A Battle of Algiers

by Theodore Dalrymple (March 2015)

When asked about the effects of the French Revolution, the late Chou En-Lai, as charming and sophisticated as he was without scruple, is alleged to have said, 'It is too soon to tell.' He probably never said it, however, which is rather a pity because it is so witty and, in a sense, true. The effects of any historical event stretch indefinitely into the future and therefore achieve no finality, which is why history constantly requires and undergoes revision even without the need of a totalitarian dictator, such as Stalin or Mao, to write people into or out of it according to the latest pattern of favour and disfavour. History will come to an end only with the extinction of the human race, and not with the triumph everywhere of liberal democracy, or of anything else for that matter.

Nevertheless, some episodes of history weigh more heavily on the present than others, and among the history that still weighs very heavily indeed in the present world, on both sides of the Mediterranean, is the Algerian war of 1954 to 1962. The French would rather forget that practically an entire generation of its men, born between 1932 and 1943, was sent to Algeria to fight to keep it French, often using the most brutal methods; the Algerians (or at least the Algerian government) would rather forget that not only did its side in the war commit many atrocities, both against the French colonists of Algeria and tens of thousands of Algerians, but that the Algerian population had not been unanimously supportive of the FLN before the advent of independence.

Nowhere has the whirligig of time brought in its revenges with a more acute sense of irony than in this case. The first fruit of a war fought in the name of a struggle against racial injustice and discrimination was *de facto* ethnic cleansing, that is to say of the million French residents of Algeria, 11 per cent of the population, including Jews, practically all of whom left Algeria in the few months after the signing of the Evian Accords in 1962. And, as the subsequent history of the country has proved, the so-called freedom fighters turned out to have been fighting not so much for freedom as for power. They were power-fighters rather than freedom-fighters, for once they were installed in power they instituted nothing that any political philosopher would recognise as a regime of freedom. The only sense in which the new regime was freer than the old had been was freedom from the old oppressor. The new oppressor (who immediately killed 15-30 thousand of his fellow countrymen who had fought on the old oppressor's side) was, however, of the same ethnic, cultural and religious origin as the population it oppressed. How much of an advance was this, and was it worth the lives of half a

million people to make it?

If the answer is yes, then it is to admit that it is preferable to be oppressed by one's own people rather than by people of alien origin, even if the weight of the oppression is 'objectively' similar. But if that is so, it is to admit that racial, religious and cultural identity are morally important in politics, precisely what so many people would like to deny because it is so uncomfortable to have to admit it, and can so easily unleash the vilest political passions. Something that is true, say our people of goodwill to themselves, could have nasty consequences; therefore it is not true.

Back to the question, is it better to be oppressed by people of the same racial, religious and cultural identity as oneself that to be oppressed by aliens? There is something to be said on both sides. To be oppressed by a foreigner gives an extra dimension of outrage to the oppression, but on the other hand permits the hope that if only the foreigner can be expelled all will be well; to be oppressed by one's own countryman avoids the extra dimension of outrage, but does not permit of the comforting illusion of a simple solution. On the contrary, it suggests that there is something flawed in one's own traditions, which leads either to despair or to the espousal of ludicrous utopian schemes of political salvation or redemption.

Another of the ironies of the Algerian war is that its conclusion almost certainly benefited the French population as a whole more than the Algerian population as a whole. Indeed, it saved France without saving Algeria. Had Algeria remained French, full rights as French citizens would almost certainly have had to be granted to Algerians, including the right to live in Metropolitan France. They were 9 million at the time of independence fifty years ago, but they are 39 million now; and whatever problems France may now have with its population of North African origin, they are tiny by comparison with what they might have been if there had been absolutely free movement between the countries.

When President Chirac visited Algeria, he was greeted by crowds of young men chanting 'Visas! Visas!' Nationalist indoctrination and propaganda had not blinded them to their own personal interests, which was to find work in ex-colonial France (I very much doubt, contrary to what some demagogues say, that they dreamed of a life on social security.) Meanwhile, in France, young men of Algerian descent express contempt and even hatred for their country of adoption, for example by booing and whistling at the national anthem in a stadium when France play Algeria at a football match. (Admittedly, the *Marseillaise* has the bloodthirstiest and most morally reprehensible lyrics of all national anthems, including the wish that our furrows may be swamped by the impure blood of our ferocious aristocratic enemies. But these were not the grounds on which the *Marseillaise* was shown such disrespect, a disrespect that caused

considerable anxiety in France.)

