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## The Bureaucrat of Torture

David Rieff

Services Spéciaux: Algérie 1955–1957

Paul Aussaresses

Paris: Éditions Perrin, 2001

In the fall of 2000, an 82-year-old French officer named Paul Aussaresses, who, for many years, had been living quietly on his pension, sought out members of the French media, promising to shed new light on the conduct of the French military during the Algerian war. Outside the military fraternity itself, and a small coterie of military historians and academic specialists on the Algerian war, he was virtually unknown. And yet this obscure retired brigadier general more than delivered on his promises. In a series of interviews, first in the newspaper *Le Monde*, then on French television, and then in a book titled *Special Services: Algeria* Aussaresses publicly admitted his own role, and that of the special operations unit he commanded, in torturing and killing Algerian prisoners between 1955 and 1957. These crimes had been committed both in the course of field operations in the Algerian countryside and during what became known as the Battle of Algiers—the campaign of counterinsurgency in 1957 during which the French army broke the back of Algeria’s Front National de Libération (FLN) in the capital.

That the French army, and, for that matter, the FLN had used torture during the war came as no surprise to anyone. Apart from the Indochinese wars and the Korean conflict, no bloodier struggle was waged anywhere on earth between the end of the Second World War and the final dissolution of the European colonial empires than the

one that took place in Algeria between 1954 and independence in 1962. French military losses were approximately 27,500 dead, 65,000 wounded, and 1,000 missing in action. Somewhere between 3,000 and 9,000 French civilians from among the so-called *pieds noirs*—whose ancestors had settled in Algeria after it had been conquered by France in 1830—were also killed. The losses among the Algerians themselves were exponentially greater. Somewhere between 400,000 and 500,000 were killed. Most died at the hands of the French during the course of the war, although at least 30,000 fell victim to the intra-Algerian bloodbath that ensued in the summer of 1962, in the immediate aftermath of the decision of the government of Gen. Charles de Gaulle to bow to the reality of Algerian independence.<sup>1</sup>

Nonetheless, General Aussaresses’s declarations broke new ground. A considerable literature on the French army’s use of torture in Algeria dating back to the 1970s already existed. But the books that detailed these crimes, notably Pierre Vidal-Naquet’s *La Torture dans la République*, were mainly written by antiwar militants whose attempts to reveal the reality of torture at the time had led to their persecution by the French authorities. This is not to say that “official” France ever went so far as to pretend torture had not taken place. Knowledge of what had gone on was simply too widespread in French society for anything of the sort to

have been possible, if for no other reason than that hundreds of thousands of French conscripts were sent to Algeria (including, at least until 1958, troops withdrawn from NATO service for the purpose<sup>2</sup>), and too many of them had returned home to tell their friends and loved ones of the systematic use of torture in the war.

But what could not be entirely hushed up was never entirely owned up to either. Indeed, throughout the period of right-wing domination of the Fifth Republic, that is, between de Gaulle's assumption of the presidency and the victory of François Mitterrand in 1981, there are striking similarities between official France's post-1962 silence over the crimes of the French army in Algeria and its silence over the crimes of the Vichy era. In both cases, General de Gaulle was able to feed a willing French public consoling myths about themselves. Famously, he was able to turn the reality of his own heroic resistance to the Nazis into a fable of a generalized French resistance that not only never took place but was in fact largely the exception to the collaborationist norm. In the case of Algeria, as the American scholar Irving Wall has shown convincingly, de Gaulle came to power trying to keep Algeria French, and transformed his pragmatic decision to reverse course into an emblem of the wisdom of the French people in the era of decolonization.<sup>3</sup> Historians might question this account, and the hard left pour scorn upon it. But so pervasive was the involvement of left as well as right in the prosecution of the Algerian war—it implicated not only such heroes of pre-Second World War French socialism as Pierre Mendès-France but the architect of French socialism's late-twentieth-century revival, François Mitterrand—that for several generations it was all but an unwritten but binding rule of French politics that what had gone on in Algeria would not be acknowledged.

