



# Setif and Guelma (May 1945)

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In Algeria on May 8, 1945, just as people were celebrating the allied victory over Germany (in which Algerian native troops took part), banned demonstrations of Algerian nationalists took place in most of the towns of the Constantine département, in the eastern part of the country.

In Sétif, an average-sized town, the demonstration turned into a riot after the intervention of the police forces. This riot then spread to the area between Sétif and Bougie (Bejaia), and in particular around Kherrata. Ninety French settlers were killed (Tixier, J.O., July 18, 1945).

Repression was organized by the army and, to a lesser extent, by the civilian population. The death toll, still unknown, probably numbers in the many thousands (Rey-Goldzeiguer, 2001: 292-307).

On May 8, in Guelma, a small town between Constantine and Bône (Annaba), a demonstrator was killed. There were no casualties among the French population. However, on May 9 and 10, 12 French people were killed. By the end of the month, between 1,500 and 2,000 Muslims had died, most of them in the hands of the civilian population (Peyroulou, 2007).

The death toll has not yet been precisely established. However, we know that it included 102 French people. Furthermore, several thousand Muslims were either killed or wounded (Jauffret, 1990: 399, 405).

## 1. The context

The fact that colonial Algeria had taken part in the Second World War gave rise to great hope amongst the nationalists, who were united around the figure of Ferhat Abbas, a Sétif chemist and a moderate nationalist *conseiller général*.

After the Anglo-American landing in Algiers on November 8, 1942, Algeria slipped away from Vichy's grip. With the death of Admiral Darlan in December 1942, the end of the General Giraud alternative (sponsored by Roosevelt) and the arrival of de Gaulle in June 1943, Algeria had become the bridgehead of the *France libre* and the landbase for the political reconquest of the occupied metropolitan territory as well as the restoration of the *République*.

In February 1943, in an international context which had become favorable to the allies after the battles of Stalingrad and El-Alamein, Ferhat Abbas submitted to the French authorities a *Manifeste* in which, after saying that Algeria and its soldiers were fighting Nazism alongside the Allies, he demanded the creation of a federate Algerian state associated with France, in which both French and Jews would be welcome to stay.

In June 1943, General Catroux, who had been appointed *gouverneur général* of Algeria by de Gaulle, refused to even consider the plan submitted by Abbas and the moderate nationalists, in the name of French sovereignty in Algeria.

However, on December 1943, that is to say one month after the Brazzaville speech, with the whole French Empire wanting change, de Gaulle took a decisive step. He announced that French citizenship would be granted to many thousands of Muslims who still wanted it, without them having to give up their personal status, i.e. the legal, customary or Muslim provisions governing among other things family affairs and morals.

This can be seen as an answer to Abbas's *Manifeste* and a sign of the willingness of the *Comité français de*

*libération nationale* (CFLN) to reform. De Gaulle's decision led to the March 7, 1944 order (*ordonnance*) granting citizenship to an elite, which was actually no more than a rehash of the Blum-Viollette plan (under the *Front Populaire*) which had failed owing to the opposition of the French colonial opinion. The new measure however limited - met with the same opposition. Besides, it no longer was an answer to the aspirations of the Algerian Muslims, i.e. to become Algerian - not French - citizens, at a time when war was opening up the range of possibilities.

Ferhat Abbas then founded the movement *Les Amis du Manifeste et de la Liberté* (AML), with the aim to spread among the population the ideas expressed in the *Manifeste*. Those ideas were congruent with the principles of the Atlantic Charter, among which people's right to self-determination once the war was over a right later developed in the United Nations Charter and were approved of by the Americans who had been in Algeria since November 8, 1942.

The *Manifeste* provoked a patriotic landslide (*un raz-de-marée patriotique*, Aït Ahmed, 2002: Chapter 2). It was highly popular among the Algerian lower middle class. The more radical nationalists from Messali Hadj's *Parti du Peuple Algérien* (PPA), who asked for complete independence, and Cheik Brahim's association of the *Oulama*, of Arab-Muslim inspiration, joined the AML and spread the nationalist ideas among the Algerian peasantry for the former, and the reformist circles for the latter. Such success worried the moderate Muslim elected representatives, like Bendjelloul or Lakhdari, who saw their voters going to the nationalists.

