

***A Diplomatic Revolution: Algeria's Fight for Independence and the Origins of the Post-Cold War Era*, by Matthew Connelly**

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A Diplomatic Revolution: Algeria's Fight for Independence and the Origins of the Post-Cold War Era. By Matthew Connelly. New York and London: Oxford University Press, 2002. ISBN 019-5145-135. Maps. Tables. Notes. Index. Pp xviii+400.

In April 1962 France surrendered its right to rule in Algeria. Algeria was unique among French overseas possessions. It had been colonized by the French monarchy in the 1830s, and incorporated directly into the French Second Republic in 1848, which is to say, at about the same time that Texas became part of the United States of America. Legally, Algeria comprised three French departments, no different than Vendée or Vaucluse. The French fought hard to hold on. They deployed as many as half a million troops there in an attempt to suppress the revolt, and tested their first atomic bombs in the Algerian hinterland. In the end, however, they would turn the place over to representatives of the Algerian National Liberation Front (known by its French initials as the FLN), whose members they had always regarded as criminals. During eight years of frequently atrocious fighting the FLN had never controlled any part of Algeria, and at the moment of triumph its poorly armed cadres amounted to barely ten thousand men. Yet it had won, just the same.

France's strange defeat has been much studied, and much mythologized. Among scholars, the Algerian war has long stood as a paradigmatic example of tactical success married to political futility. The French army, it is held, had mastered the FLN using the classic methods of counter-insurgency. Yet the indiscriminate brutality of those methods so radicalized and embittered the populations of both France and Algeria that even far-reaching concessions would not suffice to maintain control. Political and economic reform, for which military victory might have bought time, came too late, in part because European settlers living in Algeria refused to countenance changes that would put them on equal terms with their Arab and Berber neighbors. The last straw came when the settlers' cause was taken up by elements of the French army, which saw its sacrifices being squandered by the politicians, and rose up to overthrow them—a vain effort, but one that left the French leadership no choice but to abandon a war whose larger dangers had become apparent.

The mythologists, too, have focused on the armed struggle, a David-and-Goliath contest whose improbable result is explained not by David's superior weapon, but by the moral resilience of what the FLN's brilliant apologist, Frantz Fanon, called "the wretched of the earth." Most of this literature is now forgotten, but one celebrated example, Gillo Pontecorvo's film *The Battle of Algiers* (1965), has lately received a new lease on life (and limited theatrical re-release), thanks to renewed public interest in terrorism and Islam. Pontecorvo's film, which was made in cooperation with the Algerian government, portrays a seminal episode that occurred in 1957, when the French 10th Parachute Division rooted out the FLN underground in Algiers. At the center (cinematically as well as historically) is the practice of systematic torture, by which the French obtained the information necessary to expose and destroy the

FLN's clandestine network. Pontecorvo's film is notable for its quasi-documentary verisimilitude, its (reasonably) frank portrayal of terrorist methods, and its sympathetic treatment of the French, whose leader, "Colonel Mathieu," is easily the most compelling personality on the screen. Mathieu is portrayed as a worthy opponent, and as a man willing to face up to the inevitable cruelties of counter-terrorism, in which the only choice, as he sees it, is to fight the enemy on his own terms. In one scene, he defies a room full of French journalists to tell him what else they would like him to do, if torture and reprisal are not to their taste, and demands to know why it is that, when the honor and future of Western civilization are at stake, they have nothing to offer but equivocation and doubt.

Last August *The Battle of Algiers* was screened at the Pentagon, as a cautionary tale of "how to win a battle against terrorism and lose the war of ideas." I have shown it in classes on Middle Eastern history, and can testify to its cathartic effects. Yet the fact remains that no one, having seen the film, can have the slightest idea how the FLN managed to win their war. The film ends with Mathieu walking through the streets of the now-pacified Casbah, remarking that all that remained was to ferret out the rebels in the countryside. And while one might suppose that this task somehow proved impossible, it was substantially accomplished over the next twenty-four months—a grim reality over which Pontecorvo passes in silence. Instead, we see a celebratory climax, in which the same streets fill up with jubilant Algerians, welcoming the liberation of their country. This happened five years after the events portrayed in the film. In between, some sort of miracle must have occurred.

