boupacha was examined once more by three new doctors, who were left to

40 De Beauvoir and Halimi, Djamila Boupacha, 97.
41 De Beauvoir and Halimi, Djamila Boupacha, 158-159; Whitfield, “French Military Under Female Fire,” 82.
42 De Beauvoir and Halimi, Djamila Boupacha, 105-106.
determine whether she had been forcibly penetrated with a bottle, along with suffering other tortures. They curtly concluded that “her hymen has been ruptured by the insertion of some hard, blunt body, eg an erect penis.”\textsuperscript{43} Although the doctors did not deny the possibility of torture, they nevertheless assumed that Boupacha had lost her virginity due to intercourse. These examiners implied that Boupacha lied about her account of torture, focusing on sexual aspects of the case. Boupacha’s claims of torture, consistently denied by the French Algerian legal and military system, made it difficult for her to seek justice. Furthermore, Boupacha’s immense struggle to prove she had been sexually tortured indicates the power of these institutions to cover up the military’s torture practices and simultaneously damage her credibility in the process.\textsuperscript{44}

Along with defending Djamila’s torturers and covering up their actions, the French military and judiciary accused Boupacha of murder, among other crimes, based on gender and racial stereotypes. While torturing Boupacha through submersion in a bathtub of water, they “upbraided her for planting bombs in cafes and causing the deaths of women and children.”\textsuperscript{45} This suggests that the torturers’ assumption of her guilt was based on the stereotype that Algerian women planted bombs in public places. These officials thus used Boupacha’s race and gender to accuse her of guilt by association with the FLN. Moreover, their rhetoric intended to imply that Boupacha betrayed her own gender by killing innocent non-combatants. M. Patin, when talking with Halimi, additionally reproached Boupacha of betraying the French state, saying, “This Djamila Boupacha of yours is not a pleasant character...not a nice girl at all...Girl thinks she’s Joan of Arc...She wants independence for Algeria!”\textsuperscript{46} Patin’s accusation of Boupacha’s guilt is based not upon the specific crime for which she is accused, but upon her

\textsuperscript{43} De Beauvoir and Halimi, \textit{Djamila Boupacha}, 104.
\textsuperscript{44} Lazreg, \textit{Torture and the Twilight of Empire}, 163.
\textsuperscript{45} De Beauvoir and Halimi, \textit{Djamila Boupacha}, 40.
\textsuperscript{46} De Beauvoir and Halimi, \textit{Djamila Boupacha}, 99. Emphasis in original.
violation of gender norms and her struggle to dismantle French colonial domination over Algeria. Using gender, racial, and class distinctions, officials in the French Algerian legal and military institutions accused Boupacha of treachery, despite the fact that she had not been convicted. At the same time, they defended her torturers as being emblematic of true “Frenchmen.”

French legal officials not only sought to discredit Boupacha’s legal claims but also accused Gisèle Halimi of purposefully sensationalizing the case for public attention. Halimi was both a lawyer and a political activist. By openly pursuing a public campaign against sexual torture, she stepped beyond the boundaries of a dispassionate attorney. This contradiction was acknowledged by a number of French Algerian legal officials. M. Schmelk, the Attorney-General in Algiers, warned her “not to make a public scandal about this.” His comment suggests that French Algerian judicial officials sought to keep torture cases low-profile in order to protect their legal reputation and allow the military to autonomously exercise their will in Algeria, away from French public scrutiny. Schmelk’s sentiment was shared by Leader of the Bar M. Laquiere, who derisively equated Halimi and other “Parisian lawyers” with “FLN lawyers,” due to their supposed propensity to warp legal cases into political controversies by purposely defending notorious Algerian militants. In the early days of the case when Halimi pled for adjournment so that Boupacha’s case could be transferred to the French mainland, police and journalists disparaged her as an “FLN lawyer,” accusing her of using stalling tactics to defend “terrorists.”

These comments suggest that mainland France and French Algeria were regarded as having mutually exclusive legal spheres, in which lawyers from one jurisdiction were discouraged from meddling in the other.

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47 De Beauvoir and Halimi, *Djamila Boupacha*, 45, 49, 58.
Additionally, M. Patin, the President of the Committee of Public Safety and the presiding magistrate over the Boupacha case, accused Halimi of breaking the law due to her involvement with Simone de Beauvoir’s June, 1960 *Le Monde* article, which made Boupacha’s case public. He warned, “you are guilty of a misdemeanor…you have published details of a civil action, and that is forbidden by law.” Halimi responded by arguing that the rules applying to an “ordinary police-court case could not possibly hold good for one involving torture.”48 Later in the memoir, she cites “Article 344 of the Penal Code”, which forbade torture by punishment of death.49 These disputes between Patin and Halimi demonstrate how the legal issues surrounding the Boupacha case became obscured by political maneuverings between the French metropolitan lawyer and the French Algerian judiciary.

Along with the military and judiciary, the French Algerian press built the Boupacha trial’s publicity around sexual taboos to “prove” her guilt. When Boupacha’s case was publicly presented in the Military Court on 17 June, 1960, her defense was primarily based on her claim of losing her virginity due to the forceful penetration of a bottle. The press attacked this claim by insinuating that she was sexually promiscuous; they remarked how she dressed “coquettishly” with the “effrontery to do her hair a la cretoise.”50 The press also capitalized on Boupacha’s confession of sheltering FLN militants in her bedroom, suggesting that the “supposedly straitlaced and orthodox Muslim girl…used her bedroom to entertain men,” adding, “why should Djamila complain about having a bottle shoved up her after sheltering Algerian *maquisards* - possibly even in her bedroom?” The French Algerian press’ underlying intent was to demonstrate that Boupacha’s virginity was questionable. By accusing Boupacha of being unchaste in her past actions, the press argued that her claim of suffering vaginal penetration