Spring 1944 saw the emergence of confrontation between the Muslim and French populations - fuelled by a century of colonization, injustice and racism and accelerated by the events that would later lead to Germany's defeat. This dynamic was also a result of the war-induced weakening of the power of the State, of the radical regime changes (Pétain, Darlan, Giraud, de Gaulle) and of the provisional government of Algiers leaving for Paris in August 1944 and handing over control to an administration that was hostile to reform, in spite of the presence of remarkable people such as Yves Chataigneau, the *gouverneur*, and Adrien Tixier, the home secretary (*ministre de l'Intérieur*). This dynamic was also favored by the preparation of the United Nations Charter in the Spring of 1945 and the birth of the Arab League. Here were two anti-colonial organizations (one with a universalist outlook, the other a rabist) fighting colonial France in Northern Africa and in the Levant, in which Algerian Muslims placed all their hopes.

This dynamic soon developed into a very specific demographic context. Since the interwar period, the French population had gradually become a smaller and smaller ethnic minority in the département of Constantine. It was Algeria's most populated département and the birthplace of Muslim religious reformism.

The high Muslim birth rate was a major factor prompting the reclamation of lands lost during colonization and preceded political re-conquest. In the Guelma *arrondissement*, the French numbered just over 10,000 (compared with more than 180,000 Muslims) and mostly lived in Guelma and Souk-Ahras, two small towns. In Guelma, there were 4,000 French and 16,500 Muslims - all members of the AML. In the bigger city of Sétif, the population was more balanced. But in the mountains between Sétif and Bougie, with the exclusion of a few big villages like Saint Arnaud further east, the few French people there lived among the tribes of the Babors foothills. Northern Constantinois was entering the era of the masses, organized and political in the towns and disorganized and millenarian in the rural areas where famine unfolded in both 1944 and 1945.

Such a situation was the breeding ground for plotting among the Algerian Muslims, the famished and uneducated country folk, who expressed their deep anxiety in religious terms. The French, who felt besieged in their little towns and settlements, viewed the Muslims as a fanatical and dangerous mass. The elected representatives expressed these feelings to the authorities, but they were effectively helpless in

attempting to maintain law and order.

As a result, on April 14, 1945 - three weeks before the violent events occurred - Achiary, the *sous-préfet*, decided to set up an armed civilian militia in and around Guelma as part of a policy of self-defense of the urban areas and settlements. He had the support of the mayors of the area and of Marcel Lavie, a local elected representative. If in the area of Sétif, such a militia would not be set up until after May 8. In Guelma everyone saw conspirators everywhere. However, there was most probably no plot, neither from the PPA (Pervillé, 2002: 110-111) nor from the colonial administration (Rey-Goldzeiguer, 2002: 238-241).

However, there was increased pressure from the nationalists and the anti-nationalists and more radicalized positions on both parts in the run-up to the local and by-elections of Summer and Fall 1945. There was thus little room for moderation. In the small towns of the département, fear and anxiety contributed to the build-up of tension, all the more so since the May 1 demonstrations had already led to violence in the areas of Algiers and Oran.

## 2. Perpetrators

Basing their conclusions on police sources and the testimonies of nationalist activists seeking legitimacy in a revolutionary nationalism, some historians (Kaddache, 1980 ; Pervillé, 2002 ; Planche, 2006) claim that Messali Hadj's supporters from the PPA gave orders for a general insurrection, but were obeyed only in the northern part of the Constantinois. However, since there is to our knowledge no trace of such a written order from the PPA, we may infer that there was none. This is not to say that the nationalists were reluctant to resort to violence. They were just unable to do so, owing to problems of organization and armament.

