Terrorism and Torture in The Battle of Algiers
An Interview with Saadi Yacef
by Gary Crowdus

Over the years, Cineaste has interviewed many film directors, screenwriters, actors, cinematographers, and others involved in film production. An interview with Saadi Yacef, however, promised to be much more than just another discussion about filmmaking. From 1954 to 1957, Yacef, depending on one's political point of view, was either a cunning and courageous urban guerrilla who played a key role in Algeria's national liberation struggle or a ruthless and bloodthirsty terrorist responsible for the deaths of scores of innocent French civilians. He is best known to filmgoers as "El-hadi Jaffar," military chief of the Front de Libération Nationale (FLN) in Algiers, in the classic 1965 film, The Battle of Algiers, in which he portrayed himself.

Yacef arrived in New York in early January 2004 to publicize Rialto Pictures' timely re-release of Gilli Pontecorvo's documentarylike recreation of the most crucial episode in the French-Algerian War, 1954-1962, arguably one of the most violent anticolonial conflicts of the last century. Enconsoled in a suite at the Plaza Hotel, he met with a series of print and electronic journalists over the course of several days. After introducing myself, I began to unpack my journalistic tools—tape recorder, list of questions, and a few reference items. When I noticed that Yacef had spotted my copy of the film’s published screenplay, I proudly pointed out that during previous interview sessions it had been autographed by both director Gildo Pontecorvo and composer Ennio Morricone. Afterwards, I suggested, perhaps he’d be willing to sign it as well. To my surprise, he vigorously objected, explaining that to do so would only legitimize its inaccurate listing of the film's credits. Pontecorvo, he explained, is "a cinematic genius but a dishonest man." Hoping to mollify him, I replied that Cineaste had published several interviews with Pontecorvo over the years. "Yes, he’s very talkative," Yacef responded, smiling broadly, "and I’m going to attack him.

The interview proper hadn’t even begun, but it was immediately apparent that Yacef intended not merely to publicize The Battle of Algiers but also to set the historical record straight on what he felt to be his own largely uncredited role in its production. Although now a graying seventy-five-year-old, this former revolutionary, once the most hunted man in Algiers, and today a Senator in the Algerian Parliament, has clearly lost none of his combative spirit.

Saadi Yacef was born on January 20, 1928, in Algiers. He was working as an apprentice baker in 1945 when he joined the Parti du Peuple Algérien, a nationalist party soon outlawed by the French authorities. When the PPA was reconstituted as the Mouvement pour le Triomphe des Libertés Démocratiques (Movement for the Victory of Democratic Freedoms), Yacef gained his first experience in armed actions as a member of the Organisation Secrète, the paramilitary arm of the MTLD, from 1947 to 1949. When that organization, too, was broken up by the French police, Yacef moved to France for three years, returning to Algiers to work as a baker again from 1952 to 1954. In October 1954 he joined the newly formed FLN and by May 1956 was the military chief of the Zone Autonome d’Algier (Autonomous Zone of Algiers), where he was responsible for organizing the political assassinations and terrorist bombings, so vividly portrayed in the film, until his capture on September 24, 1957.

Yacef's real-life experiences, coupled with Pontecorvo's own WWII experiences in the Italian Resistance, were clearly a crucial factor in determining the film's unsparring realistic depiction of the atrocities wrought on both sides of the conflict. While Pontecorvo and screenwriter Franco Solinas, as Marxist intellectuals, were sympathetic to the Algerian independence struggle, the film clearly mourns the loss of both French and Algerian lives. Pontecorvo has explained that he was so moved by the "suffering and strife on both sides, by the hope and the collective feelings set in motion by the events," that he originally thought of titling his film, which depicts the birth of a nation, Thou Shalt Deliver in Pain. The Algerians' anticolonial violence may have been more historically justified than the oppressive violence of the French, but it was no less horrifying. The film's sense of moral parity in this regard is indicated, for example, by the use of the same elegiac strains of Ennio Morricone's score, with its echoes of the opening bars of Bach's "St. Matthew Passion," over harrowing scenes of both Algerian and French victims of terrorist bombings.