Those who prefer not to believe in miracles should read Matthew Connelly's new book. In Connelly's analysis, the dispiriting morality play of master and slave that gave the Algerian war its distinctive coloration proved decisive only because it was married to an artfully conceived campaign of diplomatic confrontation. It is thus at the level of what can only be called "grand strategy" that the French met defeat. Although the international arena would appear to be one in which the French government possessed every possible advantage, modern communications technology and new political structures like the United Nations afforded the FLN ample means to evade French censorship and subvert French claims of sovereignty. Rather than take the French on directly, they appealed instead to global public opinion, and to the interests of other powers on whom the French depended. Of these the most important was the United States, whose ambivalence and impatience would contribute mightily to the final unraveling of French colonialism.

France's strategic vulnerability in Algeria arose from the contradictions of its own policy, and from the complex economic and political dependencies that are characteristic of any advanced industrial democracy. The claim that "Algeria is France" lacked *prima facie* credibility: one needed but to go there and open one's eyes to see that it was not so. Yet the French refused to accept the FLN insurgency as an authentic indictment of French rule, and insisted that the trouble was caused by outsiders, variously conceived as communist, pan-Arab, or pan-Islamist agitators. To that extent the French felt entitled to call upon their friends for support: Algeria, no less than Texas, was part of NATO, after all, and external aggression against it should have been interpreted as an attack against "the West." Even while begging support from abroad, however, the French remained insistent that the Algerian insurrection was an internal matter, which they must be allowed to handle according to their own lights. In the long run they would baffle and aggravate their allies, by portraying the FLN by turns as a criminal conspiracy (hence an internal French matter), and as symptomatic of a metastasizing global challenge, a "clash of civilizations"—a concept, as Connelly demonstrates, that was fully alive in the 1950s.

The FLN was neither of those things, though the resemblances were real. While there is no question that the Algerian revolution was lifted up by a vast eruption of social grievance, the FLN was not a mass movement but a shadowy underground, whose methods were aimed not at confronting the French directly, but at radicalizing the population by a combination of propaganda and terror. Most FLN violence was, to say the least, "non-military" in character. Much of it was directed at other Muslims, and was intended to discourage compromise or collaboration; also to inspire indiscriminate repression, which the French were all too willing to provide. At the same time, despite the FLN's insubstantial appearance, it too was part of a global network, whose crucial nodes were the General Assembly of the United Nations, and

the emerging coalition of non-aligned and "developing" nations. Their meetings, conferences, and seminars afforded a continuing stream of opportunities for the FLN to dramatize its struggle.

From the very beginning, the FLN was determined to internationalize the Algerian war. Some of its leaders always resided overseas for that purpose, despite the mutual suspicion and discord that this introduced into the organization. FLN terrorism was calculated at least as much for its international as for its domestic effects. This was specifically true of the "Battle of Algiers," which arose from a conscious decision by the FLN to shift its focus from the countryside to Algeria's largest city, in order to claim a greater share of the world's attention. The FLN succeeded in part because it was able to gain recognition, within the non-aligned movement, as the symbol and avatar of a global crisis. But it also took pains not to present itself as the vanguard of a universal upheaval, and rejected strategies that linked the Algerian revolt too closely to pan-Arabism or radical Islamism. Islam was central to the FLN's rhetoric—it afforded an easy way to demonstrate that Algeria was *not* France—but not to its program. The FLN sought *national* liberation, a formulation that incorporated just enough ideological reassurance to get a sympathetic hearing abroad.

