

Battle of Algiers

by [Kevin Beary](#)

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Gillo Pontecorvo's famous film, [Battle of Algiers](#) (1966), was recently released in Italy on DVD. Unfortunately, at the moment it is not available in the United States, which really is a pity, given the current occupation of Iraq and the possibility of further wars of occupation in the Middle East. For Battle of Algiers shows us what the United States military is likely to be up against as it seeks to carry out its mission civilisatrice in that part of the world.



French army confronts demonstrators for Algerian independence in 1960

The film concerns the career of one Ali la Pointe, an illiterate petty criminal and boxer who is radicalized in prison after seeing the execution of a fellow Algerian. As the condemned man is being led to the guillotine, he shouts, "Allah is great! Long live Algeria!" Once out of prison, Ali is recruited by the FLN (National Liberation Front), the

terrorist/national independence group that, fighting from 1954 to 1962, forced the French out of Algeria after 130 years of French presence.

In the film, the FLN starts off its campaign of national liberation by attempting to purge the Algerian people of what the political organization sees as decadent Western influences. One of the FLN's communiqués reads:

"People of Algeria, the colonial administration is responsible not only for the misery and enslavement of our people, but also for the brutalization, corruption and degrading vices of many of our brothers and sisters, who have forgotten their dignity.... Starting today, the FLN has assumed responsibility for the physical and moral health of the Algerian people and has therefore decided to forbid the use and sale of all types of drugs and alcoholic beverages, as well as prostitution and pimping. All offenders will be punished and habitual offenders will be executed." Ali himself shoots to death a pimp who had befriended him during his pre-revolutionary life.

One can only wonder if the permissiveness and hedonism that is such a prominent aspect of Western democracy will be any more welcome in the Arab world of today than it was in the 1950s.

Then begin the murders of French policemen, who are usually shot in the back. The incidents multiply, and the prefect of police decides to take extra-legal measures that involve the bombing and complete destruction of an inhabited building associated with the FLN in the Arab quarter. Thereafter, the FLN starts its own bombing campaign. In the film's most famous sequence, three Arab women made up and dressed as Frenchwomen manage to sneak bombs into the European quarter, which has been cut off from the Kasbah by checkpoints. Their targets are a bar, a milk bar, and the Air France office. In one scene, the youthful, carefree French – teenagers and children among them – socialize, drink, and gyrate to the Latin tune "Hasta Manana" in the bar, while one of the women hides her bomb and leaves. What happens next in all three places is as horrific as it is familiar.

On the 11th of September, 2001, we saw another example of this strategy of hitting three targets simultaneously in order to disorient and demoralize the enemy: The attack on the World Trade Center, the attack on the Pentagon, and the attack manquée on the White House, the putative target of the plane that went down in Pennsylvania.

As the situation deteriorates, the French send in reinforcements, which arrive marching to the applause of the French residents. The narrator informs us that "the Inspector General of the Administration has taken drastic steps to ensure law and order and to protect people and property. In particular, to bring the 10th Para Division into Algiers.... The Commander will take over responsibility for law and order in Algiers using all civil and military measures necessary."

Commander Lt. Colonel Philippe Mathieu tells his men: "The problem, as usual, is: first, the enemy; second, how to destroy him. There are 400,000 Arabs in Algiers. All against us? Of course not. There's only a minority that rules by terror and violence. This is the enemy to isolate and destroy.... It's an unknown, unrecognizable enemy. It blends with the others. It is everywhere: in the cafes, in the alleyways of the Kasbah or in the streets of the European quarter, in the shops, in the shops, in the workplace."

The Lt. Colonel also tells his men that they need an excuse to go on the offensive, and if the Arabs don't provide one, he himself will. But the Arabs do give him his excuse in the form of a general strike: anyone participating in the strike is considered an FLN member. In an operation code-named "Champagne," the French soldiers empty the Kasbah of its men, and through interrogation and torture manage to identify members of the terrorist cells.

