

Colonial Prisons in Algeria, 1954–1962

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Abstract:

French colonialism in Algeria adopted all material and human means in order to eliminate the Algerian element and replace it with the European element. Its brutality increased after the outbreak of the Algerian Liberation Revolution in 1954, through the construction of prisons and detention centres across the entire national territory, in cities and villages alike. The aim was to instil terror in the Algerians by using the most abhorrent methods of torture, such as electricity, fire, flogging, amputation, and starvation, with the ultimate purpose of eliminating the revolution in its cradle before it could achieve its objectives. Despite this, Algerians endured with patience all the tribulations they faced in the detention centres, sustained by their faith in the national cause and their commitment to the principle of “freedom or martyrdom.” The traces of that historical era still bear witness to what tyrannical France inflicted upon a defenceless people, evidenced by the testimonies of detainees who remain alive today and still bear the marks of physical and psychological torture, as well as by the physical remnants represented in prisons across several provinces of the country, the most important of which is Serkaji Prison in the capital.

Keywords: colonial prisons, torture, Algerian Liberation Revolution, detention centres, National Liberation Front.

Introduction

French colonial presence in Algeria was inextricably linked to the adoption of a brutal and barbarous policy aimed at imposing and asserting its dominance over Algerian territory. The colonizers' desire for permanence and control, together with their exploitation and plunder of Algeria's wealth and resources in order to transform it into French territory, was the driving force behind practices that were degrading and in flagrant violation of international conventions and treaties.

The intensity of repression, extermination, and torture increased markedly during the armed revolution of 1954–1962, given the threat that the uprising posed to the continuity of colonial rule. The authorities sought by every means to suppress the revolution and stifle it in its cradle. As soon as news of the outbreak reached them, the French administration adopted measures to contain the situation, encircle the insurgency, and curb its spread, chief among them the large-scale construction of prisons across cities and villages. Some of these institutions achieved international notoriety, including Lambèse Prison (“L'Ambèze,” present-day Tazoult, Batna Province), Serkaji Prison in Algiers, El Koudia Prison in Constantine, and El Gueraita Prison in the commune of Beni Ouarsous, Tlemcen Province, among others. This carceral apparatus represented a new instrument that supplanted the earlier policy of exile and deportation abroad, while also serving to conceal the regime's atrocities: the prisons established by France in Algeria were among the most notorious in the world for their organization, administration, and

treatment of inmates. Their primary aim was to erase Algerian identity, whether among common-law offenders or militants of the national cause, on the premise that Algerians could be subdued only by force, and that nothing but the club and the whip could bring them to heel.

The very nature of the prison system in Algeria reflected the underlying reality of settler colonialism: whereas in metropolitan France prisons fell under the authority of the judiciary, in Algeria they were administered and controlled by the General Directorate of Security (the police). Consequently, any individual suspected of working on behalf of the revolution was subjected to torture at the hands of the police responsible for interrogation before ever being brought before the courts.

This study allows us to address a number of questions within the limits of the sources upon which we have relied.

Research Problem

The research problem addressed here concerns the colonial prison system in Algeria during the 1950s. This study seeks to answer the following central question: What was the nature of the French prison system during the Algerian Liberation Revolution? From this central question, the following subsidiary questions arise:

- How were Algerian prisoners treated in these prisons?
- Did these prisons provide conditions conducive to survival?

Study Hypotheses

To address the central research question and its subsidiary questions, the following hypotheses are proposed:

- The period of French occupation constituted the most difficult phase in the history of the Algerian people.
- Prisoners endured extremely harsh conditions.
- Prisoners were subjected to every form of torture and barbarity.

Methodology

This study employs the descriptive-analytical method, which allows for the gathering of data and facts relevant to the research problem, their interpretation, and an assessment of their significance, in order to arrive at conclusions and answer the questions posed.

1. Definition of the Prison

The term “prison” (*sijn*) or “confinement” (*habs*) is an ancient Arabic term (Mortad, 2001: 40) denoting an edifice designated for offenders, distinguished by an architectural design suited to the confinement of those punished by society. Such buildings are typically constructed of reinforced concrete, with iron bars fitted to the windows and doors made of thick sheet iron. Only those who have committed a moral offence, an economic infraction, or a homicide, and who have been sentenced by a court in proportion to the offence committed, are confined within such an institution (Azzawi, 1988: 11). Persons holding political views opposed to the ruling regime of their country were likewise imprisoned; the prisoner is deprived of his civil rights for a set period as a form of punishment (Azzawi, 1988: 73).