In this same spirit, the French army is portrayed in the film with a surprising degree of detachment, since, as Yacef readily acknowledges, his adversaries were "very intelligent," and he, Pontecorvo and Solinas all agreed on the necessity to avoid the conventional national war-film stereotypes of the 'enemy.' As Pontecorvo explained, "We tried to portray the paratroopers as normal—not maniacs, sadists or exceptional cases." Many critics have noted that the leader of the Paras, Colonel Mathieu (Jean Martin), is the most fully realized character in the film. He is seen throughout as a no-nonsense professional, a soldier with a great deal of respect for his adversaries, but nonetheless determined to defeat them, no matter what methods may be necessary.

Despite the alliterative name, Mathieu is not modeled on General Jacques Massu, the commander of the 10th Parachute Division sent to Algiers, fresh from their engagement in the Suez Crisis, to assume military control of the capital. "Colonel Philippe Mathieu" is actually a composite of several of Massu's officers, including Col. Marcel Bigear, head of the 3rd Para Regiment, assigned to do much of the dirty work in Algiers (including torture and the 'disappearance' of arrested suspects), whose troops were noted for their distinctive 'lizard' caps; Col. Yves Godard, director of military intelligence, who kept updated diagrams of the FLN cellular structure on a blackboard; and Col. Roger Trinquier, who established a surveillance network of the Casbah and set up checkpoints at its entrances and exits.

As Solinas explained, Mathieu thus functions as "a kind of improved synthesis in that each individual colonel was much less lucid and alert." Indeed, Mathieu has many of the best lines in the film, including his response to a challenging question at a press conference, when he offers a spirited defense of the French military's use of torture. "We're neither madmen nor sadists. Those who call us 'fascists' forget the role many of us played in the Resistance. Those who call us 'Nazis' don't know some of us survived Dachau and Buchenwald. We are soldiers. Our duty is to win." Turning the table on the assembled journalists, he continues, with chilling logic. "It's my turn to ask a question. Should France stay in Algeria? If your answer is still yes, then you must accept all the consequences."

In one of its most powerful cinematic transitions, the film then cuts to a brief montage of scenes of torture, just a sampling, really, of some of the brutal 'interrogation' techniques utilized by the French—or at least those not involving the most intimate portions of the human anatomy (there are limits, after all, to the visual representation possible in even such an otherwise straightforward film). More inquiring minds are referred to Yacef's most recent booklet, The Battle of Algiers:
Urban Guerrilla Warfare, which details a comprehensive catalog of French torture methods—including electricity, water, fire, rope, etc.—just the reading of which can make one queasy.

The use of torture by the French military was a highly controversial issue at the time and continues to haunt France today. The outspoken verging on boastful revelations about torture by Paul Aussares in his 2001 book, Services Spéciaux Algerie 1955-1957, elicited a national debate on the sensitive subject and led to a lawsuit against the former General that attempted to circumvent the amnesty decree in the Sixties for all French veterans of the Algerian war. The presidential aspirations of National Front candidate Jean-Marie Le Pen were recently dealt a public-relations blow by the publication in Le Monde of allegations of his involvement in torture as a twenty-nine-year-old lieutenant in Algeria. More recently, a group of leading French writers issued a petition calling for a national statement of apology for the policy of torture in Algeria.

The filmmakers, determined to provide an honest depiction of the struggle, did not stint, either, on their depiction of terrorism committed by the FLN. The carnage begins with a series of cold-blooded political assassinations, usually with bullets in the back, of French police and concludes with a suicidal drive by two Algerian youngsters down a main thoroughfare through the European quarter. Apparently fueled by blind rage, they randomly machinegun French civilians on the sidewalk and, when their ammunition runs out, they crash their vehicle into a group waiting at a bus stop.

The film's most famous and horrendous set piece is the depiction of the FLN's first indiscriminate bombings of civilian targets, when Yacèf's "bomb network" deployed Algerian women as the messengers of death. Dressed and made up to look like Europeans, they were able to evade detection at the checkpoints and reach their targets—the Milk Bar, the Cafeteria, and the Air France Terminal. Although historically these bombings came in response to a series of some twenty French colonialist bombings of Muslim civilian targets—including the notorious Rue de Théâtres bombing shown in the film, which leveled three buildings, resulting in seventy-three deaths and dozens more wounded and maimed, including many children—the film in no way glamorizes the FLN terrorism, depicting it as essentially a primal act of revenge.