On July 10 and 18, during the parliamentary debates on Algeria, the French government implicated the nationalist leaders Ferhat Abbas, Messali Hadj and Bachir Brahimi. However, it is unlikely that any of them (and above all Abbas who insisted on keeping within the law and resorting to negotiation) would have issued such an order. The military court was unable to establish Abbas's responsibility. What is true however is that the PPA nationalists wanted to demonstrate with the Algerian flag, as they had on May 1.

On the other hand, other factors also contributed to the build-up of tensions. The Oulamas's Arabo-Islamist propaganda was often expressed in anti-French and anti-Christian terms. Praising violence since the late 1930s, some of the PPA extremists had developed a nationalism with Blanquist overtones. Besides, Abbas did not fully realize the deadly influence of those new ideas on an impoverished population. The *jihâd* was an outlet for the rebellious feelings of the poor peasantry, which led for example to the tribes north of Sétif getting ready to take action. It is important to note that the organizers of the demonstrations had difficulties controlling the heterogeneous crowd who marched on May 8 in defiance of the French authorities.

The French responsibility for the massacres runs through the whole administrative hierarchy. When leaving Algiers for Paris, de Gaulle had ordered General Martin, commander-in-chief of the 19th corps in charge of the coordination of land forces in Northern Africa, to prevent and repress any seditious movement that might arise while the French and allied armies were busy liberating France and defeating Hitler (Jauffret, 1990: 517).

On May 8, Yves Chataigneau, the *gouverneur général*, called in the army to police the rural areas while the civilian authorities kept control of the towns of Sétif and Guelma. In the Sétif area, the military operations were carried out by the head of colonial troops, Colonel Bourdila. In the Guelma and Bône areas, those carried out by Colonel Monniot, under the orders of General Duval, were less important.

The army can hardly be held directly responsible. It obeyed the orders given by the political power to restore law and order. The soldiers acted like they would in a war, using heavy weapons, airstrikes and the navy as if they were waging a real war against the civilian population of the Sétif area.

On the other hand, the responsibility of the *préfecture* and the elected representatives cannot be denied. The Constantine *préfet*, Lestrade-Carbonnel, who first thought he could control the development of nationalism in early 1945, not only did not oppose the setting up of civilian militias but actually encouraged the civilians to resort to violence on May 13 when he came to Guelma. As for the *sous-préfet*, André Achiary, rather than using the two companies of colonial troops, he chose to mobilize the militias and, after dismissing the mayor, Maubert, set up two illegal and subversive organizations: a *conseil de la milice*, and a court called the *comité de salut public* which job was to sentence the nationalists to death. He also created prisons where the people who had been arrested would be jailed, and asked the police force to help the militias. Thus venturing into illegal grounds, the *préfet* and the *sous-préfet* encouraged the militias to commit violent acts on unarmed civilians. They had the political support of the local representatives, Lavie, Champ, Garrivet (who would later become the mayor), all members of a *comité de vigilance* in Guelma, of the *Fédération des maires*, and of the powerful *Fédération des agriculteurs*, an association of land and farm owners presided by one of them, Abbo.

On May 8 at Sétif at 9:15 am, the demonstration turned into a riot after the police tried to seize the Algerian flags and the nationalist placards brandished by the demonstrators. French civilians were stabbed or shot dead by Muslims – the victims were either town dwellers or rural folk who had come to Sétif for the market. Eventually the rioters were driven out of town and order restored (Rey-Goldzeiguer, 2002: 270-275).

In the afternoon, as news from Sétif arrived, violence stepped up in the rural areas and spread mostly up north in the Babors, particularly to Kherrata in Petite Kabylie, but also to the north-eastern region of Saint-Arnaud and Chevreul. In a spontaneous reaction, lightly-armed groups of people and whole tribes rebelled in racial and religious terms, using farm tools, knives and shotguns to attack French people on the roads or at home (Planche, 2006: 157-160). However, by the evening of May 12 the insurrection was pulling back.

In Sétif, the repression of the demonstration banned by Butterlin, the *sous-préfet*, was carried out by an understaffed police force of less than 40. The policemen used their weapons only after people resisted the seizure of their flags. However, of the policemen and the rioters, it is not known who fired first.