Colonial France likewise established prisons for a variety of purposes, foremost among them the suppression of the revolution and the coercion of the Algerian people into abandoning their support for it — that is, the isolation of the population from the National Liberation Army (ALN). The prevailing

conviction among the colonial authorities at the time was that the harsher the punishment, the more widely fear would spread among the Algerian population, thereby deterring them from continuing the struggle and inducing them to abandon the revolution and its leaders (Blibel, 2002: 48).

2. Examples of French Colonial Prisons

These prisons stand as eloquent testimony to colonial France's violations of human rights through its inhumane and atrocious practices, and equally as living evidence of the depth of the revolution's penetration and its resilience in the face of the French enemy. The colonial authorities established prisons throughout Algeria that varied in size, administration, and construction, yet shared a common notoriety. Among them were the prisons of Blida, El Asnam, Médéa, the central prison of El Kouif, the Kasbah prison in Oran, the Red Prison at Ferdjioua in present-day Mila Province, Lambèse Prison in Batna, El Koudia in Constantine, Sidi el-Houari in Oran, and Serkaji and El Harrach in Algiers (Mashri, 2006: 91). The following sections examine several of the most significant of these institutions:

1.2. Lambèse Prison ("l'Ambèze")

Lambèse Prison in Batna is regarded as one of the largest prisons in eastern Algeria. Originally built by the Romans, it was subsequently expanded by the colonial authorities through the addition of several wings. It comprised large halls and 507 cells, was guarded by approximately 800 warders, and held an estimated 12,000 inmates. Lambèse was said to rival the penal colony known as "Cayenne" in the French colony of New Caledonia in the Pacific (Blibel, 2002: 50; Bouasafsaf, 1998: 148).

Upon the arrival of a new contingent of prisoners, the guards would form two parallel lines extending from the prison gate to the interior, through which the inmates were made to pass one by one. As they did so, the guards subjected them to punches and kicks, after which they were stripped naked and immediately made to take a scalding hot bath, a practice that resulted in the death of a number of prisoners. It should be noted that whenever an inmate died under torture, the prison administration would produce a file falsely certifying that death had occurred from natural causes (Blibel, 2002: 50).

2. Barberousse Prison (Serkaji)

Barberousse Prison, known as "Serkaji," is located in the Bab el-Oued quarter of Algiers (Sharfi, 2007: 193). It held two categories of prisoners: those awaiting trial and those already condemned to death. The prison was notorious for its so-called "human heap" (qā' rās), where inmates slept crammed on top of one another, segregated by category into men and women; it also contained a separate wing reserved for those sentenced to death (Belaidi, 1999: 4).

Approaching the corridor leading to the cells of the condemned naturally instilled terror in their hearts. The cells themselves were cramped, their walls cracked, and devoid of any furniture; at night they were lit only by candles, and a stifling, oppressive heat prevailed throughout. Guards would furthermore ambush prisoners at all hours, day and night, beating them with iron rods. Before being led to their cells, prisoners were made to pass before the prison clerk, where each inmate had to declare his name, family name, and place of residence, after which the clerk would inform him of the charge against him and assign him a prisoner number (Belaidi, 1999: 5).

The most indelibly remembered days at “Barberousse” were those on which death sentences were carried out by guillotine¹ against militants of the revolution, executions that customarily took place before dawn, at around two o'clock in the morning. The moment the executioners' assistants stormed in to seize a prisoner from his cell, the entire prison would reverberate with the cry “Allahu Akbar, long live Algeria,” followed by the chanting of national anthems and a hunger strike, transforming grief and sorrow into an expression of collective defiance. The most significant event to occur in this prison was the definitive elimination of the cell guards: each cell block took it upon itself to eliminate its guards by night, an operation carried out simultaneously across every block in the prison (Belaidi, 1999: 5). The following are among the names of those executed at Serkaji Prison:

- The martyr Ahmed Zahana, born in 1926 in the Lassouane quarter of Oran, was arrested on 9 November 1954 (prisoner number 2208) and executed on 19 June 1956 at four o'clock in the morning (Belaidi, 1999: 25).
- The martyr Abdelkader Ferradj, born in 1921 in El Adjiba (“Palestro”), was arrested on 24 May 1956 (prisoner number 1791) and executed on 19 June 1956 at four o'clock in the morning.
- The martyr Mohamed Tiffourine, born in 1930 in the port town of “Guidour,” was arrested on 18 May 1956 (prisoner number 2696) and executed on 9 August 1956 at four o'clock in the morning (Kashid al-Farhi, 2007: 281).