Just as the film reveals the French to be captive to their own misguided strategy—attempting to militarily defeat a guerrilla organization resorting to violence primarily for purposes of domestic and international political propaganda—and, by resorting to torture, not only betraying their nation's historic reputation as the birthplace of the Rights of Man but playing into the FLN's hands by brutally revealing their status as colonial power—the FLN leadership can likewise be seen as being circumscribed by an ineluctable political logic. After the film's depiction of the Rue de Théâtres bombing, for example, an angry mob of Casbah residents, led by FLN militant Ali la Pointe (Brahim Haggai), are seen surging towards the European quarter to exact bloody revenge. In order to prevent a massacre, the FLN orders Ali to stop, and Jaffar (Saadi Yacèf) emerges from a passageway to entreat the crowd, assuring them that "The FLN will avenge you." In this cinematic instance, and throughout the long, bloody conflict, the FLN was continually forced to resort to terrorist violence both to ensure its continuing political viability with the Algerian masses as well as to press its case with the French government as the sole "interlocuteur valable," the only Algerian organization with which France could negotiate for peace.

During our discussion, Yacèf was quite articulate about the psychological consequences for those who practiced torture, but, not surprisingly, he was less forthcoming about the psychological fallout for himself or other FLN leaders who engaged in terrorism. Of course, given the nature of the "collective punishments" and other atrocities meted out by both sides, any latter-day apologies or expressions of remorse would be woefully inadequate. While Yacèf briefly discusses the personal moral qualms engendered at the time by one of his deadliest bombings, it would have been politically impossible for him or the FLN to have publicly expressed such concerns. In a recent Salon.com interview, Yacèf freely acknowledged, "I killed people. I did it for my country," but was also quick to add that today he is completely changed, and has become "another man." A rare insight into the emotional turmoil and the political burden that Yacèf must have struggled with is memorably related by Germain Tillion in her book, France and Algeria: Complementary Enemies (see sidebar).

On somewhat more mundane matters, Yacèf's complaints about not being properly credited for his role in producing the film are borne out by a closer examination of both published credits and previous American-release versions of the film. Myoffending edition of the screenplay, for example, lists Yacèf only as an actor in the film. The previous film, VHS, and laserdisc releases of the film here in the U.S. likewise credit Yacèf only for his performance in the film, with no mention at all of Casbah Films or Saadi Yacèf as producer, much less any story credit. The new prints prepared by Rialto Pictures do include a tagged-on end credit indicating "Based on a story by Saadi Yacèf." (Rialto should also be congratulated for their new English subtitles—the French by Cynthia Schoe and Lenny Borg- her and the Arabic by Tarik Benbrahim—which are a vast improvement over the often laughably inept translations on previous versions.)

The Writers Guild of America wouldn't have jurisdiction over this dispute, of course, but, judging by previous decisions they've made in the cases of blacklisted screenwriters who denjured proper credit, and based on the story structure and chronology of events in the film as compared to Yacèf's memoirs, there's a strong case for the claim of this victim of the politique des auteurs to a writing credit as well.

Although Yacèf never did autograph my copy of the screenplay, he was extraordinarily gracious with his time, even showing us a scrapbook of photos of himself taken in Algiers over the years with various visiting foreign dignitaries and film celebrities. When I explained that we had been able to pose only a few of our many questions during the allotted half-hour, he offered to make more time available, and later replied from Algiers to additional questions via fax. Thanks to Ellen Sochik and Joan M. West for translation assistance, and to Susan Norgert, Kevin Durst, Kim Hendrickson, and Zephyra, Yacèf's daughter, for further assistance and materials.—Gary Crowds

Saadi Yacèf (left) with Brahim Haggai, who portrayed Ali la Pointe, and Mohamed Ben Kassen, as "le petit Omar," during the filming of The Battle of Algiers (1966) (photo courtesy of Saadi Yacèf).
Cineaste: What experiences led you, as a young man, to become politically involved in the Algerian independence movement?

Saadi Yacef: I was born in the Casbah, a very large section of Algiers, with an unimaginable density of population. There were 400,000 inhabitants in the Casbah, which boiled down to about 40,000 people per square kilometer. That was where I first became conscious of the system of apartheid, if you will, which made the Algerians into nothing more than slaves. I became conscious of the fact that I wasn't considered a human being, but only half human, so at the age of seventeen I joined the Parti du Peuple Algérien, a nationalist organization interested in obtaining the independence of Algeria.

I grew up in this situation. When the Allies landed in Algeria in 1942, for example, my school was closed because all the schools were being converted into barracks for the troops. At that point I had gotten my brevet [certificate of elementary education] and the next year I would have gotten my baccalauréat [advanced school-leaving certificate] but that's when they closed the schools. That really increased my feeling of wanting revenge against those who had colonized us.