50 De Beauvoir and Halimi, *Djamila Boupacha*, 84.
under torture was unfounded and irrelevant. They hoped to establish that Boupacha lied about her torture and disobeyed the strict values of chastity expected of unmarried Muslim women in Algeria.51

Gisèle Halimi herself was not spared from the press’ misogyny. The French Algerian newspaper Aux Ecoutes published an article on 22nd July, criticizing Halimi’s involvement in the case, stating “‘our charming companions of the weaker sex’…oblivious of their ‘gentleness and feminine grace’, had treacherously committed themselves to active participation in the nationalist cause.”52 According to the article cited in her memoir, Halimi violated French gender roles by intruding into the politics of Algerian War, defined as men’s business. Due to this transgression, the article asserted that Halimi’s actions made her less of a woman. Furthermore, the article accused her of imperiling efforts to maintain French Algeria. By aiding Boupacha, vehemently named “the imprisoned hand-grenade terrorist” and “bomb-dropper,” Halimi was betraying the French Colonial Empire.53

Djamila Boupacha’s Perspective

In her memoir Djamila Boupacha, Gisèle Halimi not only depicts the perspectives of French military/legal authorities and the French Algerian press, but also focuses on Boupacha’s own perceptions regarding sexual purity and racial prejudice in colonial Algeria. Through Boupacha’s words, Halimi offers a window, however shaped by her background as a French feminist, into Algerian sexual politics. A consistent theme throughout Halimi’s encounters with Boupacha was Boupacha’s preoccupation with the crisis of her virginity. Halimi remarks how when they first met, Boupacha “asked me a question she must have asked a hundred times

51 De Beauvoir and Halimi, Djamila Boupacha, 75–76, 88; Whitfield, “French Military Under Female Fire,” 78.
52 De Beauvoir and Halimi, Djamila Boupacha, 87.
53 De Beauvoir and Halimi, Djamila Boupacha, 84.
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before: ‘What do you think? That I’m no longer a virgin?’”54 Her anxiety was evident in later meetings. Boupacha’s fear of losing her virginity led her to make excuses based on how she was sexually tortured, asking, “Do you think I’m still a virgin? I haven’t been raped by a man, after all.”55 The instrument used to violate Boupacha became more important to her than the violation itself, a common perception held by similar women raped during the war.56

Gisèle Halimi offers an explanation for why Boupacha was so worried about maintaining her virginity, based on French assumptions of Algerian sexuality. Halimi remarks how, due to her childhood experience in Tunisia, she understood that “virginity assumed utmost importance, and for Djamila it was clearly a matter of life and death.”57 Halimi claims that “marriage is normally the inevitable lot of every Moslem girl,” describing the “marriage-customs obtaining in her country,” in which “the moment the union is consummated, [the husband] goes out to show her bloodstained nightdress to the other men in the village” while the women “hasten into the bridal chamber” to verify the wife’s “deflowering.” If the wife lost her virginity prior to this consummation, the tradition is broken and she is rejected. Boupacha expresses her fear of rejection due to her torture, saying, “Do you think any man would want me after I’ve been ruined by that bottle? …A young bride must be a virgin.”58 Boupacha’s fears reflect the requirements of the bridal ritual; the French military’s penetration-torture barred her from participation in this important tradition.59

Throughout her memoir, Halimi consistently scrutinized Djamila Boupacha’s psychological well-being, charging that suffered trauma from her sexual torture, which was the

56 Lazreg, *Torture and the Twilight of Empire*, 162.
57 De Beauvoir and Halimi, *Djamila Boupacha*, 54.
58 De Beauvoir and Halimi, *Djamila Boupacha*, 75-76.
most crucial aspect of Boupacha’s legal defense. This is shown by Halimi’s appeal for a professional psychological examination of Boupacha, arguing that “because of the profound importance which Djamila places upon her virginity, and the symbolic value it had for her, the bottle-torture must have given her a most terrible traumatic shock; and a searching psychological examination might reveal this.”60 Through this, Halimi presupposed that Boupacha was suffering from mental anguish due to the implications her “deflowering” would have on her conception of purity. Corroborating this assumption with a professional psychological examination would bolster Boupacha’s credibility for claiming she had been tortured. Dr. Michel-Wolfrom, the examining psychologist, remarked how Boupacha “gave absolute and uncompromising answers” regarding the “value of virginity,” emphasizing the importance of “Moslem nuptial ritual.” In her report, she concluded that Boupacha suffered from “post-traumatic anxiety neurosis” and despite her likely traumatic physical defloration, she had “a mentality corresponding to that of a virgin.”61 The analysis of Boupacha’s psychological well-being, however vague and presumed, was viewed by Halimi as a crucial component to her legal argument that Boupacha had genuinely been sexually tortured.

To defend her views regarding premarital chastity and argue in favor of Algerian independence from France, Boupacha asserted that the French and Algerians differed in terms of both ethnicity and sexuality. She often stated this directly to counter Halimi’s apparent incredulity about Algerian sexuality, saying “Our customs are very different.”62 At one point, while discussing her participation in the FLN, Djamila Boupacha admitted to previously sheltering men in her bedroom. Wishing to “clear up any doubts” Halimi may have, Boupacha explained, “You know, things are not the same here as in France. Men and women in the

60 De Beauvoir and Halimi, *Djamila Boupacha*, 117.
62 De Beauvoir and Halimi, *Djamila Boupacha*, 75.
movement can share a room without molesting each other in any way.”⁶³ This suggests that Boupacha intended to demonstrate the allegiance she and her male companions had toward the nationalist cause, implying that she regarded her associates with chastity and comradeship. Her platonic association with male Algerian militants contrasted with the sexual torture she suffered at the hands of French authorities. Like Halimi’s perception of Algerian marriage customs, Boupacha’s assumptions of French and Algerian differences were based upon sexuality and gender relations.