3.2. The Civil Prison of Sétif

The central prison in the city of Sétif was established in 1902 specifically for common-law prisoners, with a capacity not exceeding 150 inmates. During the Liberation Revolution, however, this number rose to 200, and by the final two years of the revolution political prisoners accounted for 95 percent of the total. The prison consisted of five sections, each comprising a number of halls; one hall was designated for women, while others served as political isolation wards, an infirmary, and administrative offices, in addition to the notorious cells (Belaidi, 1999: 7).

Some of the citizens held there had taken part in the events of May 1945. Following the outbreak of the revolution in November 1954, the prison began receiving political prisoners belonging to the National Liberation Front. Several escape attempts were made from this prison: the first, in March 1957, ended in failure; the second, in 1958, achieved partial success, with seven inmates managing to escape before the operation was discovered; the third attempt, in 1959, likewise failed; and a fourth attempt, in 1960, also proved unsuccessful (Belaidi, 1999: 6–7).

4.2. The Central Prison of El Kouif

This prison is located in the town of El Kouif, near Tébessa, the site of an important phosphate mine. To exploit this mine, the French colonial authorities established military barracks in the area from the outset in order to secure the confinement of the prisoners brought in to work there. El Kouif Prison was built in 1930 as a dormitory for prisoners after their labour shifts, consisting of two large corridors. In 1952 the

¹The Guillotine: The first guillotine was constructed in 1789 during the French Revolution; its use began with the execution of King Louis XVI on 21 January 1793, followed by that of Queen Marie Antoinette on 16 October 1793. With respect to Algerian citizens, executions by guillotine began in 1864 with the execution of Bouziane el-Kalaï at present-day El Mohammadia, followed in 1912 by that of Maamar Ben Ramdane of Khenchela; between 1956 and 1960, 156 individuals were executed by this means in Algiers, Constantine, and Oran (“Martyrs of the Guillotine,” *Al-Rasid Review*, no. 1, p. 37).

French mining company dispensed with the use of prison labour and the facility was closed, until the outbreak of the Liberation Revolution led to its reopening in 1955. Owing to its location in a border region, it was designated during the revolution for the reception of civilians and detainees who were interrogated and tortured there before being transferred to other prisons or released (Belaidi, 1999: 5–6). Throughout the years of the Liberation Revolution, this prison received thousands of Algerians and contributed significantly to terrorizing the population and instilling fear and dread among them. It witnessed numerous mass arrests, criminal acts, and torture of the most atrocious kind. Among the principal forms of torture practised there were: severe beatings, water torture, electric shock, torture by dogs, forced walking on broken glass, suspension, crucifixion of prisoners by nailing their hands to trees, and forced sitting on bottles (Belaidi, 1999: 6).

5.2. The Red Prison

The Red Prison is situated in the centre of the town of Ferdjioua, in present-day Mila Province. Construction began in 1952 and was completed in 1956, carried out by the very hands of tortured sons of this nation. The prison functioned as a corridor toward death and liquidation for many militants and unarmed members of the Algerian people. Within its walls, a wide range of methods of repression and torture were practised, testifying to the brutality of French colonialism (Belaidi, 1999: 8).

The prison took its name from the colour of its walls, which were painted a dark red. It consisted of four principal sections, each comprising several cells of nearly identical size but differing functions. Above these sections, beyond the main entrance, stood a rooftop platform used for surveillance and guarding, which permitted internal control over the prison as well as observation of the surrounding area, particularly to the south, east, and west. Within the prison corridor, three cells on the northern side were reserved for the “Red Hand” organization,² while the western side of the corridor housed basins filled with filthy water, used for torture accompanying the dreaded interrogation sessions.

3. Organization within the Prisons

The National Liberation Front (FLN) worked to establish organizational structures within the prisons through the formation of regular cells linked to the Front's network outside the prison walls. In the initial period, militants concentrated their efforts on strengthening fraternal bonds between political prisoners and common-law inmates (Bumali, 2010: 382).

