

Iran's 450,000-strong, superequipped military establishment disintegrated. Significantly, the noncommissioned officers and technicians, whose numbers had swelled since 1972 as a result of large infusions of sophisticated arms, were the first to defect en masse; their defection proved crucial in the disintegration of Iran's armed forces. The military's open and mass defections, which began in December 1978, were spearheaded by technicians and cadets of the air force and armored divisions. They sealed the Pahlavis' fate.

Herein lies an extraordinary irony: In terms of its intensity, scope, and the social forces which were involved in it, the Iranian was by far the most modern and objectively advanced revolution in the Third World. Yet revolutionary power in Iran was seized by a clerical leadership of theocratic outlook, medieval culture, and millenarian style. Most scholars have attributed this remarkable phenomenon to the shah's repression (only in the mosque one found the freedom of association and speech . . .) and to Iran's Shia traditions (of martyrdom and clerical power).

This recent emphasis on Iran's Shia avocation and its ulema's institutionalized strength is exaggerated and misleading. A clearer explanation of the hegemony which the ulema achieved in the revolutionary process may be found in Antonio Gramsci's argument about the power of cultural forces in a disorganically developed environment. This idea may also help us understand how so powerful a revolution in a country so rich in human and material resources has been so tragically derailed. But that is an altogether different and more complex subject.

[1994]



7 / THE MAKING OF THE BATTLE OF ALGIERS

Editors' Note: At the time of this writing (summer 2004), The Battle of Algiers is in the midst of a revival. Recently rereleased with a new print, Gillo Pontecorvo's 1966 film has been making the rounds of art cinemas and even some commercial venues in the United States, apparently finding new and avid audiences. Reports in the press have noted that the Pentagon screened the film for its Special Operations (counterinsurgency) chiefs in August 2003. One wonders what the intended lessons are; how to fight an urban counterinsurgency campaign seems most probable. This is how the Pentagon screening was advertised: "How to win a battle against terrorism and lose the war of ideas. . . . Children shoot soldiers at point blank range. Women plant bombs in cafes. Soon the entire Arab population builds to a mad fervor. Sound familiar? The French have a plan. It succeeds tactically, but fails strategically. To understand why, come to a rare showing of this film." The "French plan," of course, included torture of civilians to extract information. With these tactics, they destroyed the revolutionary organization inside Algiers, but at the cost of mobilizing the entire Algerian population against the possibility of French rule. The battle of Algiers eliminated any last shred of French legitimacy, eventually ensuring their defeat.

Apparently, the American military has drawn only half the lesson. In April 2004, before the public revelation of American soldiers' actions at Abu Ghraib, an article in the L.A. Times called attention to the response of American soldiers to reports of misconduct in the treatment of Iraqi detainees: "It's a little like the French colonel in 'The Battle of Algiers.' You're all complaining about the tactics I am using to win the war, but that's what I am doing, winning the war" (Andrew Bacevich, "A Descent into Dishonor," L.A. Times, April 8, 2004).

Eqbal Ahmad helped research the script and was present during the filming of The Battle of Algiers. What follows is an edited transcript of a lecture about the making of the film that he gave to an undergraduate class at Hampshire College in fall 1998.

The Battle of Algiers is the first film I know of that in a concentrated fashion emphasizes a primary characteristic of revolutionary warfare, the fundamental characteristic of revolutionary warfare: to be successful, the revolutionary movement must outadminister the enemy before it starts to outfight it. *The Battle of Algiers* gives you that insight from both sides, Algerian and French. The film closely follows the actual battle, but the emphasis is not on violence; it is on organization. Early in the film, we see the French commissioner of police working hand in glove with the colon/settler underground organization. He aids the French settler underground in blowing up two Arab houses in the Casbah. In that incident, 157 Algerians died. Until that day, there had not been large-scale revolutionary violence in Algiers.