Djamila Boupacha’s own recognition of her limited opportunities as an Algerian woman, filtered through Halimi’s feminist perspective, emphasizes the racial and gender discrimination present in colonial French Algeria. When working at the Beni Messous Hospital prior to her involvement in the FLN, Boupacha explains she “‘learnt that all Moslems among the girls were to be debarred from taking their certificates…This is our country, but all the plums go to the French.’”⁶⁴ Despite her skills and training, Boupacha’s race—defined by French colonial authorities with the religious category “Moslem”⁶⁵—was instrumental to her rejection in the French Algerian colonial system.⁶⁶ Halimi remarks about Boupacha’s formerly optimistic outlook on her future, narrating, “It was only lately she had realized that ‘to study hard, make a decent career’ for oneself, in her own words, was no longer possible in this anachronistic society.”⁶⁷ According to Halimi, the French Algerian colonial system was senselessly outdated due to its pervasive restrictions on Algerian women opportunities. These passages suggest that Halimi, using Boupacha’s words, sought to oppose not only the French Algerian military/judicial

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⁶³ De Beauvoir and Halimi, Djamila Boupacha, 54.
⁶⁴ De Beauvoir and Halimi, Djamila Boupacha, 53. Emphasis in original.
⁶⁵ Shepard, Invention of Decolonization, 49.
⁶⁷ De Beauvoir and Halimi, Djamila Boupacha, 53.
institutions involved in the Boupacha case, but the entire French Algerian colonial structure, which was based upon racial and gender oppression.

The Perspectives of Boupacha’s Defenders

As a female French lawyer, Halimi intended to present an objective account of the Boupacha case, outlining a historical narrative of the aspects of Boupacha’s torture and Halimi’s burdens in confronting the French Algerian legal system. However, Halimi’s account is subjective at the same time, often moving away from a strictly legal perspective to that of a political activist, a feminist, and even a personal friend of Djamila Boupacha. Halimi’s testimony is complex and contradictory for many reasons. Despite Boupacha’s possible guilt in an attempted FLN bombing, Halimi acknowledges and implies that she is forming an emotional bond with Boupacha.68 After first hearing Boupacha recount her torture, Halimi admits that “anger and shame flooded through me…the whole of France should know what was afoot…to break our cowardly silence and passivity, to salve our honour.” She even exclaims to Boupacha, “We must shout the truth to the rooftops.”69 These passages indicate that along with becoming emotionally invested in Boupacha’s case, Halimi intends to enter the political realm, fighting for broad issues like ending the practice of torture and preserving French “honour.” Through her political endeavors, Halimi paradoxically detaches herself from Boupacha by turning her into a “symbol” on behalf of all tortured Algerian women.

De Beauvoir and Halimi’s involvement in the “Djamila Boupacha Committee,” formed in June, 1960, demonstrates their use of the Boupacha case as a shocking example to raise public opinion against French torture practices, with political goals. Working with de Beauvoir, Halimi reflects in her memoir about how they began to work on the “most effective method by which

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68 De Beauvoir and Halimi, Djamila Boupacha, 32, 55, 115, 120, 122, 163.
69 De Beauvoir and Halimi, Djamila Boupacha, 29-30.
public sympathy could be aroused,” to make the public “be shocked out of comfortable indifference.” Their strategy had two stated goals: obtain Boupacha’s acquittal, and use the “weapon of public opinion” against French torture practices.\(^{70}\) Despite her clear political goals in the Committee, Halimi had a reason to publicize Boupacha’s case: raising public awareness about Boupacha’s detainment, though technically stepping outside of legal boundaries, would save her from “disappearance” by the French military. Due to Boupacha’s newfound notoriety, the military could no longer harm her.\(^{71}\)

The Committee succeeded in its goal of stirring public opinion, and Halimi describes a variety of letters from abroad that showed support toward their cause.\(^{72}\) Halimi even acknowledges that Boupacha “had become a well-known public figure, even a symbol,” demonstrating how Boupacha had become an icon for tortured Algerian women.\(^{73}\) In this way, Halimi went beyond her legal duties and manipulated Boupacha’s case to promote a broad feminist political agenda with Simone de Beauvoir. By transforming Boupacha’s legal case to embody the broad issues of gendered sexual violence and racialized colonial violence, the Djamila Boupacha Committee linked her torture with the political fight for women’s liberation as well as Algerian independence.\(^{74}\) Indeed, the purpose of the *Djamila Boupacha* memoir’s creation is explained toward the end of the book. On 12 July, 1961, the Committee decided to launch a vigorous “press campaign” to further “stir public opinion” against torture, unanimously consenting to produce a “book — this book” to serve as “a weapon for disseminating the truth as widely as possible.”\(^{75}\) In this respect, Halimi and de Beauvoir’s efforts were successful and due

\(^{70}\) De Beauvoir and Halimi, *Djamila Boupacha*, 65, 68, 94.

\(^{71}\) Whitfield, “French Military Under Female Fire,” 81, 83.

\(^{72}\) Whitfield, “French Military Under Female Fire,” 76-81.

\(^{73}\) De Beauvoir and Halimi, *Djamila Boupacha*, 65.

\(^{74}\) Whitfield, “French Military Under Female Fire,” 77-87.

\(^{75}\) De Beauvoir and Halimi, *Djamila Boupacha*, 170.
to their involvement in the Boupacha trial, they became leading figures in the rising feminist movement.76

Simone de Beauvoir’s involvement in Halimi’s memoir illustrates the persistence of feminist rhetoric regarding Boupacha’s case. This is clear in the first sentence of her introduction to the book: “An Algerian girl of twenty-three, an FLN liaison agent, illegally imprisoned by French military forces, who subjected her to torture and deflowered her with a bottle: it is a common enough story.” She emphasized the way in which Boupacha was sexually tortured, connecting this crime to the general French offences of “racial extermination” and conducting a “propaganda machine” to cover up torture.77 Using the Boupacha case as a specific though “not uncommon” example of sexual torture, de Beauvoir sought public outcry against the entire French Algerian military and judicial system as a whole.