This organizational system was implemented through the formation of a prison steering committee, responsible for appointing a prison commander and specialized committees composed of prominent figures at the cell-block level, whose tasks included constant vigilance and the investigation of each prisoner's background as a precaution against colonial infiltration. There were also disciplinary committees tasked with punishing anyone who rebelled against the internal order (Bouasafsaf, 1998: 149). It should be noted that the organization and distribution of these committees followed the architectural layout of the prison, which determined the nature and number of committees within it, structured hierarchically. A distinguishing feature of this organizational work was that it was conducted under conditions of complete secrecy: organizational officials would appoint a prisoner in each cell

²“The Red Hand” (La Main Rouge): A clandestine French organization of a police, political, and military character, whose objective was to ensure the perpetuation of French colonial rule in North Africa in general and in Algeria in particular (Cherid, Abdallah, *The Algerian Revolution in the International Press*, 1959, vol. 2, pp. 147–149).

whose task was to report everything occurring within it to the responsible official, on condition that those appointed within a given cell remained unaware of one another's identity (Sayiki, 2003: 251–252).

Once all members and officials of the organizational committees had been appointed, a census of the prison population was conducted, following which prisoners were classified into three categories:

- Category one: Prisoners fully sympathetic to the political prisoners, since they belonged to those imprisoned in connection with the massacres of 8 May 1945.
- Category two: Prisoners sympathetic to the political prisoners, most of whom belonged to the National Liberation Front.
- Category three: Prisoners who worked against those affiliated with the Front, conducting their schemes under strict secrecy in ways that created organizational difficulties for the political prisoners. Nevertheless, the militants did not respond to them with equivalent violence, but instead engaged them through dialogue, seeking to persuade them through argument and reasoned evidence (Bumali, 2010: 383).

After studying the various methods, means, and preliminary grassroots measures that could be employed to transform the daily lives of prisoners, a set of objectives was established to regulate matters within the prison, the most important of which were:

- distributing clothing, cigarettes, and certain administration-permitted foodstuffs among indigent prisoners who received no money from their families;
- organizing cultural, recreational, and sporting activities;
- exploring various means of recruiting prisoners when necessary (Kushida, 2010: 110);
- organizing the daily life of prisoners and strengthening relationships among them within the prison;
- providing material assistance and support to prisoners' families;
- supplying prisoners with pamphlets and news, particularly regarding the Algerian cause;
- and organizing escape attempts from the prisons (Belaidi, 1999: 7).

Through this meticulous and tightly organized system, the revolution succeeded in penetrating deep into the French prisons of Algeria and even into France itself. The colonial authorities attempted on several occasions to dismantle this system, but failed; in their fury, they began closely monitoring the movements of prisoners and frequently conducted thorough searches of halls and cells. Nevertheless, the spirit of resistance proved stronger, embodied in the prisoners' determination to defend their rights and dignity as political prisoners, a determination expressed through numerous hunger strikes protesting the barbaric treatment that violated every human principle and value (Bouasafsaf, 1998: 149–150).

Furthermore, the Front devised a new counter-strategy directed against the policies of the French prison administration. This strategy involved staging deliberate quarrels among prisoners within a single cell in order to facilitate communication with other cells: as a result, the French administration would separate the quarrelling inmates by transferring them to different cells, thereby inadvertently facilitating communication between prisoners and the Front and the transmission of news among them, rather than achieving its intended purpose of destroying the unity between the prisoners and the Front.

The organization also encouraged solidarity and mutual support among prisoners, who shared among themselves whatever food and money reached them from outside the prison. This solidarity was

particularly evident at the moment of an execution, when something akin to an uprising would break out within the prison, so that the condemned prisoner felt he was not alone in facing the guillotine. The Front further took it upon itself to carry out death sentences against guards outside the prison, particularly those known for mistreating inmates, operations that instilled fear and dread among the remaining guards, who feared meeting the same fate as their colleagues.

In this way, the prisons were transformed into schools of revolutionary formation, disseminating the principles and objectives of the revolution among the inmates and thereby reinforcing their spirit of resistance — a spirit embodied in the defence of their rights through a team of lawyers appointed by the Front to represent them (Kushida, 2010: 111).