Cineaste: Following your arrest in September 1957, which is portrayed in the film, you spent five years in jail. What was that experience like?

Yacef: I was condemned to death three different times but in 1958, when General de Gaulle came to power, I was pardoned. At that time I was transferred to a prison in France, where I took advantage of the political situation because I had the rank of Colonel. When I was in prison, I had access to paper and pen, so I was able to write the manuscript that later became Souvenirs de la Bataille d'Alger, which was published in 1962. That book later became the basis for the film, The Battle of Algiers. I was militarily in charge in Algiers, which is the heart of Algeria, and in my book I described all the principal events I had lived through. That's the real origin of the film.

When you're in prison, particularly when you're condemned to death, it's a place for reflection and for meditation. I thought about different things I wanted to do. One of them was to publish the book, which I later did. The second thing was thinking about making a film which would recount the events so that the next and later generations would know how Algeria achieved independence.

Cineaste: You've been quoted, in describing this transition, as saying that you "exchanged the submachine gun for the movie camera."

Yacef: In my youth I used to go to the movies fairly frequently without, nonetheless, wanting to be a part of the world of the Seventh Art. Fate decided otherwise. During my isolation in prison, the idea occurred to me of adapting my book for the screen. My wish did come true and I was able to get rid of the submachine gun and exchange it for a camera.

After I was released from prison, I happened to read an article that said the Italians were interested in making a film about the Algerian War of Liberation. I responded to this article immediately, saying that no one but me could make such a film about Algeria because I lived through it. At that point, anyone interested in making a film about Algeria would have been making only a fictional film.

Cineaste: I gather the production of The Battle of Algiers actually began when you and Salah Bazi, another NLF militant, went to Italy in search of a director to film the script that you had written.

Yacef: Yes, Bazi was a militant I worked with—he was the one who used to make the bombs—and I took him with me to Italy in search of a director. At that time I really knew nothing about the cinema. I had seen Roma: Open City and I knew a little bit about Italian neorealism. I started to read all the cinema magazines so I could learn more about the directors. I had seen Kapò, so I got in touch with Gillo Pontecorvo. When I met Pontecorvo for the first time in Rome, I showed him the screenplay I had written for a film on the Battle of Algiers. The treatment seemed naive to him and he explained that it was not a cinematic treatment of the subject, so it was rejected right away. Pontecorvo already had his own screenplay about Algeria called Para, in which he wanted to star Paul Newman, about a demobilized French paratrooper who had become a newspaper journalist, and who was sent to Algeria to document the policy of torture that was being practiced there.

I told Pontecorvo if he wanted to make his film, Para, that No. 1, I would not help him in any way, and No. 2, that the film would not have any credibility. I told him he might as well star John Wayne in it! It was at that point that we agreed to collaborate on a new film. After a great many discussions, I succeeded in convincing him to have Franco Solinas prepare a new screenplay based on the book I had written in prison, which dealt with the main events that had taken place in Algiers. So I signed contracts with Pontecorvo and Solinas, and, contrary to what's been said, I provided some sixty percent of the financing, although I never expected to be making a commercial film. On the Italian side, Antonio Musu created a production company, Igor Film, that provided the rest of the financing, and he was responsible as the director of production. I brought Pontecorvo and Solinas to Algeria and they stayed for a few months, immersing themselves in the Algerian psyche of the time. They interviewed a lot of the militants I had been responsible for directing.

Cineaste: The script was reportedly rewritten several times before you approved it.

Yacef: Three times. The first two I rejected because they didn't tell the truth. They didn't take into account the fact that what I wanted to do was to recreate the events in exactly the same locations where they actually took place. So, for example, the place where I am seen being arrested in the film was the place where I was really arrested. The building in the Casbah where Ali la Pointe was hiding, and where they placed the bomb to blow him up, was rebuilt in the same location in order to recreate that scene. Once Pontecorvo understood that, he agreed, and that's what we did.

Cineaste: The credits for the film, however, say "Screenplay by Franco Solinas" and "Original Story by Gillo Pontecorvo and Franco Solinas."