When the historical battle of Algiers began, the real war was in the countryside, not in the city. The revolutionaries were using Algiers as their headquarters, as a source of supply, as the place from which to organize. Ali La Pointe, one of the chief characters in the film, is an example of this effort to organize. He is the quintessential lumpenproletarian: he is unemployed; he is from the ghetto; he has a criminal record; he is a vagabond; he participates in the numbers racket; he earns money by gambling; he is connected to the gambling/prostitution network in the Casbah. While in jail for petty theft and for hitting a French boy who had taunted him in the street as he tried to escape arrest, he begins his conversion to the cause of the revolution. When the French blow up the Casbah, he is in a hurry: he wants revenge—immediately. Ali is shown leading an angry mob, calling for blood in response to the bombing. In a critical early moment in the film, he goes to see the resistance commander, Colonel Mohammed Jafar, and has an argument with Jafar, saying, “We must strike back.” Jafar answers, “No, Ali, not yet; we are not ready. We must first organize the Casbah before we engage in violence. We must clean up the numbers racket, the gambling racket, the prostitution; we must institute discipline; we must offer services to people.” Ali then walks through the Casbah, telling the residents, “We must stop the gambling, stop the prostitution.” The kids beat up an old drunk, and Ali shoots the man who controls gambling and prostitution, after apparently having warned him twice to disband his network.

A second critical moment in the film is the marriage scene, presided over by an FLN militant. It signifies that French rule is over inside the Casbah, that the revolution has outadministered the French. Colonial law stipulated that marriages must be registered with the French government. Yet this marriage is not performed by a French-appointed *qadi* [Muslim religious judge], and it is not registered with the French; it is performed instead by the revolution and registered with the revolution. The French have been cut out of the process.

In Vietnam, where they fought before Algeria and lost, the French had the insight to recognize at a certain point, “We are still here, but we’re finished.” A political officer in the French resident general’s office wrote a memorandum to Paris in 1944 or 1945, after French rule was reestablished in Vietnam, saying, “We are the formal authority, but we are making laws in a void, we are legislating in a vacuum.” The parallel administration of the revolution had taken over, had superimposed itself on the administration of colonial France in Vietnam. This is what you see happening in *The Battle of Algiers*. This is why Mohammed Jafar says, “We are not ready to retaliate because we must organize the people, we must outadminister the enemy, so that the enemy is cut out, even when it thinks it is formally ruling.”

With Colonel Mathieu, the French leader, we get the view from the French side. He is coming from Vietnam; he is a veteran of Indochina; he knows revolutionary warfare better than the colons. He says, “You cannot fight this enemy unless you lick the political organization; you can kill them, but unless you lick the political organization, they are going to win.” Mathieu makes charts of how the revolutionary organization is structured to identify the key organizers. The film shows how the French deconstructed the revolutionary organization—using torture—knowing that you could not lick the revolution without getting to the politics of it. What makes this movie so significant is that it shows analytically a very fundamental reality of revolution. You must outadminister before you can outfight the enemy.

The General Strike

A few more points about revolutionary warfare with reference to the film. First, the general strike and its context. John F. Kennedy, who was then a US senator and who wanted France to settle Algeria, called for a debate on Algeria at the UN. All the Africans, all the Arabs, and all the other Third World

people supporting the Algerian Revolution, agreed. The debate took place in the General Assembly, not in the Security Council. The French argued, "These people [referring to the Algerian anticolonial revolutionaries] represent nothing; they are a bunch of terrorists." To prove to the world that they did represent the people of Algeria, the organizers of the revolution called for a general strike, all over Algeria and also in France. With the general strike, however, the Algerians broke a rule of revolutionary strategy; it was the biggest blunder the leaders could have made. From that blunder followed other ones.

What happened was, the conventional Marxist idea of the effectiveness of the general strike was superimposed on the situation of revolutionary warfare. But the principle of the general strike is totally contrary to a principle that informs revolutionary warfare that is almost as important as outadministering versus outfighting the enemy. That is, in revolutionary warfare, the mass of the population must be organized to support the revolution. But they must officially remain neutral.

Revolutionary warfare is different from conventional warfare. In conventional warfare, the sides are declared. Adversaries fight openly, sides are clearly chosen and drawn, conventional armies move and fight set battles. A revolutionary war, by contrast, is by definition a war between a static and well-structured state and determined revolutionaries. There is a massive discrepancy of power between the two. For example, in Algeria, at the height of the Algerian War, France deployed half a million troops; at the end of the battle of Algiers, there were 450,000 French troops in Algeria, including helicopter units, armored divisions, tank divisions, infantry divisions, all supported by a navy and air force. Algerians, at the highest point of the revolution, had 25,000 fighters. The revolution had only men in pajamas, a gun or grenade in hand, nothing else. In this situation, strength is the people. Chairman Mao's famous dictum was "the guerrilla is to the people what a fish is to water." The people are the sea in which the revolutionary swims. The Japanese, against whom the Chinese revolutionaries fought, responded to the Maoist dictum by pursuing a policy in Manchuria of "draining the water"—killing the people.