Some French writers have acknowledged that the prisons failed to serve French policy as had been anticipated, and instead served the interests of the Front — an admission grounded in the depth of lived experience, given that political and non-political prisoners alike came to form a tightly unified body, mutually reinforcing one another (Bumali, 2010: 385).

Political prisoners thus continued their struggle behind walls and iron bars, and it was within the prison that the citizen's identity reached its fullest expression, instilling in him a sense of national responsibility and the conviction that he bore a sacred duty toward his people and homeland. In this way, prisons both within Algeria and in France itself became stations for cells of resistance, struggle, and revolutionary unity under the banner of the National Liberation Front.

4. Methods and Techniques of Torture within the Colonial Prisons

French crimes of torture in Algeria, it has been argued, surpassed the atrocities committed by the Nazis during the Second World War, insofar as the latter destroyed their victims once and with great speed, either by burning them in gas ovens or killing them with gunfire, whereas the French took pleasure in watching their victims suffer under the instruments of torture, casting aside all moral principles and human rights (Benatia, 1997: 117).

The occupation army practised torture in the name of civilization and progress. This form of criminality evolved progressively from an occasional occurrence to a pastime, then an addiction, before finally becoming a profession in its own right. Its methods and techniques diversified in tandem with the evolving colonial mentality and the accompanying hatred that the colonizers harboured toward Algerians, together with their descent into baseness, depravity, and degradation — compounded by the continuous discovery of new methods of torture. Torture and killing thus became two inseparable and interlinked realities, taken as self-evident daily practice by French officers, once the French administration had sanctioned the use of torture as an instrument of war to suppress the revolution. To this end, every condition was provided to ensure the meticulous application of torture doctrine, including recourse to the expertise of veterans of the war in Indochina, who were charged with training specialists in torture techniques (Tumaash, 1993–1994: 22). In this connection, General “Massu”³ declared on 19 March 1957 regarding torture: “These methods must be accepted within our souls and consciences, for they are morally justified necessities” (Sahil, 2001: 40–48).

³General Massu (Jacques Massu, 1908–2002): Commander of the French 10th Paratroop Division during the Battle of Algiers in 1957, known for overseeing the systematic torture of Algerian detainees.

Torture existed in varying and differentiated degrees according to its severity and the malign impulses upon which the torturers — who resorted to every means to torture Algerians in pursuit of their objectives — drew, thereby applying the Machiavellian notion that “the end justifies the means.” In general terms, torture may be divided into two broad categories, each encompassing several types: physical torture and psychological torture, though the latter cannot be entirely separated from the former.

A. Psychological Torture

Through this form of torture, France sought to break the morale of prisoners and alter their thinking and mentality by various means. The process of arrest itself was conducted in an atmosphere pervaded by fear and dread, intended to instil terror among the population at large. The interrogation process began with an attempt to erase the Algerian prisoner's identity by stripping him of his name and reducing him to a number (Bumali, 2010: 379). The prisoner was then subjected to intense psychological pressure administered by specialized units, who reminded him of the greatness of the French state and the strength of its army, so as to render any thought of fighting or overcoming it seem impossible (Goubi, 2002: 26). This was accompanied by the claim that France had come to Algeria on a humanitarian, civilizing mission aimed at bringing progress to the Algerians, and that the Algerian revolutionaries were nothing more than a band of rebels and outlaws incapable of forming a state. Interrogators would also attempt to pressure prisoners by leading them to believe they had been captured as a result of betrayal by their own comrades, while simultaneously attempting to ingratiate themselves with prisoners in order to win their trust and induce them to abandon their revolutionary principles and align themselves with France (Bouaziz, 2009: 401).

A notable example in this regard is the approach adopted by General “Bigéard”⁴ toward his prisoner “Larbi Ben M'hidi,”⁵ whom he sought to win over and persuade to abandon the National Liberation Front and side with France (Aussaresses, 2004: 132–137).

When this approach failed, the colonizers resorted to other tactics designed to exert a still greater psychological effect on prisoners. They would make them feel dehumanized, stripping them naked, binding them, and mocking them; whenever soldiers passed nearby they would hurl insults and threats of extermination at them (Aussaresses, 2004: 52–53). At times the colonizers went even further, gathering a prisoner's family members together in a single location, stripping them of their clothing while watching and taking pleasure in touching and beating them to intimidate and terrorize, before ultimately violating the honour of family members before the prisoner's own eyes (Qantari, 2004: 175).