In the rural areas, four colonial regiments (the 1st, 92nd, 100th and 103rd) – a total of 800 irregular soldiers from Moroccan tribes – and two regiments of Senegalese infantrymen (the 10th and 15th), were used in the Sétif area to pacify the mountainous regions until May 24, even though no French people had been killed since May 12. General Henry Martin estimated that the number of insurgents was approximately 40,000 (Jauffret, 1990: 410).

The airforce was used to pacify the small villages between May 9 - 19. Twelve B29 bombers went on 39 missions, dropping 38 tons of bombs, whilst a further twelve A24 fighter-bombers carried out 39 low-altitude missions and dropped 3 tons of bombs.

In addition, on May 10 and 11, the Duguay-Trouin cruiser shot on 10 occasions in the cape Aokas area. The artillery fired 858 shells. To sum up, it can be said that a war was waged against the civilian population in the north and north-east of Sétif (Jauffret, 1990, 331, 338, 346, 356, 360 and 363). Militias were set up, in particular at Chevreul and Saint Arnaud, under the leadership of administrators whose activities remain to this day quite unknown.

In Guelma in the afternoon of May 8, 1,500 young town dwellers from the PPA took part in a peaceful demonstration waving the Algerian flag. There were no casualties among the French population. However, one Muslim was killed and five others wounded by the police under the orders of Achiary, the *sous-préfet*.

The insurrections that took place around Guelma were far less violent than those in the north of Sétif. On May 9 and 10, 12 French people were killed. However, when the Muslim population gathered, it was not to fight, but to take refuge in the mountains to escape the bombings.

The police force led by Tocquard, the Renseignements Généraux (the French intelligence agency) led by Bérard and the gendarmerie under the commandment of Cantais all assisted the militia. Its leader was Champ, a socialist representative. It was officially composed of 280 Frenchmen of all political opinions, ranging from the communist party to the moderate right, and of all kinds of professions. A third of the 35-40 age group enrolled. Actually, most of the militiamen went back home when they saw that the town was not under any threat, leaving just 78 armed militiamen, to whom we must add the armed farm owners who had formed militias under the authorities of the mayors of the villages of the area, Millésimo, Héliopolis and Petit in particular. Those militias were composed mostly of farmers, who joined in the massacres with the Guelma militiamen from May 9 to June 26, 1945, with a peak between May 9 - 19 (Peyroulou, 2007).

In the Guelma area, the army played a secondary role compared to the militias. It was not until May 15 that Colonel Monniot set up his headquarters in Guelma, once the Combourieu detachment had arrived from Tunisia. Second lieutenant Peyrusse arrived from Sétif on May 16 with the 92nd colonial regiment. In Guelma, there were no casualties in the army, the police, the gendarmerie or the militia.

### 3. The victims

The only distinctive feature among the 102 French victims is that 80 of them lived in small villages or settlements. One priest was killed in the north of Sétif. Delucca, a left-wing elected representative of Sétif and a friend of Abbas and Chataigneau was murdered as well. Most of the victims were French farm owners or minor officials, reflecting the French population in the rural areas. They were also often mutilated, their throats cut, their genitals dismembered, their bellies slit open and their insides taken out as well as their hands and feet cut off. This savagery was the result of a rebellion by very poor and uneducated country folk whose racial, religious and social hatred having been long pent-up, now vented itself.

It is unknown how many people were killed or wounded during the repression. In 1945, the French authorities didn't know either.

This is an essential point as it determines the way such an event will be assessed and qualified. Not knowing exactly the number of victims allows all sorts of estimates and figures, either on the down side such as the official figure given by the French authorities in 1946 of 1,165 people killed, or that of about 1,500 given by Tixier in 1945 (JO., July 18, 1945). Higher estimates range from between 45,000, and even 80,000 people killed (Fondation du 8 mai 1945; *El Moudjahid*, May 8, 2000; *El Watan*, May 8, 2005).

