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*The War of Algerian Independence:  
The Fifth Republic and the Return of de Gaulle*

**T**he defence of her empire in Indo-China and North Africa proved a crushing burden for post-war France. The fall of Dien Bien Phu in May 1954 brought down another French government, but the new Prime Minister, Pierre Mendès-France, was a politician in a different mould. He was, like Léon Blum, a Jew, tough, intellectual and at last ready to face realities – at least some of the realities. He fulfilled his undertaking to bring France out of the disastrous dirty war in Indo-China in July 1954 by agreeing to the peace terms of the Geneva Conference, and he negotiated Tunisian autonomy, but, ostensibly over weakness in dealing with North Africa, he was brought down in February 1955. The determination of the Gaullist right to maintain France's colonial rule led to more falls of government until, in 1956, independence was conceded to both Tunisia and Morocco. But Algeria was different. Politicians of all parties – communists, socialists and conservatives – regarded Algeria, governed through the French Ministry of the Interior, as part of France. One million French settlers, the *piets noirs*, from the wealthy to the hard-working fisherman or carpenter, who had lived in Algeria for a generation or more, saw themselves as the French of Algeria, not as Frenchmen living in a colony of France. All the French political leaders echoed Mendès-France when he declared, 'France without Algeria would be no France.'

Yet all the talk about Algeria being a part of France was paradoxical and hypocritical, as was the rhetoric in the constitution of the Fourth Republic,

whose preamble promised equality without distinction of race or religion. Racism was as rampant in Algeria as it was in the worst of European colonies overseas. How could Algeria be France if the majority of its inhabitants, the 9 million Muslim Arabs, were not Frenchmen with equal rights? There was no place for the Algerian in the higher administration of the country; the economy was dominated by the wealthy European settlers; the plight of the land-hungry poor Muslim Algerian was aggravated by a high birthrate; meanwhile, the larger, more mechanised settler farms no longer required large numbers of peasant labourers. The Fourth Republic instituted some reforms but, on the key issue of political rights, only a measure of ostensible power-sharing was introduced. An Algerian-elected assembly was created, chosen by two electoral colleges, one composed of the European French citizens, plus a few meritorious Muslims, some 500,000 electors, who chose sixty members of the Assembly; the rest of the Muslim population chose the other sixty members. Even this was not enough for the European settlers: electoral corruption made doubly sure that the European minority would continue its domination.

The tragedy of Algeria was that violence and atrocities, involving great loss of innocent lives, marked the path to nationhood. That was not how the majority of moderate Muslims wished to achieve their rights. A lack of vision and of generosity and the resolution of the *piets noirs*, actuated by fear and material self-interest, to deny the Muslim Algerians

genuinely equal rights and self-determination left the outcome of the struggle to be decided by the extremists. The settlers believed that their power, backed by the army of all France, could always overwhelm such guerrilla units as the FLN (Front de Libération Nationale) could muster. But their confidence misled them. In the end, the French were sickened by the bloody excesses and the slaughter of civilians, which spilled over into metropolitan France. The majority that ultimately counted was not that of the *pieds noirs* in Algeria, but the majority of voters in France. To them the price of retaining Algeria and defending the European settlers proved too high. De Gaulle ended the Algerian conflict on the only terms that could be secured: those demanded by the FLN leadership.

The twisted road from the close of the Second World War to Algerian independence in 1962 was punctuated by waves of violence, abortive negotiations and constitutional crises. The liberation of Europe in May 1945 had raised the expectation of colonial peoples that a new era had dawned for them. In Sétif, a small Algerian market town, these expectations led to a bloody clash, the first of many. Extremist Muslims carrying nationalist flags turned on European settlers that May, murdering and raping more than a hundred. The French response was to 'pacify' the region in typical colonial fashion, killing thousands of Muslims. The indelible impression of racist conflict and bloodshed overshadowed all political speeches. De Gaulle had promised a new deal to the French colonial peoples: they would be led *eventually* to self-government, but the time and manner would be decided by the French. Thus the initial stance of the Europeans was that violence would not wrest that decision of decolonisation from them. French military power was so overwhelming that proposals put forward by the more moderate Algerian nationalist leaders, such as Ferhat Abbas, for a compromise solution were not entertained (Abbas had proposed an independent Algeria federated to France). The movement for independence, therefore, became more radical, and new leaders, such as Ahmed Ben Bella and Belkacem Krim, were ready to use violence. With just a few hundred armed men, Belkacem Krim started an open revolt on 1 November 1954. Throughout the country a proclamation was distributed addressed 'To the Algerian people' and announcing the formation of the Front de Libération Nationale, whose objective was to gain Algerian independence.