Throughout the memoir, both Gisèle Halimi and Simone de Beauvoir use feminist rhetoric to rally the reader against French torture practices. This is demonstrated by the strong words that Halimi and de Beauvoir use, as well as their characterization of the Algerian conflict in terms of French male oppression of colonized women. Citing the French Algerian judicial system’s failure to bring torturers to justice, Halimi remarks how Boupacha, when first arrested, “had been turned over to a group of men whose monstrous behavior increased from certain knowledge of immunity,” pointing out the irony that “from time to time one of them would be decorated with the Legion of Honour.”78 Highlighting the contrast between the “monstrous” actions of Boupacha’s torturers and the subsequent decorations for their service, Halimi emphasized how French legal and political authorities kept secret the military’s use of torture

and concealed French military actions in Algeria through public awards and honorable recognition of officers.

One of the members of this judicial system, M. Patin, the President of the Committee of Public Safety, questioned Boupacha’s right to a French trial because she has “no love for France,” to which de Beauvoir replied, “How can one love France when girls like Djamila have bottles rammed up them?” De Beauvoir assumed that this torture technique was prevalent in Algeria to emphasize the contrast between French male nationalists and colonized Algerian women, who were systematically tortured in sexualized ways specific to their gender. De Beauvoir remarked how earlier, when Patin cheerfully denied Boupacha’s ordeal as “real torture” compared to the “per anum” technique in Indo-China, that he was comforted by the fact that “clearly nothing of the sort could ever happen to him.” She implies that Patin, a French male, could easily disconnect himself from violence committed against colonial women; his acknowledgement of sexual violence was based on gendered and racial prejudice. Halimi and de Beauvoir make the point that men disregard sexual violence as torture because it is so commonplace in wartime and because it is primarily inflicted upon women, not men.

As Gisèle Halimi’s memoir demonstrates, the issues of race, gender, and sexuality were crucial to the articulation of the arguments surrounding the Boupacha trial. As it demonstrates too, the French use of sexual torture and rape against Algerian women was intended to maintain colonial oppression through gendered subjugation and humiliation. To defend these torture practices and the overall distorted structure of the French Algerian military-judicial system, French officials and journalists in Algeria relied upon sexual and racialized language. Even Djamila Boupacha’s perceptions of gender roles in Algerian society rested upon her explanation.

of mores and expectations of sexual conduct. As well, Gisèle Halimi and Simone de Beauvoir rallied public opinion against the French use of torture with an emphasis on the sexual violence Boupacha suffered, transforming Boupacha’s trial from a closeted legal issue into a political espousal of women’s rights. Although the various actors and issues in *Djamila Boupacha* are presented and filtered through Halimi’s perspective as author, the text reveals much about the immersion of sexual politics in the Algerian War, as well as the colonial dynamic between France and Algeria.

This case underlines how controversies of sexuality and race can underpin legal and political discourses situated within larger issues, such as colonialism and torture. The Algerian War was just one example of numerous colonial conflicts where sexual violence was conducted as a form of military policy. For instance, wartime sexual violence was prevalent in the Indonesian, Bosnian, and Rwandan conflicts of the 1980s and 1990s, among many other wars in recent history. Moreover, the significance of this case extends beyond war to illuminate how legal institutions in general can become entangled in sexual politics. Although often overlooked, the issues of gender, race, and sexuality are often at the center of contemporary political controversies.

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Torture: Henri Alleg and the Algerian War

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The University of Iowa

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Instructor: Dr. Mériam Belli
During the Algerian War (1954-1962), the French military used torture to gain information and, in turn, suppress the Algerian nationalist movement. Torture had a dehumanizing effect on the individuals of the native population, both suspected nationalist sympathizers and those who performed the torture. This created a sense of unity and humanity among the victims of torture at the hands of the French military. Torture built an “army” against the French military in Algeria. *The Question* was a memoir of one of the military’s victims, Henri Alleg. Alleg was an important member of the Algerian nationalist movement in Algeria and France during the Algerian war. Alleg’s memoir contributed to the gathering storm of anti-colonial and anti-torture activists and authors that changed the public’s opinion of France’s involvement in Algeria. The French military’s dehumanizing methods of torture performed on Henri Alleg and the native Algerian population contributed to France’s loss of the Algerian War.

Henri Alleg can be seen as many things: Jewish, European, Polish, French, but London born; during his life he lived in France, Algeria and Czechoslovakia. He has been called many things including pig, communist, editor, rat, husband, prize catch, friend and activist. Despite these various distinctions, Alleg considers himself an Algerian and a communist. Born with the last name Salem, he took a last name of Kabyle origin (Berber region in northern Algeria) while working within the underground during World War II.¹ Alleg’s experiences after arriving in Algeria in 1939 shaped him as a person, activist and communist. These experiences contributed to his involvement with the Algerian nationalist movement.

Under Vichy control, Alleg’s activities in Algiers during World War II marked the beginning of his non-institutional education as a communist and anti-colonial activist. Living in an Algiers hostel exposed him to many members of the oppressed native Algerian population. As Alleg stated in his book *The Algerian Memoirs*, “What I learnt from them about the

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humiliations, insults and racial discrimination to which they had been subjected in their short lifetimes taught me more about the real situation of the Algerians under colonial rule and their aspirations than I could ever have learnt from the most scholarly university courses.”

Alleg witnessed first-hand the dehumanizing treatment of the native Algerian people during the Vichy and French occupation of Algeria. Speaking of the French military’s attitude on the use of torture on Algerians, Alleg wrote, “After all it was the only way to deal with Arabs.”