Yacef: If it were up to me, I would redo the credits of the film to say "Screenplay by Franco Solinas, based on an idea by Saadi Yacef." All of the things that take place in the film are described in my book, which was published in 1962—the December eight-day strike, the bomb lowered in a basket that kills the soldier, the account of my arrest, the death of Ali la Pointe. The genius of Pontecorvo and Solinas is that they were able to translate my book into cinematic language, which is something that I didn't know how to do. They
took the events of the experience that I had lived and transformed them into something that could be seen on the screen. But they were not responsible for inventing any of these events. If my book had been published in 1965 instead of 1962, then they could claim that this had been their creation.

Cineaste: How did you feel about becoming an actor and playing yourself in the film?

Yacef: That was Pontecorvo’s idea, he wanted me to act in the film. He said, “You know, you have a good appearance, a good face for the cinema, like Tony Curtis or a young Paul Muni.” I told him I really couldn’t do it because I wasn’t capable of entering the skin of an actor. But he insisted, saying, “No, you should play this part.” I agreed to do it because by acting in the film, I was also able to supervise what was happening and to make sure that it reflected the reality that I had lived. If he had chosen someone else to play the part, it would have been all right with me, but since he chose me to play the part, everything had to be exactly the way it was. Those were the conditions under which I agreed to perform.

I also explained to him, unlike what they say now, that I’m not the hero of the Battle of Algiers. The Algerian people were the heroes—they were the ones who fed us, who lodged us, who suffered with us. I have a scar from where I was machine-gunned, a wound from which I almost died, but I was saved by Ali la Pointe, who is perhaps in paradise today. But he and so many others who died are the true heroes. I told Pontecorvo that you have to show this in the film, which should have a choral protagonist. That was my idea, not his. But in that regard, Gillo Pontecorvo was a genius. He knew how to bring together all the elements, using Ali la Pointe as the thread to tie everything together. He decided to film it in black and white, giving you almost the sense that you’re watching a documentary. That was Pontecorvo’s idea. Even some of the music he used in the film was traditional Algerian music that he discovered.

Pontecorvo is also the one who discovered Brahim Haggag, who played Ali la Pointe, Jean Martin was the only professional actor in the film. At the time he was playing a priest on stage in Paris and at night he took a plane over to Algiers in order to play a paratrooper. He was switching between two uniforms! The creative genius of Pontecorvo was knowing how to bring together all these people, people who were not professional actors, and to create a film that is still being discussed today.

Cineaste: One of the most distinguished aspects of The Battle of Algiers is the remarkable even-handedness of the film, particularly in its refusal to moralize either about French torture or Algerian terrorism.

Yacef: What we really tried to do was to show the horror of the situation in its most raw state, in the most honest and frank way that we could. When you begin a war of liberation, you know there’s going to be a price to pay. And we knew also that our enemies perceived us as communists. In discussing this with Pontecorvo, I told him—and you can ask him—“You know, when the French make a war film and they show the Germans, the Germans are always bad.” We wanted to show that the enemy were people who were very intelligent and who had experienced this continual cycle of colonial wars. We wanted to make a film that showed the violence on both sides.

What we show is truly a revolution, a war, one that was made by people, and everything that situation entailed. There was bravery, but there were also horrors committed, there were serious errors. There is a saying that, “Whoever says revolution, says error.” We committed a large number of errors. The enemy committed errors as well. Finally the conflict became like a chess game, with two players facing each other who reach a stalemate. Neither player won or lost—they didn’t win or lose, and we didn’t win or lose. It was history that won.

Cineaste: There are several scenes in the film that reflect the role of Islamic fundamentalism in the national liberation struggle. In an early scene, for example, the FLN proclaims the need to clean up the Casbah in order to prepare the Algerian people physically and morally for the struggle, so they prohibit gambling, alcohol, drugs, prostitution, and so on. Were there tensions within the FLN leadership between such religious motivations and more secular, political motivations?

Yacef: There’s about seventy percent truth in what you’re saying. It’s the fault of the French who, since 1830, had discriminated against the Islamic religion. During the war Islam was legally pushed aside, in a situation similar to apartheid. People conserved all the practices of the religion—there was fasting for the thirty days of Ramadan, for example—and that remained constant. Even if there had not been a war, the Algerian people would have remained Islamic.

But religion was also a great help to the national liberation struggle. I’ll give you an example. When I was preparing someone who was about to go out and commit an assault, that person would do his prayers because there was a possibility that he might not come back. You should also understand that the French were considered like the devil. So for us there were two objectives—that the Islamic religion be preserved and that independence be achieved. In an early scene in the film, when you see a prisoner being led to his execution—and that was someone who had really been condemned to death—he shouts “Allahu Akbar” (“God is Great”) as well as “Vive Algerie” (“Long Live Algeria”). A lot of Algerians didn’t understand that we were trying to achieve independence for them; the struggle was just a way of chasing away the devil. The religious question per se was never discussed within the FLN but there were conflicts around power.