But the FLN also promised that French settlers and French interests would be dealt with fairly: the *pieds noirs* could even opt for Algerian nationality. For more than seven years the FLN fought, without deviating from their objectives. But the implacable hostility of the settlers made it impossible for any agreement to be reached which might have safeguarded their future. In 1954 the Fourth Republic rejected as unthinkable the very idea of Algerian independence. The prime minister at that time, Pierre Mendès-France, and his socialist minister of the interior, François Mitterrand, were ready to abandon colonialism in Indo-China, Morocco and Tunisia, but not in Algeria – for, as they repeatedly proclaimed, 'Algeria is France.' Their solution was military repression, which was to be combined with economic reform to reduce unemployment. But Reform had no chance. The FLN answered repression with terrorism.

Ten years after Sétif, in August 1955, indiscriminate terrorism was repeated at Philippeville. The murder of Europeans and their Muslim allies by an FLN-instigated mob led in turn to the killing of more than a thousand Muslims in reprisals. Such violence could only play into the hands of the FLN, who regarded as their enemy, not only France, but those moderate Muslims who were prepared to accept French rule. The FLN killings were directed as much against these 'traitorous' Muslims as against the French. Indeed the Muslim Algerians who had placed their trust in France were to become the most tragic victims of the war. The FLN resorted to bombing cafés and dance halls in Algeria, causing bloodshed wherever Europeans came together in large numbers. The French army responded with equal ferocity, torturing FLN suspects to gain information. French military power, however, could not crush the terrorists. All that could be achieved were temporary victories over the FLN, as in what became known as the Battle of Algiers.

Meanwhile, the *pieds noirs* became suspicious of the intentions of the government in Paris. Would they negotiate with the FLN above their heads? The FLN was gaining respectability internationally at the United Nations, receiving support from Tunisia, while Nasser's Egypt – recently victorious over the French – broadcast pro-Algerian propaganda from Cairo. Practical help, however, was not so readily forthcoming.

In the spring of 1958 the paths of the European

settlers and the recalcitrant generals in Algiers, on the one hand, and the politicians of the Fourth Republic, on the other, fatefully crossed. From 15 April until 13 May 1958 Paris was politically paralysed: no government could be formed. The way was opened for the return of de Gaulle at the end of May. This spelt the collapse of the Fourth Republic and, after another four years of confusing politics, military repression and bloodshed, of French Algeria as well.

De Gaulle, in 1947, had miscalculated and as a result of his resignation spent a long decade in the political wilderness, preparing for his return. He wished to end the Fourth Republic and what he regarded as its fatally flawed parliamentary constitution, which he believed had brought back the errors of the Third Republic. But he would not seize power unconstitutionally. The Fourth Republic must turn to him and ask him to save France from chaos. This did not mean that he was reluctant to exploit the feelings of those groups of Frenchmen in France and Algeria who were ready to conspire against the Fourth Republic. His refusal to condemn disloyalty to the Fourth Republic or those ready to defy the government in Paris before he came to power was sufficient to encourage the belief that his Algerian policy would be resolutely French. A master of lofty rhetoric, de Gaulle could be all things to all men. When, three weeks after the fall of the government on 15 April 1958, President René Coty had found no politician able to form a new government, he consulted de Gaulle. But on 13 May, it was Pierre Pflimlin, a man who was anathema to the army in Algeria, to whom he turned.