His calling, as an Algerian independence activist, was solidified because of these experiences under Vichy occupation and continued after the war.

Henri Alleg continued his anti-colonial activism after World War Two. Alleg found a home in the PCA, Parti Communiste Algerien. The PCA was the Algerian communist party until legally disbanded in 1955 by French authorities. The French government banned the PCA for its involvement with Algerian independence activities. Within the PCA, Alleg continued his fight for an independent Algeria. Disseminating communist pro-independence propaganda throughout Algeria, appealing to the Algerian public was Alleg’s weapon of choice. Through his involvement with the PCA, his reputation for advocating Algerian independence and his communist writing, Alleg became the editor of the daily publication the Alger republicain in 1951.

Under Alleg, the Alger republicain was intended to cast a wide net, reaching the Algerian public in its entirety. Although widely considered a communist publication, Alleg maintained, “It was understood that Alger republicain was not and must not be a party organ but would rather be the paper of the whole spectrum of anti-colonialists, regardless of origin, religion or political

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3 Alleg, Memoirs, 171.
affiliation.”⁵ This daily was meant for all types of people, from the well-educated intellectual to the uneducated laborer.⁶ The Alger republicain appealed to and informed the native population about the nationalist movement.

With the onset of the conflict between France and the Algerian nationalist movement after All Saints Day in 1954 the French government had begun to pay more attention to the Alger republicain and Henri Alleg. The French authorities in Algeria censored much of the Alger republicain’s content, seized its equipment and arrested its staff members. In place of the articles censored by the French government, Alleg printed, “Alger republicain speaks the truth and nothing but the truth but cannot say the whole truth.”⁷ In September 1955, the French government in Algeria banned the PCA and the Alger republicain because of its involvement with “rebel” insurrection. Henri Alleg’s anti-colonial and anti-torture fight went from being a large public thorn in France’s side to an underground battle. Even after the “official” banning of the Alger republicain, Alleg and others continued to covertly create and distribute this publication. It had gained him some notoriety within the pro-French Algeria government, military and local police. He was a “prize catch” to his French torturers after his arrest.⁸

Alleg’s memoir describing the torture he experienced at the hands of French paratroopers was published and distributed in France and around the world in 1958, at the height of the Algerian War. Henri Alleg, while in hiding from the French military in Algeria, went to his friend Maurice Audin’s home. Alleg was unaware that a French detective had arrested Audin the previous day and was waiting in Audin’s home. The detective took Alleg into custody and transported him to El Biar. The Question was Henri Alleg’s memoir of his experiences at the

⁵ Alleg, Memoirs, 159.
⁶ Alleg, Memoirs, 159.
⁷ Alleg, Memoirs, 172.
hands of the torturous French paratroopers. The memoir was written in 1957 shortly after his month-long confinement and torture for being a nationalist sympathizer and an anti-torture advocate. After its release early in 1958, the French government quickly banned the book in France. A month after its ban, the two most read books in France were *The Question* and Anne Frank’s diary.9 This controversy surrounding *The Question* only increased its popularity around the world. Alleg’s memoir was a best seller in the United States in 1958.10 *The Question* details Alleg’s dehumanizing experiences of electrocutions, beatings, water boarding, burning, and water deprivation along with being drugged all dealt by the French paratroopers in the Centre de Tri (El Biar). Alleg not only experienced torture first hand, he also witnessed the same inhumane treatment of the native Algerian population.

The French paratroopers attacked the victim on two fronts, physically and mentally. The location of the torture site was important to the victim’s psychological torture. The El Biar detention center, as described in *The Question*, was a nondescript, unfinished apartment building. The physical state and location of the building was meant to create a sense of fear and isolation while asserting the French military’s control. The French military purposefully chose this location because they believed its location to be important to the torture process. The military intended an individual under arrest to feel ignored, invisible, forgotten. Alleg wrote that during one of his “sessions” a paratrooper mentioned that they were three floors underground so his screams could not be heard.11 As Kate Millett, a feminist activist and author, explained, “The character of clandestine detention, the practice of bringing victims to undisclosed locations, is central to torture- both to its secret and illegal character and to its terror and force. One is in

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9 Reid, “Question of Henri Alleg,” 574.
10 Reid, “Question of Henri Alleg,” 574.
11 Alleg, *Question*, 55.
limbo, one disappears.”12 The location was intended to demonstrate the French military’s God-like power over Alleg’s finite existence within his torturer’s grasp.

The French paratroopers used dehumanizing terms to identify Alleg and others during their detention and torture. Henri Alleg mentions throughout The Question that his captors rarely referred to him using his name. This lack of proper humanistic identification protected the conscience of the ones performing the torture. Not referring to someone as an individual, with a name, created a separation of human qualities from the victim for the torturer. Alleg’s torturers referred to him in this way throughout The Question. The torturers called Alleg ‘pig,’ ‘customer,’ ‘rat’ and ‘prize catch’ among other non-humanistic names. As Marnia Lazreg, a professor of sociology and researcher at City University of New York, explained, “The prisoner is but a vessel through which the torturer works.”13 The French paratrooper removed the human part of Alleg and recreated him as nothing more than an object to work through. The French military frequently referred to Alleg and the Algerian people as bougnouls, an ethnic slur meaning “rats,” loosely translated. In the 1984 film The Algerian War, General Bollardiere commented on the French dehumanization of the Algerian people, “It’s easy to torture a bougnoul, because you figure he’s not a human being.”14

The French military used these dehumanizing identifications to break down the prisoner’s sense of self. Alleg’s captors used these identifications to establish their superiority and reinforce the belief of his inferiority. The French paratroopers repeatedly addressed Alleg and other native Algerians using the familiar and demeaning form of “you,” tu.15 Alleg insisted that his torturers not use the demeaning form tu to address him, which was met with laughter by the

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15 Lazreg, Twilight, 133.
paratroopers. These terms were not uniquely used in referring to Alleg. The paratroopers often used dehumanizing terms when communicating with other “Arab” prisoners. Alleg made it a point to include in his memoir the connection his French wardens made between himself and the other “rats” or “Arabs.” A French paratrooper exclaimed “Well, a Frenchman! He’s sided with the rats against us? You’ll take care of him, won’t you, Lo-!” The paratrooper took away Alleg’s French identity and transformed him into the enemy, siding with the “rats.” That statement not only dehumanized Alleg, but also discredited and dehumanized the native Algerians involved in the nationalist movement.