But even as the FLN is being broken up, the bombings continue. A horse race is interrupted by two explosions, and the French spectators attempt to wreak their vengeance on an Arab boy selling refreshments in the stands. As the mob moves towards him, the boy's eyes become filled with terror – a terror that is also wary, doubtless because the boy has feared the wrath of the French before and intuitively understands the workings of corporate guilt. The lad, who ironically is wearing a cap with the Coca-Cola logo, is reminiscent of the little Jewish boy with hands raised in the famous WWII photograph – a comparison made almost certainly on purpose by Pontecorvo.

Immediately after the explosions, while the bloody victims are being carried to safety, the French pounce on the child, striking and kicking him, shouting: "Salopard! You'll pay for the rest! Little rat! Get going! Son of a bitch!" The child is saved by a French policeman, who puts himself between the boy and the mob while shouting, "Take it easy! He's only a child!" To which someone in the mob responds, "So what?"

Don't they kill our children?!" The officer and his colleagues succeed in carrying the boy to safety – an intentional endorsement, possibly, by Pontecorvo of the Western sense of justice and fair play.

This is certainly the most moving scene in the film, and it is the one that stayed with me vividly all during the thirty years after I first saw the movie.

In a following scene, Pontecorvo deals with the issue of the killing of innocents by an army vs. such killing by an irregular force. During a press conference, a reporter asks a captured official of the FLN: "Isn't it a dirty thing to use women's baskets to carry bombs to kill innocent people?" To which the official answers, "And you? Doesn't it seem even dirtier to you to drop napalm bombs on defenseless villages with thousands of innocent victims? It would be a lot easier for us if we had planes. Give us your bombers, and we'll give you our baskets."

In a second press conference, another reporter questions Colonel Matthieu about the use of torture against FLN members. The colonel responds: "I'll ask you a question myself: Should France stay in Algeria? If the answer is still yes, you'll have to accept all the necessary consequences."

There follows a graphic but at the same time stylized sequence of the torture of suspected terrorists.

The colonel finally succeeds in destroying the terrorist cells. He is convinced that if the head of the organization is taken or killed, the organization itself will die. And he does succeed in blowing up Ali la Pointe, after which there is a period of calm in Algeria.

But the peace does not last. The narrator informs us: "It is not known why, but after two years of relative quiet, apart from the guerrilla war in the mountains, trouble has broken out again."

The demonstration scene at the end of the film, with its Algerian-flag waving, ululating protestors, is where Pontecorvo indulges and celebrates his communist convictions – the victory of the people over their imperialistic oppressors – not foreseeing where liberation and independence would lead: in 1991, the FLN government of Algeria cancelled the results of a free election in which the decidedly un-communist FSI (Islamic Salvation Front) was poised to win a majority

and banned the party. In response, a splinter group of the FSI, the Armed Islamic Group (GIA), set out to purify Algeria of all apostate and infidel elements. It is estimated that 100,000 Algerians have lost their lives as a result of the GIA's zeal.

Battle of Algiers is gripping with its scenes that seem to have been shot today in Palestine and that possibly will soon be shot in Iraq. Though Pontecorvo was a communist who sympathized with the FLN, it is quite easy to watch and appreciate the film even if one identifies with France's mission civilisatrice and believes in the superiority of Western over Eastern values. But even though a Western viewer might root for the French, he is still faced with the intractability of that discord between two cultures that Rudyard Kipling summed up so memorably.

The question that the film poses to us present-day Americans is the same, *mutatis mutandis*, that Lt. Colonel Matthieu poses to the journalists: Should France stay in Algeria? Should the United States stay in Iraq?

If the answer is yes, I'm afraid that, like the French, we'll have to accept all the necessary consequences.

Gillo Pontecorvo and Battle of Algiers

In her biography of Pontecorvo, *Memorie Estorte a uno Smemorato* (Memories Wrung from a Scatterbrain – a reference to Pontecorvo's famed absent-mindedness) Irene Bignardi tells us that the future director of the Battle of Algiers was born into an Italian-Jewish family of Pisa in 1919. Like the families of not a few Italian communists, Pontecorvo's was well-to-do: his father, a cloth manufacturer, owned three factories and employed 1500 workers.