It is impossible to resort to the demographic method (Peyroulou, 2007) owing to the unreliability of the Muslim registry office and above all to the fact that many families did not report the death of their relatives. As a result, and bearing in mind the fact that time passing makes estimates even rasher, it is impossible to venture an accurate figure.

General Tubert, the head of an investigation mission which worked in Sétif - but not in Guelma - in May 1945, advanced the figure of 5,000 people killed (Reggui 2006: appendix, 137-168). In 1952, Captain Terce, head of the *service de liaisons nord-africaines* of Constantine, an intelligence service, ventured the number of 10,000 victims (Peyroulou, 2007). The historian Charles André-Julien, a member of the SFIO and a moderate anti-colonialist, estimated the toll to be between 6,000 and 8,000 (1953: 379). And in 1948, *Égalité*, Abbas's newspaper, estimated that 15,000 to 20,000 people had been killed.

On June 4, 1945, relying on information provided by the French sanitary services, the British staff headquarters reported 6,000 people killed and 14,000 wounded – the latter being a key figure. The British had arrived in Algeria in November 1942 and had a base at Sétif. They were all the better informed since they had a special interest relating to French politics in Arab countries, from the Levant (where Churchill and de Gaulle were playing a tight game) to Morocco. On December 25, 1946, the *New York Times* estimated the number of people killed to be between 7,000 and 8,000. As far as identification of the dead is concerned, for the town of Chevreul alone 227 victims have been identified (Peyroulou, 2007).

Marcel Reggui, a Muslim-born French citizen and a member of the SFIO who lived in Guelma during the summer of 1945 and was very well informed, advanced a figure of 1,500 to 2,000 victims in a manuscript written in 1946 and recently published (Reggui, 2006: 125-126).

The estimates of the allied countries and Marcel Reggui suggest a figure of 5,000 to 6,000 people killed in the area of Sétif-Kherrata-Bougie, and 1,500 to 2,000 in the area of Guelma, to which one must add the thousands of injured people, some of whom may well have died of their wounds. The global toll (killed and injured) would then fall into the bracket advanced by the nationalists from Abbas's party in 1948, and well under the number (20,000 to 30,000 people killed) given by Jean-Louis Planche (2006: 309).

### **Who were the victims?**

In the rural areas north of Sétif, the army indiscriminately killed rebels and bombed villages and hamlets, which meant that families were killed just because they happened to be in the insurgent areas and the military forces (artillery, navy, airforce) outweighed the rebels by far. Plunder came with the repression. In particular cattle was seized on a large scale.

What happened in and around Guelma was clearly planned. It was, the area with the strongest nationalist mobilization in Algeria before May 8. The people killed were nationalist men, youngsters or adults (79% were 15 to 45 years old), and they were methodically picked from four lists; that of the Muslim scouts, that of the subscribers of the AML (Amis du Manifeste de la Liberté) of Guelma and the surrounding villages, that of the Muslim members of the local CGT, a trade union, and that of the moderates from the local Muslim middle-class – the latter being provided by Smaïl Lakhdari, a local elected representative, with the aim to get rid of his political challengers.

In Guelma, the victims accounted for 13.06 % of the adult male population – a quarter of the 25-45 age group (Peyroulou, 2007). Only a few of them had recently settled in the areas around the town. For the most part, they were traders, craftsmen or minor officials (railway or health workers and even a policeman) living in the Arab quarter. In the rural areas, most of the victims killed were tenant farmers working for French farm owners. The only children and women killed – with the exception of Zohra Reggui in Guelma – belonged to the families of those tenant farmers.

Most of the murders took place at Kef-el-Boumba, 4 kilometers north of Guelma, between May 10 and 19. The bodies were buried in common graves. In June 1945, they were disinterred by the roads department under the orders of the militiamen and burnt in a lime kiln belonging to Marcel Lavie and his son Louis,

less than 2 kilometers away from Kef-el-Boumba. According to our calculations, 636 people went missing . Their bodies were burnt at Héliopolis between early June and June 25, to ensure that Adrien Tixier, the home secretary, would not see them. Thus destroying the evidence (Peyroulou, 2007).