The right, intent on maintaining the image of de Gaulle, clearly had no interest

in doing so. But, if anything, the left's interest in keeping any discussion of Algeria muted was even more acute. In large measure, this was because François Mitterrand had been *garde des sceaux* at the height of the Algerian war—a cabinet level post that, despite its medieval title (it means “keeper of the seals”) put the future president directly in the political decisionmaking about how to prosecute the war. Indeed, perhaps the most important political claim General Aussaresses makes in his book is that Mitterrand was kept “directly informed” of the operations—a euphemism for the kidnappings, tortures, and murders Aussaresses's special unit engaged in. According to Aussaresses, a special magistrate named Berard liaised between the headquarters of the paratroop general, Jacques Massu, the commander of French forces during the Battle of Algiers, and Mitterrand's office in Paris.<sup>4</sup>

In blaming the political establishment for its crimes, Aussaresses is of course breaking no new ground. One thinks of the senior leadership of the Wehrmacht at Nuremberg, or, far more pathetically, of Lt. William Calley's rationale for his actions leading to the My Lai massacre during the American war in Vietnam. Even in the context of the apologies of French officers for their conduct in Algeria, such a defense was already familiar by the time Aussaresses published his book. The memoirs of Gen. Marcel Bigeard in particular, *Pour une Particule de Gloire*, took a similar line. And it is important to remember that, as individuals, French officers who had tortured believed with reason that they had little to fear from the authorities. The alternative defense was to assert, as General Massu would eventually do, that, yes, his men had used torture, but the decision was one he now regretted. Other methods, he insisted, might have been just as successful in putting down the FLN in Algiers.

In any case, a succession of amnesty laws passed in 1962, 1968, and 1982 were generally agreed by international lawyers to

shield French officers from prosecution no matter what they had done. In effect, while a few diehard activists like Vidal-Naquet could rail on as they liked, so long as the commanders remained silent no amount of testimony on behalf of the Algerian victims of torture, or of the relatives of those whom Aussaresses and his comrades had murdered, nor, for that matter, the admissions by an increasing number of young French conscripts about what they had seen, could shake the official story that torture had never been systematic but rather an exception carried out by a few people caught up in a brutal war whose rules had never been made clear.

Of course, this last point is true. For a long time, the French government refused to admit that it was engaged in a colonial war, on the model of, say, Indochina. Rather, it insisted that it was putting down an internal rebellion, as it does in Corsica today. And legally, Algeria, or, more precisely, its three coastal provinces (the Saharan hinterland had an ambiguous legal status) did not constitute a colony, but were rather part of metropolitan France. As the only French overseas possession, apart from Quebec in the eighteenth century, that had seen a large-scale migration of colonists, Algeria had a special role in France's collective imagination. In other words, it was not simply intellectuals of *pied noir* origin like Albert Camus who believed in the "Frenchness" of Algeria, but the French people as a whole. Although, by the time the war broke out in 1954, the native Algerian population was growing fast and the *pied noir* population far more slowly, the fact remained that there were almost a million French colonists to nine million Algerians. And in some of the major cities, the demographic balance was far closer.

For French soldiers, the belief in the indissolubility of France and Algeria colored everything. One of Aussaresses's colleagues, the torture and guerrilla warfare expert, Col. Roger Trinquier, wrote in his memoir of his Algerian service that when he first flew over the Kabyle region in his helicopter it re-

minded him of his native region of Dauphine.<sup>5</sup> Trinquier, who, along with Aussaresses, would go on to help train the Argentine military in the black arts of counterinsurgency, was scarcely alone in indulging in such romantic musings. It permeated not only the French officer corps at the time, but the political class as well. Aussaresses, who seems to take a particular joy in highlighting the role of François Mitterrand in prosecuting the war in Algeria, quotes the future president of the Republic as declaring in late 1954, "I can accept no negotiations with the enemies of the nation. Our only negotiating approach is war!"<sup>6</sup> But, in fact, examples of this kind of patriotic bombast were legion at the time.