Recently I read – and looked at – an illustrated history of the Algerian war by Benjamin Stora, one of the most lucid and readable historians of the war and its continuing effects. He grew up with the war, as it were, having been born in Algeria in 1950; he left his native land with his parents in 1962. His mother, who spoke to him partially in Arabic, never accustomed herself to the impersonality of life in suburban Paris.

Stora seems genuinely even-handed in his treatment of the war, which the French won militarily but lost politically (happily for them). He extenuates no one and does not excuse the atrocities of anyone, including those of the FLN – though he suggests that the French army's use of torture during the Battle of Algiers, when it took control of the city from the infiltrating guerrillas of the FLN, may have been militarily useful, and uncomfortable conclusion for those who would like to believe that torture is not only morally wrong but useless in practice.

To only one person does Stora show himself unduly indulgent: François Mitterand, the former, and late, president of France. Mitterand was Minister of Justice during much of the most violent phase of the war. In that time he confirmed the death sentences of four out of five of the many Algerian rebels who were sentenced to death by courts (most deaths, of course, were extra-judicial). Many hundreds of people were executed when he had the power to stay the executions; but it was under his presidency, in 1981, that the death penalty was finally abolished in France.

Stora wonders how Mitterand could have undergone such a change. I do not think there is any real need to wonder, or to waste much time on such wondering. Mitterand did not so much change his mind – not like General de Bollardière, who resigned his post rather than continue to serve while torture was being carried out on a large scale by his men – as see on which side his political bread was buttered. By 1981 it was politically more profitable to him to be an abolitionist, just as in 1956 it had been politically more profitable for him to have been a willing executioner. Neither truth nor morality ever meant much to Mitterand in his pursuit of power, and even in a profession remarkable for its cynicism he stood out as outstandingly lacking in principle. I suspect that he thought that principles were strictly for the naïve.

Two photographs in Stora's book particularly affected me. One was of the beach near Algiers taken in April, 1962. There are sunbathers in bikinis on it, as if nothing unusual were happening. True, the placard behind them advertising Coca-Cola ('refreshing') was scrawled with graffiti in support of the O.A.S., the Secret Army Organisation, a dissident branch of

the French Army opposed to General De Gaulle's policy that was then carrying on terrorism of its own on quite a large scale; but clearly for some, the state of their tan was more important than that of the country.

Was this stupidity or sangfroid on a magnificent scale? Within weeks those sunbathers would be refugees in France, probably deprived of all that they owned. But perhaps they simply accepted that they were in a hopeless and powerless situation, as eventually we all are, and therefore that they might as well continue with their normal pleasures. They would thus have one day more of sensual pleasure than if they sat lamenting: sufficient unto the day being the evil thereof. By sunbathing they were taking seriously at least one of the injunctions in the Sermon on the Mount.

The other photograph showed a gravely injured woman, Mme Monnerot, being lifted on a stretcher from a helicopter towards an ambulance, on November 1, 1954. That was the date on which the nationalist movement in effect declared war on the colonial regime, suddenly carrying out thirty simultaneous explosions in Algeria, its existence as an armed force having previously been unsuspected. (Mme Monnerot's husband, a teacher, who was killed in the explosion that injured her, the first fatality of the war.)

The photograph reminded me of my time in Rhodesia, as it then was (Zimbabwe now). There were two hospitals in the city of Bulawayo at the time, one for blacks and one for whites and the very few blacks who could afford to be treated there. (The treatment in both was of a very high standard.)

A friend of mine, a doctor, had a house in the grounds of the hospital for whites and I happened to be visiting when the first casualty of what was soon to be the guerrilla war arrived by helicopter. Until then security had seemed to be absolute but, young as I was, I knew this to be an historic moment, and that Rhodesia would not long survive as Rhodesia. Most of the Rhodesians, however, did not take the sign very seriously, indeed they took it almost lightly, as if the whole thing were an amusing distraction rather than a harbinger of a complete change. How could they be so blind to the obvious? The answer is clear: we can blind ourselves to anything we do not want to see. The writing on the wall is always written in ink that is invisible to someone or other.

Moreover, there is none of us who has never failed to see some or other writing on the wall. Our clairvoyance, if we possess any at all, is always limited both in time and place. However clear-sighted we are about some things, we are always blind about others. And as if wilful blindness were not enough, there is the inherent unpredictability of things. We imagine that a

corollary of free will and the absence of fatality means that can control the future, but this does not follow at all. The glass through which we see things is always dark.

Yet if foresight is impossible, it is also necessary. I do not find this depressing, on the contrary I am thankful for it. How dull an existence it would be if all that were necessary were also possible!

Theodore Dalrymple’s latest book is