## 4. The witnesses

Officially, there were no witnesses since nobody was killed by the militiamen at Guelma and the people who went missing could technically reappear at any moment. Such was the logic of denial of the authorities between 1945 and 1953.

The reality is that witnesses are actually quite numerous and old. They live in the area of Sétif, Kherrata and Guelma and are hoping someone will come to ask for their testimonies. However, nobody is willing to do that in Algeria for two reasons.

First, the official history has been constructed in mollifying terms, i.e. reinterpreting the events as the rebellion of a united people in 1945 thus prefiguring the fight of the *moudjahidines* in 1954-1962. Figures have been tempered with, and factual and serious evidence deliberately ignored. However, some Algerian historians have started working towards re-establishing the truth (Mekhaled, 1995; Aïnad Tabet, 1987, with 104 pages of witnesses accounts).

Secondly, the 1945 events provide an unwanted backdrop to the civil war that has been going on in the country since 1992. Here again there are hundreds of missing people, some the victims of kidnapping by the military security service (*sécurité militaire*) and many others killed by the Islamists. It is felt that listening to the witnesses of the atrocities committed at Kherrata, Sétif or Saint Arnaud in 1945 might incite the people who survived the massacres at Benthalla, Beni-Messous, Remka and many other places but who have since been living in fear and silence to speak.

A few witnesses have testified in Mehdi Lallaoui s film about the demonstration in Sétif and the atrocities committed in the area. This is a starting point for collecting more accounts, an urgent task since the witnesses are old.

In the case of Guelma we can rely on three very serious and factual narratives.

The first was written in 1946 by Marcel Reggui, who lost two brothers, Mohammed and Hafid, and a sister in May 1945. His manuscript, which had been entrusted to his friend, the writer Jean Amrouche, was rediscovered by Amrouche s son, Pierre, in 2003 and published in 2006.

The second text narrates the arrest and release of Marcel s brother, Paul Reggui, an SFIO member who lived in Paris and had come to Guelma in the Spring of 1945.

Paul wrote it in early June 1945, before the victims bodies were burnt. The text was read out in parliament in front of the government by the communist Algerian representatives in July 1945 (it is in the appendix of Marcel Reggui s book, 169-175).

The third text consists of a series of reports by Abdelkader Safir published in 1947 in *Égalité*, Abbas s weekly paper. The journalist documented the account of a survivor of the massacres, Ouartsi ben Salah, and of Ouartsi Ziné, a letter-writer who wrote the complaints of the victims relatives and had therefore acquired a global vision of the events.

## 5. Memories

Between 1945 and 1954, the memory of the events was kept alive by the moderate nationalists. Every May 8, and until 1954, *Égalité* and *La République algérienne*, two UDMA moderate newspapers, would devote an article to the subject. However, the PPA estimated that the event clearly demonstrated that moderate nationalism had failed and that independence could only be obtained through armed struggle. For that reason, the MTLD, the legal front for the PPA created an armed organization in charge of preparing insurrection under the leadership of Hocine Aït Ahmed, who strongly criticized the amateurism and the irresponsibility of the PPA leaders during the 1948 MTLD party conference. Thus, for the radical nationalists, May 8, 1945, was exactly what should not be done.

From 1954 onwards war was again at the forefront of people's minds, erasing the memory of May 8. After independence in 1962, the official history focused on November 1, 1954, as the founding event of independent Algeria, thus extolling the party at its origin, the FLN. The memory of May 8, 1945, could not compete with that of November 1, 1954.

Since the 1990s, the plurality of Algerian nationalism has been rediscovered and the memory of May 8, 1945, brought to life again after having been replaced in official history by the heroic vision of a united people following the FLN in its rebellion against colonial France.

The main figures of May 8, 1945, were Ferhat Abbas and Messali Hadj, whose names had long been erased off official history, and the *Manifeste*'s political program, with its federalist vision, came in full contradiction with the November 1, 1954 proclamation, which set total independence as the Algerians' aim.