The French military repeated the theme of “everybody talks” to Alleg and other suspected nationalist sympathizers inside and outside the French detention centers. The paratroopers claimed that they would find a way to make everybody talk. This claim was intended to instill a sense of helplessness in Alleg and others, making it difficult to withstand torture. Outside the walls of the detention centers, the French military placed posters meant to sway the native population from supporting the members of the nationalist movement (see illustrations 1 & 2 posted at the end). These illustrations also implied that the French military took the information they needed at any cost and that no one could withstand the methods of the French military. These illustrations discredited the Algerian nationalists or “rebels” by comparing them to a group of criminals, vagrants or barbarians. Notice how the “rebels” were portrayed: angry facial expressions, unclean with tattered clothing. The “rebels” were portrayed as lower forms of the human race that were not to be trusted or helped. These posters gave the impression that the French military always captured the “rebels” and their sympathizers. Talking to the French authorities was inevitable. The French military claimed that everyone talked but

16 Alleg, Question, 43.
17 Alleg, Question, 41.
Alleg’s own experience exposed this claim as propaganda. Despite everything Alleg endured he claimed to never have been broken or to have given up any information.

The French military used various atrocious methods of torture in the many detention centers. Alleg’s description of the torture he endured shocked much of the French public. Alleg had first-hand experience of the French military’s dehumanizing methods of torture. Alleg recalled at one point, “They unfastened my trousers, took down my underpants and attached the electrodes to each side of my groin. They took turns in manipulating the knob of the magneto…”19 The attack on male and female genitalia was a common practice within the walls of El Biar and other detention centers. Alleg had electrodes attached to his face, mouth, ears, chest, penis and other areas. Another method the paratroopers used was water torture to simulate drowning and create panic, as life seemed to be slipping away. Alleg’s torturers burned him all over his body. He was forced to sleep either on the concrete floor or a mattress filled with barbed wire. The French paratroopers involved in Alleg’s torture created a world of pain, discomfort, sleeplessness and what seemed to be imminent death. His torture was intended to push him over the edge and to break his will. The paratroopers attempted to replace Alleg’s humanity with pain and humiliation. The French military created certain roles, for themselves and the victims, during the torture process to enhance the dehumanizing effects on the victim.

The French military established distinct roles, differentiating themselves from the prisoners, and aiding in their domination over the tortured. The paratroopers played the role of god over the prisoner. A French paratrooper, after restraining Alleg to a wooden board for his first “session”, stood over Alleg to impress upon him that the French paratroopers were superior. Alleg recalls “I saw Lo- standing above me, his legs apart, one foot on each side of the plank at

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19 Alleg, Question, 55.
the height of my chest with his hands on his hips in the attitude of a victor.”  The French paratrooper defined their roles, superior/torturer to inferior/tortured. Alleg overheard a paratrooper verbally impressing his god-like status over a prisoner, “He shouted at him: ‘Say your prayers to me.’” Creating these roles took away the prisoner’s power and sense of self-worth.

The French military also psychologically tortured prisoners by threatening to harm their families. French paratroopers continuously threatened Alleg’s family in order to prove the French military’s power and Alleg’s helplessness. A French paratrooper calmly said to Alleg in response to his refusal to talk “…we’ll take your wife. Do you think she’ll stand it?” another paratrooper added “Do you think that your children are safe just because they’re in France? We’ll bring them here whenever we want.” This was intended to instill a sense of helplessness in the face of the far superior French military. Psychological torture had a profound impact on Algerian captives as documented in Alleg’s memoirs.

Viewing Algerians as a sub-human race made the use of torture more agreeable, if not, enjoyable for the torturer. General Paul Aussaresses, a member of the paratroopers during the Algerian War, referred to FLN members and suspected Algerian nationalist sympathizers as rats, criminals, rebels, militants, and fellaghas (bandits), among other disparaging names. The purpose of using these terms in his memoirs was to create a less than human picture of the Algerian people. In his memoir, General Paul Aussaresses spoke of the “disappearances” of many prisoners during the Algerian War. He explained, “Only rarely were the prisoners we had questioned during the night still alive the next morning. Whether they had talked or not they

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20 Alleg, Question, 41.
21 Alleg, Question, 91.
22 Alleg, Question, 57-58.
generally had been neutralized.”

Humans, freedom fighters, fathers, teachers, sisters don’t “disappear,” only bougnous and fellaghas “disappear.” This rhetoric concerning native Algerians was common within the ranks of the French military and desensitized the French soldier.

It was common among the French military to treat torture as a form of entertainment and sport. Trivializing torture as a form of sport or entertainment is evidence of the dehumanizing effect that torture had on the torturer. No longer was torture an assault on a human being but a show or a spectacle for the viewing pleasure of the audience. Lazreg noted, “Some torturers referred to the serial kicking and punching of their prisoners as ‘soccer’. Watching the séance was akin to watching a soccer match. Torture is a sport.”