In order to protect people, revolutionaries must maintain the fiction of popular neutrality. The incumbent power (whether colonial or local) has the compulsion to say, "The people are behind us; the revolutionaries, the guerrillas, are merely terrorizing them. We are protecting the people," as indeed the French said. That rhetoric reduces their ability to attack the whole population. Therefore good revolutionary tactics always create an environment in

which the people are overtly neutral, while covertly larger and larger numbers of them support the revolution by various means. In Algeria, therefore, you didn't do anything to expose the entire people to attack by the other side. But that's what the general strike did. No decent revolutionary movement would call a general strike in a situation of warfare until almost the end, when it was winning, and it just needed the last push.

This was not the case in Algeria. The film opens with the first communiqué of the FLN in 1954; they were just beginning to organize. When the FLN declares the general strike, Colonel Mathieu is very happy and says, "Now we can lick them. They have made their first bad move." Why? Because they are announcing themselves to be on the side of the revolution. He can plan his operation: arrest everyone who is on strike and torture the bloody lot. Interrogate them. Some of them will turn out to be activists, some of them will turn out to be neutrals. But now he has a large pool from which he can get information. He called the operation, Operation Champagne: he went outside, saw a billboard advertising champagne, and thought, "This is going to be easy; it will go down easy, like champagne." He smoked them out. Seventy-seven thousand people in a period of just about twelve days were tortured, badly, in the city of Algiers. He would, each time, mark on the chart one more person they had identified, one more cell broken, check, check, check, destroy, destroy. That's how they did it. Six of the French who carried out the operation were eventually censured for torture.

Dividing the Revolution

The battle of Algiers had a very bad effect on the revolution. In 1965, working on the film, I had not quite understood that. The battle of Algiers made it impossible for the leadership of the revolution to stay in Algiers. The general strike, in fact, caused the total destruction of the cadres; the leadership eventually had to move out of one of the safest places to hide, the city. In the countryside, the revolutionary cadres were constantly pursued because the countryside was a battleground. After trying to live there, unable to send out communiqués, unable to direct their units, the leadership went to Tunis. There it formed the Provisional Revolutionary Government (Gouvernement provisoire de la République algérienne—GPRV), which proceeded to direct the revolution from Tunis.

But 1958 witnessed another event: the French started to build the Morice and Challe lines. These were electrified barbed wire fences that ringed the frontiers of Algeria and Tunisia. The French idea was to cut the leadership off from Algeria and to make it impossible for them to supply arms to the revolution. Their third goal was to divide, to create discontent between the *wilaya* commanders inside Algeria and the leadership by cutting off communications and supplies from one to the other.¹ The French had some success: a division was created in the Algerian Revolution between the exterior leadership and the interior revolution. There was bitterness inside, where Algerians were fighting the battles and the French were increasing their pressure, while the leadership was sitting outside, making speeches at the United Nations, meeting with all the great leaders of Africa and Asia. Arms were not making it into Algeria. The Tunisian-based GPRA then, knowing that there was anger toward them from inside and feeling insecure, created an army on the frontier, called the ALN (Armée de Libération Nationale), under the leadership of Colonel Boumedienne. This army sat on the Tunisian and Moroccan frontiers. It was well trained; it had arms, even tanks; it had a small air force; it had armored battalions. It was a proper conventional army, sitting outside the electrified barbed wire that surrounded Algeria.² Occasionally, it would lose half a unit, sending forty men into Algeria and losing twenty or twenty-five of them, but it had made a symbolic gesture of going in and fighting. Otherwise, it was well rested, well trained, well equipped.

Then, in 1962, independence comes. France negotiates its withdrawal. At that moment, the army the GPRA had created, a conventional army, in order to have a strong bargaining mechanism and a coercive apparatus in case the interior was hard to control, turned on the GPRA, because it was not a revolutionary force; the ALN was a military force. The turn was made easier by Ben Bella, a particularly ambitious man, who sided with the army. From 1963 to 1965, he was the most famous man in the Third World. No one realized that this man, in the name of revolution, had brought a conventional army into power. The army ate him up. The GPRA created the ALN, and the ALN ate the GPRA up. If you are going to raise a tiger, the tiger can turn on you.