In Algiers, 13 May 1958 was the decisive day. Brigadier-General Jacques Massu and Commander-in-Chief General Raoul Salan, with their associates, were practically in open revolt against Paris. Although Pflimlin received the backing of the National Assembly to form the next government, the conspiracy on both sides of the Mediterranean was in full swing. De Gaulle had to make his move. Although it was the insurrection of the army in Algiers and the threat of civil war that was forcing the hands of the President and legitimate government of the Fourth Republic, de Gaulle had to give the appearance of total independence and personal disinterest in anything except the cause of saving France. In a crucial public statement of 15 May de Gaulle avoided mentioning

the insurrection in Algiers beyond referring to 'disturbance in the fighting forces'; he condemned the 'regime of the parties', which he said could not solve France's problems, and harking back to his mission in 1940 concluded, 'Not so long ago the country, in its hour of peril, trusted me to lead it ... to its salvation. Today with the trials that face it once again, it should know that I am ready to assume the powers of the Republic.' By placing himself at the 'disposal' of the French people over the head of the President, the government and National Assembly de Gaulle undermined whatever authority they might have been able to exert. The French people would not have taken kindly to a usurpation of power led by the army, which would have provoked protests, riots and widespread civil disturbances.

There were still formidable obstacles in the way of a *legal* transition of power. After all a government under Pierre Pflimlin was functioning and there was no real danger of an insurrection in metropolitan France other than by armed units from Algeria. General Massu knew he would need to camouflage any use of force. He planned a coup in Paris code-named Resurrection: mass demonstrations would be organised, *backed up* by paratroopers airlifted from Algiers and the south-west region of France who would occupy strategic government buildings. The crisis reached fever pitch on 28 and 29 May. De Gaulle's relationship with Resurrection is one of the most hotly argued controversies among historians. Had the General himself given the order to set the coup in motion or was it Gaullist supporters in Paris who gave the green light to the army generals in Algiers? What seems likely is that de Gaulle had expressed himself in an ambiguous way, yet had given clear indication that if he failed to gain power by legal process, which he preferred, he would have taken advantage of the Algiers plot.

The airlift actually began when six Dakotas took off early in the afternoon of 28 May. That evening in Paris President Coty called in de Gaulle and invited him to form a 'government of national safety' since France was on the verge of civil war. Coty also had to accept de Gaulle's demand that he would take over only if he could prepare plans for a new constitution; meanwhile he would govern without the National Assembly. De Gaulle then agreed that he would be granted special powers for only six months and would first need to appear before the National Assembly for confirmation as

head of government and to receive authority to plan and submit a new constitution. When they received this news, the generals postponed Resurrection. The National Assembly on 1 June 1958 by a majority voted its approval of de Gaulle as head of government with special powers, but a sizeable minority voted against him, 224 members out of 553. The following day he received the necessary three-fifths majority for submitting a new constitution to the French people by referendum. So de Gaulle, at the age of sixty-seven, had become head of the government again, but Coty remained president, an arrangement which conferred legality and continuity on the interim period that marked the last months of the Fourth Republic.

De Gaulle had achieved a constitutional transfer of power just this side of legality – but he could not have done it without the military threat from Algeria. His immediate problem was now not metropolitan France but Algeria, where settlers and generals, together with French Gaullist politicians back home, would look upon any retreat from 'l'Algérie Française' as rank treachery, which would absolve them from owing loyalty to any government guilty of it. But what did de Gaulle really think?

It is a question not easy to answer. In letters and private conversations he seems to have tried out ideas, using those he addressed as a sounding board. But he was clearly pragmatic. The conflict would be brought to an end and de Gaulle did not believe that that could be achieved by continuing to discriminate against the Muslim majority or by employing military force and the torture of opponents. He relied on his own immense prestige among the settlers and the millions of Algerian Muslims, to whom he proposed a new deal. To the fighting men of the FLN he offered an olive branch by praising their courage. He was under no illusions that one day Algeria would be independent, but that independence would be best achieved gradually and in harmony with France and in some form of association with her.