Henri Alleg, like many others imprisoned, had himself been the focus of such sport or entertainment. On numerous occasions, paratroopers were the “studio audience” that enjoyed the torture show. While at El Biar, Alleg overheard a paratrooper exclaim that he was excited to see for the first time a prisoner being burned. They referred to this act as “roasting.” Torture was a show, something to be excited about witnessing. Alleg recalled at one point during a session of electrocution that the paratroopers were “all around me sitting on the packing cases. Cha- and his friends emptied bottles of beer.” It was common for the torturer and the audience to laugh at, jeer, insult, and taunt the victim. This behavior showed just how desensitized the paratroopers became as a result of the torture process. During the torture sessions the French military created an alternate world. The characters within this world of torture were transformed. The torturer changed himself from a soldier into a deity and the victim became sub-human. The

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23 Aussaresses, Casbah, 127.
24 Lazreg, Twilight, 134.
25 Alleg, Question, 50.
26 Alleg, Question, 45.
physical act of performing torture on another became a sport with an audience, a source of entertainment.

Henri Alleg authored *The Question* to show the people of France the dehumanizing methods their government used in the name of France. Alleg felt a responsibility as an Algerian and communist to fight for the independence of the oppressed Algerian people who were being subjected to torture. This responsibility was born of a “brotherhood” he felt with the Algerian people and the communist belief that colonial oppression should be stopped. The paratroopers subjected Henri Alleg to the same treatment as native Algerians in El Biar. Many of the Algerian prisoners embraced Alleg as one of their own. Alleg recalled that while in El Biar, the Algerian prisoners “understood that, like themselves, I had been tortured and they greeted me in the passage: ‘Have courage, brother!’ In their eyes I read a solidarity, a friendship, and such complete trust that I felt proud, particularly because I was a European, to be among them.”

The “disappearance” of his friend Maurice Audin, along with many others, was another motivation for writing *The Question*. The French military had the propensity to make certain trouble makers “disappear.” Audin was a French mathematics professor at an Algerian university, a communist and an Algerian nationalist sympathizer. The paratroopers at El Biar brought Alleg and Audin together momentarily. All that Audin said to Alleg was, “It’s hard, Henri.” Audin was quickly taken away and soon after he “disappeared,” just as many others had before him. While incarcerated at the Lodi detention center, after his time in El Biar, Alleg’s lawyer Matarasso, spoke with him about the importance of publishing his experiences. Matarasso said, “You’ll be writing for the thousands of Algerians who cannot do so and who

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have been subjected, or risk being subjected, to the trials that you went through.” Alleg wrote his memoirs in part for his friend Maurice Audin.

Soon after the publishing of *The Question*, French intellectuals formed the Comité Audin to initially look into the “disappearance” of Audin. The French government officially claimed that Maurice Audin was on the run. Eventually, the Comité Audin took on the task of investigating the use of torture and other human rights violations during the French Algerian War. *The Question* and the Comité Audin were two forces within the metropole that helped to force the French public to take issue with the use of torture in Algeria. Audin’s disappearance and Alleg’s torture was for many people in France horrifying accounts of the French authorities human rights violations during the colonial war. The account exposed “the lies of the leaders who claimed to be defending civilization, democracy and human rights…” While the issue of torture was creating a storm with the French public, it was building an army in Algeria.

The torture and detainment of native Algerians increased unity among them and support for the resistance against the French military. These methods incited the Algerian public to act against their French oppressors. The French military threw a wide net to capture and suppress the nationalist movement during this battle and throughout the Algerian War. In 1958, Edward Behr, author of *The Algerian Problem*, wrote “between thirty and forty per cent of the entire male population of the Casbah were arrested at some point…” during the battle of Algiers. Consequently, the mass detainments created support for the independence movement. Albert Camus, a popular French intellectual at the time, declared that torture may have saved some lives by preventing eventual attacks against the French, but “at the same time it has created fifty new

33 Evans, *Undeclared*, 224-225.
terrorists…”35 The oppression of these arrests brought many of the native population previously not involved in the conflict to the front lines against the French military. The French military’s mass arrests and detainment of the Algerian natives concentrated a diverse population of prisoners in one place, including a large number of political prisoners. The political prisoners disseminated pro-independence ideals within the prison creating support for the movement.

While detained, Alleg recognized the impact these new ideas had on the prison population. He stated in his memoir, “It had come to the point that the non-political inmates, now very much in the minority, whom the prison administration used as employees, strove to measure up to the political prisoners. They even took risks to do what the clandestine organization in the prison asked of them.”36

Henri Alleg witnessed this growing unity among the native population during executions of Algerian prisoners. Alleg recalled “the entire prison joined together in a single chant…nearly the whole Casbah district- the mothers, wives and sisters- stood on the terraces and chanted in unison, accompanying the condemned man or men (sometimes two or three were taken at once) until the blade of the guillotine fell.”37 The French military’s use of torture and other dehumanizing oppressive tactics during the Algerian War built an army for their Algerian enemy, the nationalist movement. Despite the French military’s use of torture increasing the native Algerian support of the FLN and the national movement, many members within the ranks of the French military believed it to be a necessity to keep Algeria French.

Torture had been a part of recent French history. The Gestapo’s use of torture during World War Two was still fresh in the memories of many within the French military’s ranks. Many of these French military figures were involved in the resistance while others were

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supporters of the Vichy government put in place by the Germans. Many French military officials had been tortured during the war. Not long later after the defeat of Germany, the French military was using torture to keep Indo-China a colony. Coming off an embarrassing defeat in Indo-China, the French government and military vowed not to lose another colony.38 Many of the French military leaders arrived in Algeria within weeks of the defeat in Indo-China. The military brought the practice of torture with them to the Algerian War. Though not all French military members condoned or conducted torture, many within their ranks did. Those who did support the use of torture justified their actions in the name of French national interests, raison d’État.39

The French military believed that in order to win the war in Algeria, torture was an indispensable tool. Some French military authorities, including Gen. Massu of the French 10th paratrooper division and Gen. Aussaresses of the French Action Service, claimed that the Battle of Algiers could not have been won without the use of torture. The Battle of Algiers (1956-57) was a major battle between occupying French forces and members of the Algerian nationalist movement (specifically the FLN). The outcome of the Battle of Algiers was very damaging to the nationalist movement, especially the FLN and its leadership. Torture may have aided the French victory in the Battle of Algiers, but its use contributed to the loss of the Algerian War. Paul Teitgen, prefect of Algiers during the conflict, commented on the paratroopers’ use of torture during the Battle of Algiers, “All right, Massu won the Battle of Algiers; but that meant losing the war.”40 The use of torture created enemies against the French military and led to their ultimate defeat.