#### *In Defense of France*

But the rhetoric concealed a reality that all but insured that the war would be savage. The FLN was not just fighting a war against the French army but a terrorist war aimed at driving out the European settlers. For their part, the French conceived of their action as a campaign in defense of France itself against an illegitimate rebellion. The conventional wisdom is to emphasize the filthy nature of colonial wars. But while this was often the case during the era of decolonization, it was hardly an ironclad rule. Indeed, French officers like Aussaresses, who tortured with such zeal in Algeria, had for the most part recently come from Indochina. And yet nothing of the sort occurred there, even though the war itself was ferocious. Not only was torture on both the French and Viet Minh side quite rare, it was never a systematic policy.

But while it was a war of liberation, the French war in Indochina, unlike its American successor, was conventional in nature. Unlike the FLN, the Viet Minh were not tempted by terrorist tactics. And for their part, the French, much as they wanted to retain their colonial empire in Southeast Asia, were under no illusions that they were fighting what, to use the current vernacular,

would now be called a war of homeland defense. As a result, it was the rules of war between nations, which, for all their faults, still limit the horror and barbarity of war, that obtained in Indochina, and the customs of civil wars where, in most cases anyway, almost no savagery is excluded, that predominated in Algeria.

Interestingly, neither Aussaresses nor any of his colleagues refer in their memoirs to the Viet Minh as terrorists. They are variously referred to as the “Viets,” or more simply as the enemy. The contrast with Algeria could not be greater. It seems, in this instance at least, as if language and morals are inseparable. In Aussaresses’s mind, anything was permitted in his war against terrorism. Again and again, he offers the same refrain. Any means, he insists, had to be employed to make the terrorists talk. Predictably, Aussaresses offers the torturer’s justification of his crime by saying that “the utilization of this form of violence, while unacceptable in normal times, could become acceptable in a situation in which normal limits have been superseded.” And lest readers have any doubt about what he means, Aussaresses makes his case even more precisely. “When you are interrogating a man,” he writes, “who, even in the name of an ideal, has spilled the blood of an innocent person, torture became legitimate in those cases where time was of the essence.”<sup>7</sup>

In this passage in his book, Aussaresses goes on to offer the classic scenario that supposedly justifies torture, and has been used by all regimes that wanted to engage in it, up to and including the State of Israel today. The bomb is about to go off and the choice you face is obeying the letter of the law, and allowing carnage to ensue, or torturing and possibly saving lives. At first glance, it seems to make sense; in fact, it is nonsensical. For the reality is that no regime that tortures as a matter of policy has ever restricted its use of torture to this “a bomb-maker who has planted a bomb on a school bus, he’s in custody, but refuses to talk”

scenario. It is true that anyone would be tempted to use torture under such exceptional circumstances, but, despite what Aussaresses, and the countless other torturers who preceded and succeeded him, have claimed, torture is normally a way of waging war, and a way of thinking about one’s enemies, not an exceptional response to an exceptional tactical circumstance.

That is the real importance of Aussaresses’s book. However unintentionally, he demonstrates how false the “torture as exceptional reaction” justification really was in Algeria and makes a mockery of the apologies of officers like his old boss, General Massu. For all scenario talk aside, what Aussaresses really argues in the book is that the only response to a guerrilla force like the Algerian FLN, which he defines as bent on “[mixing] in with the civilian population and [trying] to bring it into their struggle by propaganda and terror” is to “liquidate” it.<sup>8</sup>

In other words, for Aussaresses, as for all torturers, the justification for the act is not tactical necessity married to a moral imperative that allows one to consider even the most abominable practices (the bomb on the school bus, etc.), but military strategy married to the ideology of counterterrorism. In this sense, torture becomes almost the inevitable response to any insurgency with a mass following. And the act of torturing, instead of being, as Aussaresses intermittently claims, an exceptional act in war, becomes instead the paradigmatic act of war. After all, in a conventional war, one fights a battle, and, if one carries the day, one takes prisoners. Intelligence of the kind self-avowed shadow warriors like Aussaresses can obtain is valuable but usually of secondary importance. The issue is decided on the battlefield.