For all his rhetoric and grandeur, de Gaulle was far from sure of his ability to impose a policy opposed to the wishes of the French settlers and the army generals, who were congratulating themselves on their destruction of the Fourth Republic. Nor did the killings in Algeria cease with de Gaulle's return. Indeed, the savagery was worse than ever during the next four years, while the General



Left: Muslims rally to de Gaulle as he arrives in Bone, Algeria, on 7 June 1958. Right: Algerian nationalists' growing confidence is on display as a girl flaunts her rebel flag on the eve of de Gaulle's national referendum, of 8 January 1961, to approve plans to grant Algeria the right to self-determination.

seemed to procrastinate, switching from concessionary overtures to the FLN to renewed efforts to achieve 'pacification', and the toll of death, maiming and torture mounted. If de Gaulle really represented, as he claimed, the greatness of France, is he not to be condemned for vainly attempting to save France's position in Algeria? The ambiguity of his policies was to be revealed on his first visit to Algeria, only three days after his investiture. To Algerian Muslims and the French settler crowds, he proclaimed on different occasions the delphic utterance, 'I have understood you'; however, in all but one of his speeches he carefully avoided uttering the *pieds noirs*' slogan, 'l'Algérie Française'.

De Gaulle's impact on the population in France and in Algeria was enormous. The great majority of Frenchmen and of Muslim Algerians were prepared to place their trust in him and to be led to new relations and a better future. He was the best guarantee that France would not be plunged into civil war. The trouble was that the trusting French settlers and military expected a completely different outcome from that expected by the trusting Muslim Algerians. Even so, the referendum on the new constitution, held in France, in the French Commonwealth and in Algeria, was a personal triumph for de Gaulle. In metropolitan France over 80 per cent voted for him. In Algeria, where the Muslim Algerians could vote with the Europeans on equal terms for the first time, army intimidation cannot account for the large majority of 76.4 per cent, achieved in the face of FLN threats. So why was there no prompt settlement in accordance with the wishes of the great majority of Muslim Algerians, who were clearly ready to accept some form of association with France? After all, de Gaulle himself was deliberately using the weapon of democracy, of the majority, as the best means of finding a settlement.

It was not majorities which decided the issue in Algeria but the organised force of settlers, the French army and the minority of militant Algerians who made up the FLN. The FLN would not lay down their arms for anything less than complete independence. They survived as a guerrilla force in the country and in urban areas despite 'successful' French military actions, attacking the French settlers and their Muslim Algerian supporters. De Gaulle's attempts to negotiate with them, even at moments of their greatest military weakness, came to nothing. Moreover, the extremists among the

*pieds noirs* soon recognised that, whatever his personal preferences, de Gaulle would in the end settle with the Muslim Algerians and abandon the settlers if need be. These extremist settlers mounted some thirty assassination attempts against de Gaulle, and one revenge shooting in August 1962 riddled his car with fourteen bullets and nearly succeeded in killing him and his wife. In February 1961 they had formed the Organisation Armée Secrète in Algeria, soon known throughout the world as the OAS. They declared that they would act as ferociously as the FLN and take their terror tactics to Paris if de Gaulle and metropolitan France tried to abandon 'l'Algérie Française'.

On 30 March 1961 de Gaulle announced that peace talks with the FLN would begin shortly at Evian. This was the signal for an open rebellion carried out in April by OAS plotters with the assistance of four retired army generals in Algeria. But the French army in Algeria was split. Once more de Gaulle's appeals averted the danger of civil war. During the long-drawn-out negotiations at Evian, the OAS did their worst, but they were unable to prevent agreement being conceded practically on FLN's terms on 18 March 1962. On 1 July that year Algerian independence was granted after a referendum in France and Algeria. The previous month the OAS gave up the hopeless struggle in Algeria. The extremists had ensured that there could be no future for the French Algerian settlers, most of whom now migrated to metropolitan France.