Cineaste: While the use of torture was a decisive factor in helping the French win the Battle of Algiers, in the long run it also proved to be a decisive political factor that led to the loss of its former colony and became a controversial issue that continues to haunt France today.

Yacef: Actually torture helped the FLN enormously because what it did was to expose the real face of the French military. When General Massu took over full power, what he did was to transform himself into a policeman. In a prerevolutionary or revolutionary climate, torture becomes the preferred arm of the powerholders. But torture creates men who are mad. When a balanced individual tortures someone who’s very much like himself, it wounds him in the most sensitive place within the human being—the conscience—and this is a wound which doesn’t heal. Torture quickly destroys that which is most noble in the person who practices it—the heart and the spirit.

A stable man who is capable of torturing and of unmercifully, violently and painfully driving a fellow human being—even a wholly
villainous one—to the point that he begs for death, with no hope of being allowed to die, such a stable man will feel his conscience, previously inviolable, break. Whoever orders torture, practices it, or plots it, becomes involved in a suicidal environment from which he will not escape without some form of atonement.

In many people's view, simple destruction is much less ignominious. But there is no greater crime than bragging about torture. General Massu wrote about the gégène [a method of torture using electric shocks], saying, "I experimented on myself, in my office at Hydra, at the beginning of 1957, and most of my officers did the same." Now there's some lovely reasoning—suggesting that such an abomination is experienced equally on both sides. On one side is the experience of the individual being tortured, who pleads with his torturers, with no rancor or regret, to end his life quickly. He is so deeply sunk in this infernal ordeal, feeling his body mangled, his eyes bulging out, and his head reduced to jelly. Every fiber of his physical being is subjected to such violent shocks that he will break the strongest bonds that shackle him and knock down several men struggling to immobilize him. On the other side is the experience of the torturer, who has abdicated his humanity and distorted his sensitivity, and who is driven solely by hatred and the most barbarous instincts. The torturer even complacently regards his victim's suffering as fundamental cowardice, which he endeavors to ridicule.

Cineaste: Franz Fanon wrote about this phenomenon since he treated at his clinic French military personnel who engaged in torture as well as Algerians who had been tortured, both having been emotionally scarred by their experiences.

Yacef: Yes, it's an illness. Fanon was the director of the Blida-Joinville Hospital, located some fifty kilometers from Algeria. I did not meet him personally, but I knew him through his writings and his devotion to the Algerian cause. Before his death he took care of a large number of our people. He was a very great man. He wrote in a very famous text that "The Algerian people are not fighting against torture..." The Algerian people are not unaware of the fact that the colonialist structure rests on the necessity of torturing, raping and committing massacres. So torture is a problem that fell more on the shocked French conscience than on the conscience of the Algerians, who were its eternal victims.

Cineaste: The FLN also had the support of a number of French intellectuals, writers, and political activists, such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Germaine Tillion, and Francis Jeanson. Would you discuss their role?

Yacef: The acts of violence engendered by the war were not considered, in any way, to compromise our chances for a future. This fact won us many friends from different origins, especially French. All were sensitive to the appropriateness of our cause and to the legitimacy of our aspirations. Some amongst them fought and fell at our sides. Others, informed of the grave consequences that would lead their country to war, faithfully and loyally chose as well to fight—within their situation and according to their means—in order to thwart the threats to our cause.

From the beginning, aid organizations, youth movements, the Jeanson network, lawyers' groups, intellectuals, journalists, teachers, former World War II members of the Resistance, and the French clergy expressed their disapproval of this unjust war and used their influence to block its progress. Many of these people suffered humiliation and threats and lived through situations that were sometimes tragic without ever retracting their support. Intense campaigns stirred up public opinion in favor of calling a halt to the shameful practices of the French army. On April 18, 1957, French professors and scientists wrote an impassioned letter to the President of the Republic, René Coty, denouncing these practices. Less than a month later, one hundred and twenty-one personalities from Lyon stood up against the excesses that had been documented in Algeria. Monsieur Duval, Archbishop of Algiers, spared neither his time nor his credibility in courageously denouncing what seemed unjust and intolerable to him, as well as the problems arising from maintaining order.

