

» [Back to article](#)

Socialist Worker 1950, 5 May 2005
www.socialistworker.co.uk/art.php?id=6388

Features

Algeria — the war didn't end in 1945

The defeat of Hitler's Nazis raised hopes of liberation for Algeria, writes Ian Birchall, but these hopes were to be brutally suppressed

Sixty years ago, on 8 May 1945, millions of people celebrated VE (Victory in Europe) Day. There was genuine enthusiasm that the Nazis were gone at last. But in North Africa things looked rather different.

Algeria had been colonised by the French in the 1830s. Technically it was part of France, but the only people with full rights as citizens were the one million European settlers that dominated the eight million native Muslims.

French politicians spoke about their “civilising mission” in Algeria. This was a monstrous lie. In 1834 a French general reported that virtually all the native population could read and write, with schools for boys and girls in each village. A century later only a quarter of the Muslim population could read Arabic. Less than one in ten could read French.

The Muslim population lived in abject poverty. In 1939 the future novelist Albert Camus penned a series of reports from eastern Algeria. “I saw children in rags fighting with dogs over the contents of a dustbin,” he wrote. A local inhabitant told him that similar scenes happened every day.

In 1941, during the Second World War, British prime minister Winston Churchill and US president Franklin Roosevelt signed up to the Atlantic Charter. This promised to “respect the right of all peoples to choose the form of government under which they will live” — a pledge that generated much interest in Algeria.

There had been a movement for Algerian independence for many years. The liberation of Europe gave it a new boost. But the French authorities in Algeria wanted nothing of it.

Rigged system

Messali Hadj, the veteran leader of the movement, was deported. Many activists were jailed on May Day 1945. The government offered only very limited reforms, whereby a few thousand Algerians would get full rights of citizenship. The rest would be represented through an electoral system rigged in favour of Europeans.

On 8 May a victory parade was held in Sétif, a market town in eastern Algeria. Many Muslims

assembled, including members of the Muslim Scouts, a legal organisation set up by the Algerian People's Party, Algeria's main nationalist organisation.

The nationalists wanted a large peaceful demonstration. They brought flags and banners calling for national independence and the release of Messali Hadj. The local French chief official, Butterlin, was determined to assert his authority even though he had only 60 police. He ruled all banners and Algerian national flags illegal.

Kateb Yacine, later one of Algeria's most renowned writers, took part in the demonstration as a 16 year old school student. Soon after he was arrested and interned. In his novel *Nedjma* he described how the demonstration started:

“We've had enough promises. 1870. 1918. 1945. Today, 8 May, is this really victory? The scouts are marching at the front, then the students... The crowd grows. Four by four. All the passers-by take banners... A song comes from the lips of children: 'From our mountains rises the voice of free men.' A police officer, hidden in the shadow of an arcade, fires at the flag.”

There are competing reports of exactly what happened. But it is clear that one of the police opened fire, killing a boy carrying a flag. This action enraged the crowd. Some were armed, many were not, but they used knives, bottles, clubs and railings. All Europeans were seen as the enemy — they were killed and their bodies mutilated.

Altogether around 100 Europeans died. Some were “innocent” bystanders, but years of accumulated bitterness — and the arrogance and brutality of the settlers — made such indiscriminate violence inevitable.

The rising spread to the whole region. About 50,000 people, one in 20 of the Muslim population in the area, took part. The violence continued for four or five days until troops ended it.

Villages bombed

But now the settlers wanted to assert their power. Large numbers of troops were brought in, including Senegalese soldiers, who unfortunately did not make common cause with the local population.

There were executions and widespread arrests. Many European lawyers refused to defend the accused. Villages were bombed from the air and a town was shelled from a cruiser at sea. The attacks were more or less random.

The point was not so much to punish the original rioters as to teach the whole Muslim population to know their place. Settlers set up their own unofficial death squads and killed hundreds of Muslims. German and Italian prisoners of war were released to take part in the massacre.

Torture was widespread. One Algerian, Souiyah Lahouari, told how he was subjected to electric shocks and blows in sensitive parts of the body, and hung like a chicken from a pole, with his hands and feet bound.

Edouard Sablier, one of the soldiers who took part in the repression, later described the situation: “Everywhere in the towns there were camps surrounded by barbed wire containing hundreds of suspects who had been arrested... Often, when we set out to inspect an isolated hamlet in the mountains, I heard people say, ‘We should punish them by taking away their crops’.”

Muslims were not allowed to travel unless they wore white armbands. Those not wearing them were liable to be shot on the spot.

Probably at least 15,000 died, though some claim as many as 50,000. Even on the lowest estimate, the Europeans killed 50 Muslims for every European life lost.

The massive military retaliation could not have been carried out without the full involvement of the French government. The repression was a clear signal to the rest of the French empire in Africa and Indochina that French colonialism would carry on where it had left off in 1939.

In the autumn the Clement Attlee government in Britain sent troops into Vietnam to keep it safe until the French were ready to reoccupy.

Repression

The French prime minister, Charles de Gaulle, was a military traditionalist. But his government contained members of both the Socialist Party and the Communist Party, France's two working class parties. Without their backing de Gaulle could not control a society with thousands of armed resistance fighters and persuade workers to rebuild the French economy.

Socialists and Communists alike backed the repression in Algeria. The Communist Party daily paper declared, “It is necessary to mete out the punishment they deserve to the Hitlerite killers who took part in the events of 8 May.”

Relatively little was reported in the French press. Only a few courageous journalists spoke up. A paper called *Ohé Partisans*, published by the French Trotskyists, described Sétif as an “Algerian Oradour”. Oradour was a French town where the Nazi occupiers had murdered over 600 people, including children. To compare French rule in North Africa to the atrocities of the Nazi Occupation so soon after the end of the war took some courage.

The revolt was crushed — in the short term. Nationalists knew that an immediate fightback would simply mean more losses. Instead they planned, argued and prepared. Below the surface anger was burning.

In one primary school the teacher gave his pupils a writing lesson, telling them to copy the sentence, “I am French and France is my country.” The Muslim children wrote in their exercise books, “I am Algerian and Algeria is my country.”

For many Algerians Sétif marked a vital turning point. Any hope of peaceful progress towards independence was lost.

Courageous fighter

One young Algerian had just returned home after fighting with the allies in Italy. He had won a medal for his courageous conduct, presented by de Gaulle himself, and was invited to stay on in the French army. But, he recalled, Sétif made it clear that he must refuse:

“The retaliations at Sétif had created an unbridgeable gulf between the two communities. I felt that I owed it to the people of my own community to return home, and that I must endeavour by all the means in my power to improve their lot and rectify the injustice from which they had suffered.”

His name was Ahmed Ben Bella. In 1954 he was one of the leaders of the Front de Liberation Nationale which launched the war for national independence. In 1962 he became the first president of an independent Algeria. Today, aged 86, he still campaigns against imperialism — he spoke at last year's European Social Forum in London.

Repression could not prevent the independence of Algeria. It merely ensured that the process would be much bloodier. Yet if today Algeria is independent, imperialism survives. Sétif is now a holiday resort. The grandchildren of those who fought for independence are low paid employees of the tourist industry.

From Sétif to Fallujah there is a long line of blood. Both show just how ruthless imperialism can be. But both also show the power of human resistance and the hope of eventual victory.

[top of page](#)

© Socialist Worker (unless otherwise stated). You may republish if you include an active link to the original.