Was it an honourable peace? The French could not protect all the Algerians who had been loyal to them and were now condemned as traitors by the FLN. Muslim Algerians who had served in the French army had numbered 210,000. Only a minority took refuge in France, and it is not known how many of those who remained behind were executed or murdered. Estimates vary between 30,000 and 150,000. The leaders of the new Algeria later admitted that there had been 'blunders'. Whole families, even children, were massacred. Many Third World countries have passed through the suffering of colonial repression and then through the wars of national liberation, which involved not only the fight against the 'occupier' but also the savagery of fratricidal civil war. Algeria was one of the worst examples of this process. De Gaulle's military training helped him to face this inescapable consequence. Certainly the blame cannot be placed solely on him.

from a confrontation that might have led to a neo-fascist regime in Paris. The ending of the war was greeted with enormous relief by the great majority of Frenchmen, and by none more than the half-million conscripts sent to Algeria. The verdict on de Gaulle offered by the historian Alistair Horne seems eminently just: 'the way he extricated France from Algeria may not have been done well – but certainly no one else could have done it better'.

De Gaulle succeeded in 1958 in re-establishing the constitutional authority of France over the recalcitrant army and rightist extremists. Not his least important weapons were his impressive personal television appearances in which he addressed the nation. Even opponents were bound to admire the authoritative style of the *grand Charles*, dressed in the uniform of a brigadier-general, during these early years of turbulence. He had been given just six months of rule without parliament to reshape the institutions of government. He lost no time. Invested with special powers in June 1958, de Gaulle created a consultative committee (which he chaired) to draft the new constitution. It was approved by an overwhelming majority in a referendum on 28 September.

The constitution of the Fifth Republic, which came into force in January 1959, enormously increased the powers of the presidency. Under article 16 it permitted the president in case of grave national crisis to take 'whatever measures are required by the circumstances'. Until the 1958 constitution was amended in 1962 by a further referendum, the president was not directly elected by the people but chosen by an electoral college consisting of all members of the Assembly and other 'notables': de Gaulle was proceeding cautiously. On paper the prime minister shared executive power with the president, but the president chose the prime minister, and other ministers on the recommendation of the prime minister. On paper, Parliament retained considerable powers. Governments were responsible to it and were required to resign if the National Assembly censured them or rejected their programme. The prime minister (article 20) was charged with determining and

to initiate new laws, the president is commander-in-chief and presides over the Council of Ministers. For the constitution to work, the government would have to act as the junior partner of the president, thus eliminating the overlapping powers and potential sources of conflict. De Gaulle interpreted his powers widely and was able in practice to make decisions in all areas which he regarded as important, at home as well as abroad. In fact he treated the prime minister and the ministers of the government like civil servants. The government was little more than the means by which the executive presidential will was carried out. Prime ministers Michel Debré (1959–62), Georges Pompidou (1962–8) and Maurice Couve de Murville (1968–9) were the President's men, and many ministers were technocrats rather than party leaders. Their divorce from the political parties of the National Assembly was emphasised by the provision that members of the government could not hold seats in the Assembly. This was to distance them from the political manoeuvring among ministers that had caused so much instability to the Third and Fourth Republics. With the support of the Gaullists and their allies in the National Assembly, which following the elections of November 1958 and November 1962 formed the largest group, de Gaulle was able to override such powers as the constitution of 1958 had on paper awarded to the prime minister, government and parliament. He established overwhelmingly presidential rule for the period of office to which he was democratically elected, but was mindful of the individual liberties and civil rights of Frenchmen. This starkly differentiates de Gaulle from the dictatorships in Spain, Portugal and much of Latin America. The President's position was further strengthened in 1962, as we have seen, when an amendment to the 1958 constitution replaced indirect election with direct election by the people for a term of seven years.

De Gaulle led France effectively, and by making use of the special provisions for referendums could bypass parliament and seek approval for his policies by popular mandates. He was clearly the choice of a large majority of Frenchmen until at least 1968–9, even though there were many who disapproved