The contact I had with my longtime friend Germaine Tillion was with the goal of stopping the infernal cycles of bombing operations and of retribution and executions. Tillion gave faithful accounts of our exchanges in the press and in her book Les Ennemis complémentaires. She lent herself to this exchange in good faith, with the agreed-upon limits, and after having consulted her best friends, in power and out, friends formed in the school of fighting for the French Empire. This academic, this WWII Resistance fighter thrice condemned to death by the Nazis, knew in advance what to expect when dealing with human stupidity. With her heart torn apart by the drama that Algeria was experiencing and the harrowing course of events that was unfolding, she undertook an effort to obtain a temporary, unilateral truce from our organization. This was granted, with no ulterior motive, since our political line did not preclude actions of this kind.

Cineaste: Germain Tillion wrote quite movingly in her book about her clandestine meetings with you and especially about your emotional response to the results of terrorist bombings that you arranged. Although the use of terrorism, like torture, can be rationalized as a legitimate and absolutely necessary political tactic, there can likewise be serious ethical and moral
Yacef: Bombs don’t choose their victims. But you have to remember that we were the victims of bombs placed by the ultracolonialists. You see such a bombing in the film. At that point the Algerian population of the Casbah wanted to go into the European quarters to take revenge. We stopped them, just the way you see it in the film, by telling them that the FLN would avenge them. In order to keep our word, we had to arm ourselves in a way that was equal to that of our adversaries. That’s why we brought in experts, chemists, who helped us devise bombs. Those were the three bombs that were carried and placed by the women, as you see them do in the film.

In discussing the whole question of bombs and the placing of bombs, you have to understand that at this time the ultracolonialists, the pieds noirs, would often disguise themselves as paratroopers, and, because they were not interested in any mercy, they would place bombs indiscriminately, resulting in the death of civilians. So we too began to place our bombs indiscriminately, not really worrying about the consequences.

I’ll give you a very specific example of what happened to me. I was responsible for placing a bomb in a casino, where a large number of officers and military people would go. But a lot of women went there as well because it was a place for dancing and drinking. A very famous jazz singer and a very famous drummer were performing there at the time, and I went there and placed a bomb. It exploded and there were a large number of casualties. At that point I really had to think about what I was doing, and I had to ask God why it was that I was placed in a situation where I would have to place a bomb that would kill or maim a large number of people. I wondered why I was not with the maquis in the countryside, fighting somewhere else, but I realized that is what I was there to do.9

Cineaste: Today the Battle of Algiers continues to be fought in what might be called the Battle of the Memoirs. You wrote your own memoirs in 1962 and subsequently wrote other accounts of your activities.10 General Jacques Massu wrote an entire chapter on you in his book, La Vraie Bataille d’Alger,11 and most recently General Paul Aussaresses made some outrageous claims against you in his book.

Yacef: I never expected to be decorated with a medal by the enemies of yesterday whom I had chased out of Algeria. The penchant for wanting to sow confusion in the minds of impartial readers is the only motive that can prompt authors to do such a thing. As for Aussaresses (alias “O”), he had already left Algeria three months before I was arrested, and, according to my investigation, never had knowledge of the trap that had been set for me. Aussaresses was a kind of ghoul, he would go around to all of the various barracks where people had been tortured. He would collect these half-dead people who could not be released because to release them would be proof that people were being tortured. He would take them to his headquarters, where these torture victims had their legs shackled with very heavy weights and they were then dropped from helicopters into the sea. Some of his victims were sealed up into walls. Aussaresses was very knowledgeable about torture and he was willing to use any and all means. But you could say that Aussaresses was one of the FLN’s most important assets because the more he tortured, the more militants we recruited.

Even in Indo-China Aussaresses was noted as an extreme counterrevolutionary. There he would tie his victims to trees before setting them afire. Aussaresses was a criminal, a vampire, but what bothers me the most is that the American military called on him to teach a course on the Battle of Algiers. I wonder what sort of lessons he could have given them?

Captain Paul-Alain Léger, former WWII Resistance fighter and principal founder of the Groupe Renseignement et d’Exploitation (Information and Operating Group) recounts in his book Aux Carrefours de la Guerre the story of my arrest and those of other FLN militants, as well as the discovery of Ali la Pointe’s hiding place. These operations were led in the beginning by Captain Léger with the help of Colonels Godard and Jean-pierre, Captains Allaire, Chabannes, La Bourdonnay and Faulk, who were all, of course, overseen by General Massu. The main role was played by one of our FLN people in charge, a traitor by the name of Gandriche Hacene, alias Zerrouk, Safi, and Basil.