⁴Bigéard, Marcel (born November 1916, France): A French army colonel who began his career as a bank employee before being conscripted to defend France at the outset of the Second World War. Following the occupation of Paris he was captured, and upon his release departed for Algeria. He was subsequently sent to Indochina as part of a paratroop division and took part in the Battle of Dien Bien Phu. At the end of 1956 he was tasked with suppressing the Algerian revolution and oversaw the psychological warfare campaign against fedayeen cells in Algiers; his name became closely associated with brutal practices and torture (Sharfi, Ashour, *Dictionary of the Algerian Revolution*, pp. 102–103).

⁵Mohamed Larbi Ben M'hidi (1923–1957 / 1341–1376 AH): Born in Douar el-Kouachi, near Aïn M'lila in eastern Algeria, he obtained his primary school certificate with distinction in 1937, joined the Muslim Scouts in 1939, and subsequently attended the Free School founded by the Association of Muslim Ulema in Biskra in 1943. He began his political activism in 1942 by joining the Algerian People's Party and became a member of the Special Organization (Sharfi, Ashour, *ibid.*, pp. 77–80).

Among the most atrocious methods was that of binding a prisoner to a post and brandishing weapons at him to make him believe he was about to be killed, before actually opening fire while aiming to have the bullets land close to his head or chest, sometimes piercing his clothing or grazing his skin (Bumali, 2010: 186). Interrogators would likewise brandish knives before a prisoner's face, feigning an intention to slit his throat or stab him, in order to shatter his nerve and extract confessions to acts he had never committed (Bousselham, 2000: 93). Such practices resulted in physical, organic, and psychological harm that degraded human dignity (Vialatoux, 1957: 42–43).

B. Physical Torture

1.1. Electric-shock Torture

This procedure generally took place at night: the victim would be stripped naked and stretched out on an operating table, with his limbs bound, and a bucket of water thrown over him to complete the electrical circuit. An electric current would then be applied to the sensitive areas of the body — whether of a man or a woman — such as the ears and tongue (Nejadi, 2007: 143), and was also applied specifically to the genitals (Al-Dir'i, 1997: 184), inflicting unbearable pain upon the victim, often followed by loss of consciousness. When the current was particularly strong it could cause concussion, leaving the victim afflicted for a prolonged period with headaches, dizziness, and pain in the eyes, brain, teeth, and ears alike (Qalil, 1991: 41). This treatment claimed the lives of many victims, who died from the electric current itself; and to this day, some of those who survived this form of torture can still be seen living in a pitiable state of health (Khalasi, n.d. a: 200–201).

2.1. Water Torture

Water torture was carried out using dirty water or washing water through various methods, among them the submersion of the prisoner's head in a basin filled with water for several minutes until his stomach was distended, after which his head would be pulled out and he would be ordered to confess to the charges against him (Khalasi, n.d. a: 199). Alternatively, the prisoner's stomach would be forcibly filled through a tube or hose until it was distended to the point of near-asphyxiation, at which point he would be released and then trampled underfoot, causing the water to be expelled from every orifice of his body (Bouasafsaf, 1998: 66). Victims were also submerged in hot water for a set period before being immediately transferred to cold water, a practice that caused unbearable pain (Bousselham, 2001: 182). The duration of such torture sessions ranged from four to six hours daily throughout the week, and could extend beyond a month (Saghir, n.d.: 222). Following the period of torture, detainees were brought before courts that decided their fate — either execution or life imprisonment with hard labour.

3.1. Torture through Physical Mutilation

The French administration also resorted to mutilating the bodies of prisoners as a form of vengeance, disfiguring Algerians' physical appearance through such methods as: piercing the prisoner's flesh with needles, removing the eyebrows and eyelashes, plucking out the hair of the scalp, and flaying the skin (Tumaash, 1993–1994: 36); extracting teeth and molars one by one; severing the ears and genitals; tearing out fingernails; cutting flesh with pincers; slashing the legs with knives; rubbing salt into wounds; and gouging out the eyes. Torturers also forced prisoners to sit on broken glass or on seats studded with nails, and inserted the necks of broken bottles into their anuses (Bumali, 2010: 188; Bouaziz, 2009: 400).