Everyone knew the Algerians were going to win. By 1960, one way or another, the people were going to win. Even by 1954, when the French were defeated at Dien Bien Phu, France was internally divided about the Algerian war, just as America would later be over Vietnam. These two revolutions de-

feated the collective presumptions of modern technology. They defeated massive powers. They were an extraordinary demonstration of the power of human will and of organization. Without that conventional army, the revolution would have been at least partially successful. It has not been even partially successful. It only succeeded in getting rid of France; it failed at building a democratic, revolutionary society.

The Making of the Film

The film *The Battle of Algiers* is a historically accurate rendition of the battle. The script was written by Franco Solinas. I did research for it and consulted on the script. The role of the leader was played by the actual organizer of the battle of Algiers, Saadi Yacef, who was also the associate director of the film. The script was based on Saadi Yacef's book about the battle of Algiers, a book he wrote in prison. Gillo Pontecorvo directed the film. Pontecorvo had a rule that those people currently living played themselves but were assigned fictional names, while real names were used for the dead. In the case of Yacef, since he was living, playing himself in the film, he was given the name Mohammed Jafar.

The first time you see him in the film is when Ali La Pointe comes out of prison and is ordered to shoot someone and given a gun with no bullets. He has a meeting with Mohammed Jafar and asks him, "Why did you give me a gun with no bullets?" "To test your sincerity." The second time you see him, he is sending women out to plant bombs. The last time you see him, he is being arrested. He is in a car, on the way to prison, and Mathieu, the colonel (who in real life was Roger Trinquier), says, "I would have been disappointed if you hadn't surrendered." And he asks, "Why?" Mathieu responds, "Because I have been studying your profile, and our estimation of you is that you never make an empty gesture."

Two incidents stand out in my mind in relation to the filming of *The Battle of Algiers*. I recall with great emotion that every time people died or were killed, Pontecorvo had music playing on the sound track. Every time a French person died, he used Beethoven; every time an Algerian died, he had the Algerian Arabic dirge. As the film was nearing completion, Saadi Yacef said to Pontecorvo, "This is something I don't like. You have to have the Algerian

dirge for both of us. Otherwise, we are separating even the dead according to nationality." Of course, Pontecorvo made the change.

By conscious choice, Pontecorvo shot the film in black and white. He wanted to give it the texture of a documentary without using documentary footage. He wanted to give the film a sense of crude urgency, and he felt that using color would take away the feeling of intimacy and urgency. The choice to do it in black and white was contrary to the wishes of those funding the film. By this time (1966), nearly all films were made in color. His concern with immediacy was such that one time during the filming process something suddenly got into his head. He was filming the torture scene with which the film opens. When the torture scene was being taped, the cameras were on tripods (three cameras, 16 mm). Pontecorvo said, "Get them off, get them off, get those cameras off the tripods, hold them in your hands, approach the subject." And holding the cameras in their hands, they shot the torture scene. After that, all intimate scenes, such as the marriage, were shot with the camera in hand, to give a sense of extreme proximity and intimacy with the subject. He used a remarkable set of techniques.

One last historical note about the film. Do you remember Ben M'Hidi? He is the one who says to Ali La Pointe on the rooftop, "The general strike is a mistake, but we must do it." The lines were entirely his. He was one of the seven historic chiefs of the Algerian Revolution. He was the only one in the central committee of the Algerian Revolution who assiduously opposed the general strike. And, ironically, he is the only one who got killed.

He appears again in the film; he's the Algerian who is arrested and brought by the French to a press conference. The French then take him back into custody and announce later that he has died, he has committed suicide. And the general feeling, all over the world, including among us, was that Ben M'Hidi had died under torture. At the next press conference, you may remember, following the announcement of his death, there were questions about torture. Several years later, while doing the research for *The Battle of Algiers*, I interviewed Roger Trinquier (who is still alive, by the way), and one of the last questions I asked him was, "What happened to Ben M'Hidi?" And he answered, talking and looking just the way Matthieu did—that tall, lean, killer figure, but very sharp and intelligent. "I know that all of you think we tortured him to death, but we did not." I said, "What happened?" He said, "We shot him, but we gave him a guard of honor before we shot him." And I asked, "Why did you do that?" "Parce que M. Ben M'Hidi était un chef." "Because

M. Ben M'Hidi was a leader." And then he talked about Ben M'Hidi for almost an hour. He said, "I didn't want to shoot him. I had never met anyone like that. I would have liked to see him as *le président de la France*. So, once I was ordered to shoot him, I gave him a guard of honor first."

[1998]