The memory of May 8 is officially kept alive by the *Fondation du 8 mai 1945*, set up in 1988 during the short-lived period of democratization (1988-1991). Its chair today is Mohammed El-Korso. This state-controlled foundation organized symposiums at Sétif and Guelma for the 60th anniversary of May 8. There were special issues in the daily press. On Sunday, May 8, 2005, *El Watan*'s headline declared 'The genocide of May 8, 1945'. However, this newly-found memory reflects a political use of May 8 (and more precisely the way French-Algerian relationships fluctuate according to which clan is the strongest in Algiers) with a French-Algerian treaty of friendship currently in stalemate. This for example resulted in Abdelaziz Bouteflika using the terms 'genocide' and 'crimes against humanity' in 2005 to qualify the May 8 atrocities. This prompted Jacques Vergès, a lawyer with strong links with the FLN since the war of independence, and being present at Guelma on May 8, 2005, to demonstrate the legal validity of such terms.

At Guelma and Sétif, as well as in the villages most affected by the tragedy (Kef-el-Boumba for example), there are memorials and monuments commemorating the victims killed in 1945, who are considered as *chouhada* or martyrs (though not *moudjahidines*, the term used for the 1954-1962 war victims).

On an individual level, memory centers exist around the figure of Saâl Bouzid, the scout bugler and the first Algerian killed at Sétif, whose place in Algerian history parallels that of the young Bara in France in the 19th century.

In movies, May 8 is systematically presented as an introduction to the war of independence, be it in *Noua*, made for television by Abdelaziz Tolbi (90 mm, 1972), *Chronique des années de braise*, by Lakhdar Hamina (135 mm, 1975) or *L'aube des damnés*, a documentary by Ahmed Rachedi (100 mm, 1965).

In France, until the 1980s, the memory of May 8 was kept alive by the *pieds-noirs* (the French colonials born in Algeria), and stressed the violence of the rioters and the fear of the French colonial population. The

documentary file collected by Francine Dessaigne in 1990, *La Paix pour dix ans*, is also very useful in this capacity.

With the initiative of an association called *Au nom de la mémoire* (Mehdi Lallaou, Anne Tristan and David Assouline) the early 1990 s saw the emergence of a different memory, combining antiracist activism and a quest for their origins on the part of the children of Algerian immigrants. A key element was Mehdi Lallaoui s documentary, *Les violences de Sétif, un certain 8 mai 1945* (1994). However, May 8 emerged into public space and collective memory only in May 2005. First, there was a demonstration organized by the *Indigènes de la République*, a movement asking for equal rights and claiming that ethnic inequalities stem from the colonial past. Secondly, the Sétif events were featured on the front page of the daily *Libération*. It was the first time a French newspaper did not have the allied victory in Europe as its front page, thus illustrating the way the event may be redefined by the current problems of French society and the new international balance of power.

On the official level, the change came on February 26,, 2005, with a speech given by the French ambassador in Algeria, Hubert Colin de Verdière, at the University of Sétif, three days after a law about the positive role of colonization was voted in the French parliament. The ambassador described the events of May 8 as an unforgivable tragedy, though he failed to discuss responsibility. On May 8,, 2005, the foreign affairs minister, Michel Barnier, said in an interview given to *El Watan* that it was the historians job to explain the events.

## 6. Interpreting the events

With all its nuances, mainstream interpretation (from historians like Jauffret, Kaddache, Mekhaled, Planche, Pervillé, Rey-Goldzeiguer) based on military archives focused on the Sétif area and on the narratives of the political figures of the time. It claims that May 8 was a spontaneous insurrection triggered by the repression of banned nationalist demonstrations.

Coming ahead of the order of rebellion given by the PPA, Messali Hadj s party, it affected the areas of Sétif and Guelma at a time when the international context was changing, and the world was entering a period of decolonization. The insurrection was repressed with excessive severity by the army and the civilian colonial population.