4.1. Torture by Fire

Torture by fire was matched in severity and cruelty only by the derangement of those who practised it. Among its various forms were the following:

- The victim would be seated on a chair, bound with his hands behind his back and his chest bare, whereupon the torturers would blow cigarette smoke into his eyes before extinguishing their cigarettes on his chest (Al-Siddiq, 2005: 145).
- Petrol would be poured over the victim in front of an audience, whether in internment camps, detention centres, or public markets, and then set alight before onlookers. The first victim of this barbaric method was an Algerian peasant near the city of Constantine, in the district then known under French rule as “Sméndou”⁶ at the beginning of 1955, when colonial soldiers arrested him, doused him with quantities of petrol, and set him on fire (Qantari, 2004: 161; Bumali, 2010: 184).
- Iron rods heated over fire until red-hot would be inserted into the prisoner's mouth, causing death by a method that even the Nazi execution squads had never devised. Another method involved binding the prisoner's hands behind his back and placing lit matches at the tips of his fingers to burn the nails, along with the branding of various parts of the body with fire, a blowtorch (“chalumeau”), or a hot iron (Khalasi, n.d. a: 198; Nejadi, 2007: 147).

5.1. Torture by Rope

Among its principal forms were the following:

A. Suspension: Among the most obscene methods practised by the colonial executioners, this technique involved suspending the prisoner with his legs upward and his head downward, leaving him in this position for a set period before he was released from above, causing him to fall to the ground on his head and back. The procedure would be repeated as often as deemed necessary to compel the victim into confession, even a false one, or into a fabricated denunciation, simply to bring an end to his torturers' fury (Khalasi, 1979: 45–46; Belaidi, 1999: 13; Al-Siddiq, 2005: 146; Nejadi, 2007: 148).

B. Strangulation: The victim would be bound to a chair in a seated position, with a rope tied around his neck; two executioners would then pull the ends of the rope, tightening it around the throat to induce progressive asphyxiation that could culminate in strangulation or death — an outcome recorded, in such cases, merely as an “accident” (Nejadi, 2007: 123).

6.1. Binding to the Ground

The prisoner would be stretched out, in the form of a cross, on the cold, damp ground of certain caves and grottoes, his hands and feet bound to stakes driven into the earth, and left in this position for days and nights in total darkness (Al-Siddiq, 2005: 146). In other instances, certain limbs would be tied to a tree while the rest of the body was attached to a vehicle, which would then be driven off so as to tear the limb from the body (Bouaziz, 2009: 400).

Conclusion

The colonial administration also brought in vast numbers of French soldiers to reinforce its military strength, establishing military networks throughout every region of Algeria in its determination to stifle and eliminate the revolution. It further employed torture as a means of exerting pressure on members of

⁶The District of Sméndou: The name given during the era of French colonial rule to the present-day district of Zighout Youcef, Constantine Province.

the National Liberation Front and its supporters in order to extract information — a practice the occupation authorities euphemistically termed “interrogation” (l’interrogatoire), as though it were a legitimate procedure, rather than using the word “torture,” which conveys the full and true meaning of the term (Sahil, 2001: 40–48). This served, on the one hand, to humiliate, subjugate, and intimidate the population. Among the principal forms of torture inflicted upon Algerians during the revolution by generals such as “Massu” and “Paul Aussaresses” (Aussaresses, 2004: 132–137) were electric-shock torture, water torture, and suspension, as well as psychological torture such as verbal abuse, threats of death, brutalization, and sexual violation.

Measures of confinement and arrest were also intensified, affecting all categories of persons accused of cooperating with or supporting the revolution. Numerous trials were held, many culminating in death sentences carried out either by guillotine or by firing squad; among the most notorious prisons where such executions were carried out was Serkaji Prison in Algiers. Nor should the harsh treatment inflicted upon prisoners generally be forgotten (Darwaz, 2002: 89).

The sealing of the borders with electrified barbed wire further reinforced the military policy aimed at destroying the revolution. These barriers obstructed the supply lines that furnished the revolution with weapons and provisions, inflicting both human and material losses on the National Liberation Army. This, in turn, compelled the Army to devise military plans to breach the wire barriers; as a result, methods of infiltration were developed and the logistical support networks diversified, extending their routes by sea as well as through the desert.

Notes

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