### *The Illegitimate Enemy*

But in Algeria, the French did not believe their enemies were legitimate adversaries. They may not have used U.S. secretary of

defense Donald Rumsfeld's formulation when he called the Al Qaeda fighters "illegitimate combatants"—i.e. combatants with no rights under the laws of war—but the effect was similar. The Algerian war was one of the first instances of a state making every effort to elide the distinction between war and police work. Aussaresses is introduced to torture by the policemen he and his soldiers worked with in the provincial town of Philippeville in 1955. This was the site where the insurgents murdered a large number of French colonists in cold blood, setting off the cycle of torture. Often, he describes his own work as a kind of brutal policing. And before long, any traditional conception of war or of a legitimate enemy has disappeared.

Instead, Aussaresses offers the model of the terrorist, the ultimate illegitimate enemy, who has to be stopped by the most effective means necessary, including, unavoidably, torture and summary execution. The terrorist's cause is by definition bogus, and his hold on the population based only on physical and ideological compulsion. Ironically, Aussaresses's self-justification, which is that his enemy was so illegitimate that any means necessary were justifiable in order to vanquish him, is the mirror image of the terrorist's *apologia pro bellum suum*, which is that his cause—the revolution, the faith, the wrong—is so just that no one can claim to be a nonbelligerent, and the distinction between military and civilian targets is valueless. Speaking of his role in torturing his prisoners and in killing them, Aussaresses says that, "One must not regret what one has done trying to do one's duty."<sup>9</sup>

If Osama bin Laden turns out to have survived the U.S. bombing of Afghanistan and the international manhunt and lives into great age, it is easy to imagine him saying more or less the same thing. For whether they issue from the mouth of a Paul Aussaresses or an Osama bin Laden, these are the generic rationalizations of people who believe the rightness of their cause

trumps all other moral obligations. Defenders of certain terrorists claim that one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter. This is false. Terrorism has a specific character, both operationally and morally. By the same token, it is absurd for Aussaresses to claim, as he does in his book, that in Algeria to be a good soldier was to be a torturer. If anything, the reverse was the case, and the only French general officer to emerge from the horror of Algeria with his honor intact, was one of Aussaresses's brother officers, Gen. Jacques Pâris de Bollardière.

General de Bollardière thought of himself as a soldier, not a policeman. And when General Massu issued an order during the Battle of Algiers for the army to "accentuate its police effort"—a directive every officer worth his salt knew really meant stepping up the army's campaign of torture and summary execution—Bollardière publicly refused. He was jailed for his pains. For him, the issue, as he put it at the time in a letter to Jean-Jacques Servan-Schreiber, was losing sight of "moral values" in the name of "immediate operational effectiveness."<sup>10</sup>

If Aussaresses is even aware of such principles, he makes no mention of them in his book. Finally, the most chilling thing about the memoir are not the matter-of-fact tales of monstrous cruelty Aussaresses recounts without a hint of shame, but that he does not appear even to have been haunted by what he did. The book is almost eerily serene. Clearly, Aussaresses wanted to embarrass the French establishment, above all the Socialists. But the stronger impression is, as Hannah Arendt famously said of Adolph Eichmann, of this man's terrible banality. What Aussaresses reveals himself in his book as being is a bureaucrat of torture, as boring as he is sinister. But paradoxically, it is that which makes his career, snaking as it does from Algeria through the dirty wars of Latin America two decades later, so relevant to the current debates on terrorism and how best to fight it. It is also what makes these times so terrifying. ●

## Notes

1. The most judicious account of the conflict's human and economic toll is to be found in Bernard Droz and Evelyne Lever, *Histoire de la Guerre d'Algérie* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1982).
2. For an excellent discussion of the distorting effects of France's commitment to prosecuting the war in Algeria on its relationship with NATO, see Irwin M. Wall's admirable *France, the United States, and the Algerian War* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).
3. *Ibid.*, passim.
4. Paul Aussaresses, *Service Spéciaux Algérie, 1955–1957* (Paris: Éditions Perrin, 2001), p. 163.
5. Roger Trinquier, *Le Coup d'État du 13 Mai* (Paris: Éditions l'Esprit Nouveau, 1962), p. 243.
6. Quoted in Aussaresses, *Service Spéciaux Algérie*, p. 12.
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 30–31.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 26.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 10.
10. Quoted in Droz and Lever, *Histoire de la Guerre d'Algérie*, p. 140.