The director was introduced to communism in the late '30s by an older brother, Bruno, who worked as an atomic physicist in Paris, and by Bruno's circle of anti-fascist friends. The group set to work on the young Pontecorvo, who later explained his conversion thus: "Those boys were older than I, and they had a certain prestige, a certain fascination. Maybe I would have become a rugby player, if they had been rugby players...."

During WWII, Pontecorvo worked as a courier and journalist for the Italian Communist Party. But he became disillusioned with the party in

1956 as a result of its support of the Soviet invasion of Hungary: "For a long time, I had begun to criticize that which I had liked for so long: those [Communist Party] grooves that had given me a great sense of security, the romanticization of the working class...the romanticization of the Soviet Union and the myopia concerning certain facts.... This series of small delusions had brought [me and others] to the truth and had separated us from the religion. When the suppression [of the revolt] in Hungary took place, all these feelings came to a head, and I decided to leave a party in which I had believed blindly, but which had deluded me in many ways."

Pontecorvo's brother Bruno's disillusionment with the Soviet Union took somewhat longer. He defected to that country in 1950 and remained there for many years. Only towards the end of his life did he confide to his brother Gillo how absurd it seemed to him that "doing the [scientific] work I do, which should be completely based on reason, I was conditioned and driven for forty years by impulses that I can only define as religious in nature. Just think: I got to the point where I could justify to myself without hesitation even the mass murder of the kulaks."

Like many other Italian communists who left the party in disgust at the Soviet invasion of Hungary, however, Pontecorvo did not abandon his communist convictions. Which brings us to Battle of Algiers. Algerian independence was declared and recognized in 1962, and Pontecorvo and his collaborator Franco Solinas, Bignardi writes, were "fascinated by the events and their ideological implications, convinced that the anti-colonial struggle was an urgent and important subject, almost a symbol and model for the political struggle against 'an invincible capitalism in Italy,'" as Solinas put it in an interview. In 1964, a representative of military head of the FLN leader Jacef Saadi (who in the film plays the part of the FLN commander Kader) arrived in Italy looking for a leftist director to make a film about the struggle for Algerian independence and decided on Pontecorvo. In 1965, the government of Algeria gave the director "not only all the necessary permits to shoot the film in Algiers, but put at his disposal – though not completely without charge – the Algerian army for the crowd scenes."

Pontecorvo wanted to shoot his film without using professional actors (in fact, the only professional is Jean Martin, a French stage actor who plays the part of the French commander Matthieu). He found the 138 faces featured in the film while wandering the streets of Algiers. "The journalists and French soldiers," Bignardi tells us, "were played by tourists of various nationalities – in particular, for the French troops,

some British tourists were chosen for their height and build.... Brahim Haggiag, who played Ali La Pointe...had a splendidly dramatic face, but he was a poor illiterate farmer whom Pontecorvo had found in a city market and who hadn't the faintest idea what cinema was.... [He] would be taught his part step by step by the use of signals and by keeping the memorization of his lines to a minimum."

If one has not seen this film, one cannot begin to imagine Pontecorvo's extraordinary achievement. The acting is so natural and convincing that many viewers and even some critics assumed that the movie was a documentary. Only a master director could have taken this raw acting material and gotten such performances out of it. And despite his leftist viewpoint, Pontecorvo neither ridicules or demonizes the French, as does Michael Moore the Americans in his recent putative documentary *Bowling at Columbine* – though I do a disservice to Pontecorvo to compare his work to that of Moore.

Although nearly forty years have passed since its creation, *Battle of Algiers* is more timely than ever – especially for Americans, given the American involvement in a contemporary colonial war in the Middle East. One hopes that it will soon be available in videocassette or DVD in the United States.

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