By itself, the collective sympathy of the Third World would probably never have shifted the French out of Algeria. For that, additional leverage was required, and the United States would supply it. Washington recognized that there was some justice on the side of the rebels but preferred to see France reassert control, provided it could do so quickly and cleanly. Any sort of protracted mess was not in the American interest. Although the United States was inclined to discount French claims of direct communist influence in Algeria, it took for granted that continued turmoil there might tempt the Soviets to try their hand in a region that Washington regarded as strategically vital. In the early years of the Algerian revolt (which began in 1954) American war planners still considered it likely that, come the Third World War, the Red Army would quickly sweep NATO forces out of Europe, so that the military reconquest of the continent would initially have to be based in North Africa (as it had been during World War II). Forward air bases there (e.g. in Morocco) were also considered vital to nuclear deterrence, since the United States did not yet possess significant means of striking the Soviet Union directly from North America, or by means of submarine-launched ballistic missiles.

From the French point of view, considerations of this kind should have sufficed to guarantee whole-hearted American support. The United States preferred to hedge its bets, initially by maintaining surreptitious contact with FLN representatives, and whispering private words of caution and concern into the French ear, and later by adopting an increasingly neutral public posture, and threatening to withhold military and financial assistance from France if it did not make the kinds of concessions that Washington considered necessary to reach a settlement. The evolution of American policy from that of stalwart ally to that of "honest broker" was halting. In the beginning the Americans needed the French badly, and French hints that, if pressed too hard on Algeria, they might have to reconsider their commitment to NATO, always went reliably home. But French influence in Washington inevitably declined as conditions in Europe stabilized. The rearmament of Germany, the advent of intercontinental ballistic missiles, the Sino-Soviet split—these and all the countless other adjustments of the global strategic balance in the 1950s were also steps toward Algeria's independence.

Anyone who imagines that the Cold War was a stately progress of bilateralism, a simpler time than our stormy present, will have much to learn here. Connelly's account leaves no doubt that the FLN won not because it was pulled along in the wake of East-West rivalry, but because of tensions and cross-purposes within the Western alliance, which it exploited with skill and tenacity. Not the least of this book's merits is the dexterity with which the author has passed the many threads of American policy in Asia, Europe, and the Middle East through the needle's eye of the Algerian revolution, by way of illustrating the gradual waning of France's sway over its much stronger partner. The French, for their part, were driven to despair by the realization that, so long as Algeria's rebels saw any hope in the outside world, they would never stop fighting. In retrospect it is hard to argue that they were wrong. It is equally hard to dispute Connelly's judgment that the French defeat was also a deliverance. "The Algerians' victory," he concludes, "enabled the French to become free—free from their colonial charges, and free from the United States. ... [H]aving

failed to beat the non-aligned movement, [they] joined it instead" (277). They have steered a determinedly independent course ever since.

Connelly's book is not a comprehensive history of the Algerian war, but a meticulous reconstruction of the global environment in which it occurred. By recasting the Algerian revolution as a contest between competing "transnational systems" (281) he has shined a welcome new light on a struggle that has long been treated, for practical purposes, as an episode in the history of France and its empire, without sufficient reference to the rest of the world, whose interests were most decidedly in play. Not everyone will agree, however, with his larger argument, that what we are seeing in the Algerian war is the dawning of new world order, in which the claims of sovereignty, that "Pandora's box" of "plagues and horrors" (287), will inevitably lose out. That those claims failed to save the French in Algeria is true enough, but the very precision and detail of Connelly's account raises doubts whether it is a generically representative case.

That the Algerians themselves were fighting for sovereignty is also an important part of the picture, and not one that can simply be dismissed as an example of the cunning of history. There is nothing like the experience of colonization to give one a lively impression of the power of the state, not to mention a strong desire to wield it for oneself. No one today is more jealous of the perquisites of sovereignty than the post-colonial governments whose swelling numbers gradually drew the United Nations General Assembly into support of the FLN. Conversely, it is the post-imperial states of Europe that appear most willing to set sovereignty aside in order to test new means of "transnational" cooperation and "soft power." When the Algerian revolution began, the United Nations had sixty members. When it ended there were 104. Today there are 191. Even if one accepts that the Algerians won because the tide of history was with them, one should not be too quick to judge the direction of the flood. The withering away of the state has been proclaimed before. We are not there yet.

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