39 Shepard, Invention, 66.
40 Horne, Savage, 207.
In 2001, French General Paul Aussaresses published his memoirs called *The Battle of the Casbah*. Aussaresses fought in World War Two, Indo-China and Algeria. While in Algeria from 1955-1957, Aussaresses was a member of the French Action Service, under orders to “liquidate all FLN leaders by any means available…” In his memoir, the General never apologized for his part in the use of torture and summary executions. The French military concealed the practice of torture. Torture was never officially authorized but it was unofficially encouraged. As Aussaresses commented in his memoir, “Torture, it was tolerated if not actually recommended.” He continued, “We didn’t discuss it among officers…”

In 1956, the French Parliament passed the Special Powers Act. The Act “endowed the French military with police authority and virtually unrestricted power to bring an end to the rebellion in Algeria.” It gave men like Aussaresses the legal and military backing to conduct torture sessions without specifically and officially condoning its use. In the name of a French Algeria, the native Algerians had become no more than *bougnouls* to the French government and military.

The French government viewed torture as a growing problem. The French authorities attempted to cover up the news of the dehumanizing methods being used in Algeria. The French public became more opposed to the war in Algeria as the news of torture spread. French military commonly made certain suspects or prisoners “disappear.” Members of the French military adhered to the principle, “no body, no crime,” in an attempt to cover up torture and other dehumanizing acts. Alistair Horne, a historian of France, wrote of these “disappearances” of Algerian nationalist suspects that “The number of such ‘disappearances’ may never be verified; the distinguished secretary-general at the Algiers prefecture, Paul Teitgen, put it at just over

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42 Aussaresses, *Casbah*, 129.
Torture in Algeria was not covered up for long. The French government censored certain publications in order to cover up the use of torture in Algeria, but keeping the issue of torture out of the public eye failed. Authors and activists like Henri Alleg, Gisele Halimi, Simone de Beauvoir, Jean Paul Sartre, Frantz Fanon and others sparked the torture controversy in France. These influential individuals were educated and well known in their fields of expertise. They authored publications and spoke out protesting the French military’s use of torture in Algeria. The Question, by Henri Alleg with a preface by Jean Paul Sartre, was one of these outspoken publications. As previously discussed, the French government quickly banned The Question after its release, but not before 65,000 copies had already been sold. Alleg stated that The Question “contributed indirectly to bringing together hundreds of university professors and intellectuals around the Audin committee…all of whom worked relentlessly to break the silence imposed by the torturers and killers and their high-placed accomplices.” These intellectuals protested against the French government’s ban of The Question and demanded a complete report of the French military’s use of torture in Algeria.

The Question was the first person account of the torture of a Frenchman, Alleg. Its shocking and vivid first-hand account was especially powerful because the victim was of French origin. Alleg’s text reached a wide audience that brought attention to the French military’s inhumane practices in Algeria. Jean Paul Sartre, France’s most popular intellectual, authored the preface that brought the use of torture to the eyes of the world. Sartre wrote, “Torture is neither

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44 Horne, Savage, 202.
45 Reid, “Question of Henri Alleg,” 574.
46 Alleg, Memoirs, 224.
47 Alleg, Memoirs, 224.
civilian nor military, nor is it specifically French: it is a plague infecting our whole era."\(^{48}\) One cannot ignore the influence this book had on the French public and world.

Public opinion of the war in Algeria changed as the news of the French government “unofficial” support of the military’s use of torture. Simone de Beauvoir, a French intellectual and activist, in a 1960 article in *Le Monde*, charged the French public to take action against the use of torture that was excused by the French government. She exclaimed, “When the government of a country allows crimes to be committed in its name, every citizen thereby becomes a member of a collectively criminal nation.”\(^{49}\) Accounts of the French military’s use of torture, like *The Question*, reached the French public and had a damaging effect on the war effort. Looking back, many in the French public were ashamed of the use of torture during the Algerian War. In fact, many in the public believed that France “had to wash her hands of the sale guerre [dirty war].”\(^{50}\)

The eight-year Algerian War came to an end in 1962. Algeria became an independent nation with de Gaulle’s Fifth Republic passing the Evian Accords. In a strange and awful way, the French military’s use of torture contributed to the independence of Algeria. Torture dehumanized the native Algerian population, while at the same time, created unity among them. Torture helped build an “army” for the nationalist cause. The publication of *The Question* and other publications like it changed the public’s opinion of the French involvement in Algeria. Many French military members viewed torture as an acceptable and necessary method of warfare. The French military members who tortured in the name of France will never be brought to justice for their actions in Algeria. The Evian Accords granted amnesty to all involved in

\(^{48}\) Horne, *Savage*, 196.


\(^{50}\) Horne, *Savage*, 206-207.
military actions in the Algerian War. The Accords provided amnesty in order to encourage people to forget the atrocities in Algeria and to repair the French Republic’s reputation as a just society. Those who experienced torture will never forget the inhumanity. Those who tortured will remember that their actions ultimately contributed to their defeat.
Illustration 1

‘Everybody Talks – the rebel surrenders’.
‘The accomplices of the rebels they also will be punished: Talk!’
Selected Bibliography