We agree with this analysis of the international context and also think that May 8, 1945, represents a decisive moment in the creation of the Algerian nation. However, thanks to new archives from the civil authorities, in France and in Algeria, and after field instigation in Algeria, our interpretation is quite different - not so much concerning Sétif as Guelma. It is worth noting that in 1984, Charles-Robert Ageron, colonial studies leading specialist, talked about a colonial large-scale settling of accounts ( *un vaste règlement de comptes colonial* ), without being able to back up this assertion since sources were lacking.

There was indeed an insurrection in the Sétif area, fuelled by resentment and thinking of itself in terms of holy war. However, there was no such thing in Guelma. What happened was, on the contrary, a French subversive movement announcing the OAS and its actions in the towns in 1961-1962. This local subversion was a grassroots movement backed up by the civilian authorities as a response to the Sétif events. It was fuelled by panic and took place in a colonial system that was on its last legs. Those two points help explain why the violence went so far in a short period of time. The aim was to destroy Algerian nationalism, if only locally.

That is why the term genocide used in Algeria (El Watan, May 8, 2005) and also in France is not apt to

describe events, which in a more modern terminology correspond to the notion of politicide or more simply massacre, a term which perfectly describes the facts without making them fit into rigid interpretations and preconceptions (Sémelin, 2005).

The way the atrocities in the Constantinois were dealt with in France was certainly made easier at first by the fact that all those involved with the army and defense could still be censored, and secondly by the ambiguous position of the French communist party. On the one hand, it took part in the interim government, which entailed that it supported its repressive policy. On the other hand, it elected representatives close to the Algerian communist party (PCA), like the resistant José Albouker, who voiced their disagreement at the Assemblée consultative (JO, July 10 and 18, 1945). The communist press - *l'Humanité* as well as the Algerian communist dailies *Liberté* and *Alger républicain* - published information that was censored while condemning the PPA and AML nationalists. Indeed, the PCA, instead of adopting an anti-colonial and nationalist line, supported Maurice Thorez's vision of Algeria as a nation in formation, a Latin, Berber and Arab melting pot.

Reasons of State did not intervene immediately after May 8, but later, in a context of diverging interests for the many authorities involved: the metropolitan state, the local authorities, the SFIO, and MRP representatives without whom the government would have lost the majority, and also the RPF, a opposition party. To this, we must add the colonial public opinion, which pushed the elected representatives and the administrators towards conservative positions. There were also the communists from the PCA and the moderate nationalists from the UDMA, for whom positions on the benches of parliament were as important as Algeria's independence.

This complex interplay of power within the colonial system enabled each party to accuse others while pleading their own innocence, mainly by denouncing a conspiracy, be it fascist, colonial, administrative, nationalist or Americano-English. For example, Abbas started evoking a plot from the PPA and the civil authorities in March 1946. The colonial system created the conditions for the construction of reasons of State. Thus a military court in Constantine sentenced the Sétif insurgents who had been arrested - 3,630 suspects were handed over, 157 of whom were sentenced to death and 33 executed. Another 1,028 cases were dismissed and 577 people acquitted (Jauffret, 1990). It was still for reasons of state that an amnesty was voted by parliament in March 1946 in an effort to reconcile the two communities, which meant that the question of the missing people (*les disparus*) was swept under the carpet. The State agreed to buy off some of the complaints from the relatives of the victims, but refused to give death certificates, a necessity for some family affairs.

The aim of the State dialectically endorsed declarations from the top to the bottom of the State apparatus (with the support of colonial opinion and a part of Muslim opinion) was actually to hide a truth - namely that French civilians had committed atrocities and had not been punished - and to keep up the illusion of French Algeria. However, in May 1945, there were already two Algerias. The French one, anxious about its future, had taken refuge in the towns along the coast, and was courted by the parties of the *Quatrième République* and General de Gaulle. The other, the Algerian, Arab and Berber-speaking one, lived inland in rural areas and was expanding in terms of demography and territory, opening up towards the Orient and moving away from Abbas's federalist vision.

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