

No More Torture Says France

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'This is La Main Rouge,' said the gruff voice on our home telephone in Geneva, Switzerland.. 'Stop your activities on behalf of the FLN or we will kill you.' The mysterious caller hung up.

I was petrified. La Main Rouge was killing supporters of free Algeria across Europe.

This was 1959 where I was studying at the International School of Geneva. The war to liberate Algeria from 130 years of French colonial was at its bloodiest and most intense.

As an idealistic student, I was outraged by the brutality of this struggle in which up to 1.5 million Algerians were killed by the French and by fellow Algerians. I organized demonstrations calling for free Algeria, penned articles and carried messages for the Algerian underground (Front de Liberation National, or FLN)'s branch in Paris.

The death threat was the first of many I would receive over my life, along with much other heavy intimidation and offers of bribes to alter my journalistic positions. But the bloody Algerian War of Independence, that ran from 1954-1962, still holds particular resonance for me even though I've covered 14 wars since then. The horrors of Algeria's massacres and torture have stayed with me all these years.

La Main Rouge (Red Hand), we later learned, was a false flag operation mounted by French intelligence (SDECE) to kill or frighten off supporters of the Algerian cause, notably pro-Algerian leftwing intellectuals, and arms suppliers.

That's why I was elated to see France's new president, Emmanuel Macron, officially admit that France had indeed conducted systemic torture in Algeria that he called 'a crime against humanity.' Previous French governments had denied the crimes in Algeria and censored reports and books about it.

Torture, 'disappearing' and judicial executions would no longer be sanctioned in France, even in extreme cases. Macron called France's repression in Algeria 'a crime against humanity.'

The record of the war is ghastly. Tens of thousands of Algerian suspects were rounded up at night, thrown into prisons, and tortured – many to death – using electric generators attached to their genitals or lips with steel clips. Intense beatings and use of masked informers were common. Many FLN suspects were sent to the guillotine.

The superb film 'Battle of Algiers' recounts ferocious efforts by French elite paratroopers and security forces to crush the FLN network. 'We far outdid the Nazi SS and Gestapo,' boasted one particularly sadistic French general.

As a result of the Algerian War, torture spread to France's metropolitan security services and even regular police. But this is always what happens when torture is used. It spreads like a virus.

Back in 1995, then President Jacques Chirac admitted that French police, not Germans, had rounded up 75,000 French Jews and sent them to German concentration camps. France's right was outraged.

Now, France's right is denouncing President Macron for finally telling the truth and opening France's secret archives

Which raises the question of torture by US occupation forces in Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, and of similar crimes by its satraps Egypt, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and by Israel. Under President Donald Trump, the US is going in precisely the opposite direction as France. Trump and his cohorts have lauded the use and efficacy of torture and called for its wider and more intense use in America's modern colonial wars. The CIA's new chief led one part of the torture program in Southeast Asia.

France is now purging itself of the crimes against humanity committed during the Algerian War. Nations, like people, need to occasionally cleanse their spirit of foul deeds and crimes. But not so the United States where the White House and Congress have become cheerleaders for torture.

It will be hard for Washington to keep holding itself up to be the world champion of human rights when its torturers are hard at work inflicting unspeakable punishments on suspects. Let's recall that the Bush-Cheney administration massively increased the use of torture to try to prove a fake link between Saddam's Iraq and 9/11. America disgraced itself and never could manufacture the 'evidence.'

America and France are sister democracies. President Macron has shown Washington how to deal with the crime of torture. We should listen.

Epilogue: Algeria gained independence in 1962 thanks to the wisdom of President Charles De Gaulle. But, as Danton famously stated, 'the revolution devours its young.' The FLN's rival leaders began murdering one another. The once noble struggle for independence turned into a bloodbath. Algeria fell under military rule and suffered worse horrors than even the French inflicted.

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