Cineaste: I’ve read that when you and Zohra Drif were arrested, one of the principal reasons you surrendered was that you knew an explosion would have also destroyed a house across the narrow street.
A Clandestine Meeting with Saadi Yacef

Germaine Tillon was a French ethnologist who had spent considerable time in Algeria since the Thirties. During WWII she served in the French Resistance, and was arrested by the Gestapo, who sentenced her to death. After the war she returned to Algeria and in 1955 was responsible for establishing a series of social-welfare agencies that also tried to improve Franco-Muslim relations. During the 1954 Algerian War, she served as a member of the International Commission on Internment, which was investigating conditions in the strife-torn country. In the summer of 1957, Tillon had two clandestine meetings in Algiers with Saadi Yacef and other members of the FLN in what proved to be a futile effort to establish a truce, which would have involved a halt to French executions of FLN militants in exchange for the FLN's cessation of terrorist bombings. Midway during the account of her first meeting with Yacef, during which she was unaware of his identity, she relates the following exchange:

Consequently, after about two and a half hours of conversation, Yacef smiled faintly and said something like: "You see that we are neither criminals nor murderers." Very sadly, but very firmly, I answered: "You are murderers." He was so startled that he said nothing for a moment and seemed to be choking. Then his eyes filled with tears and he said: "Yes, Madame Tillon, we are murderers." Then he told me several details about the Casino bombing, adding that when he heard about it he wept for three days and three nights. In this second part of the conversation, he had tears in his eyes on several occasions, and when he spoke of the Casino incident the tears ran down his face.

I remember saying in almost these words: "Terrorism is the justification of the tortures in some people's eyes. To others, the tortures and executions are the justification of terrorism. It is a vicious circle." Another time, Yacef made a sudden gesture and said: "Oh, those bombs, I wish they were all at the bottom of the sea!" I answered that I would be glad to help him throw them there. In a terribly crushed tone he replied: "It's our only way of expressing ourselves." It seems to me that he repeated this phrase several times, and I for my part during this second phase of our conversation repeated: "Innocent blood cries out for vengeance!"

From that day on, it was my profound conviction that this man had no intention, in initiating this conversation, of speaking to me of his moral crisis; he had concealed his name from me, as I discovered later, only because it had become a synonym for terrorism in the Algerian papers and because he was afraid of showing himself by telling me who he was. Nevertheless, everything we said was impromptu, violating his customary secrecy, he immediately told me the name of his bodyguard (Ali la Pointe), whose reputation was no better than his own.

He expressed himself throughout with a great deal of spontaneity and naturalness, and during our two conversations, thanks to the brief remarks he made, I gained a sense of the kind of life he had been leading for two years, hunted day and night by several thousand soldiers in an area the size of the Jardin du Luxembourg, making a tremendous physical and intellectual effort almost without material means, for it was his task to co-ordinate first the entire political and military machinery of Algiers and then (as an interim functionary) to ensure this co-ordination for all of Algeria. I could also see the great respect he inspired in his collaborators; yet, precisely because of this respect, they expected him to assume every responsibility in every domain. Consequently, he was obliged to bear a moral burden that had probably been weighing upon him for some time when I met him. The turn our conversation took—quite unexpected to both of us—precipitated, in my opinion, a decision he had already been contemplating a long time.

Almost abruptly he said: "I promise you that from now on we will not touch the civilian population."

I was petrified by this remark, and I answered that I represented no one and that I had no qualifications to accept any such commitment. He answered: "That doesn't matter. It is to you I wish to make this promise, and it is to you that I do make it."

Around seven-thirty I ended the interview. At the moment of leaving I turned first toward the two young women sitting on my right. The young blonde (Zohra Drl) had spoken briefly on one or two occasions; the other woman had taken no part in the conversation. Consequently, I did not know how they felt about the discussion. I shook hands with them, and when one of them kissed me, I realized their emotion and, deeply touched myself, said: "I beg you to use your influence to protect the innocent." Both bowed their heads gravely, and then turned toward the man called Ali la Pointe and, seizing him by his shirt collar, I shook him a little and said: "Did you understand what I said? Innocent blood cries out for vengeance!" Somewhat intimidated, he answered: "Yes, m'dame." Lastly I shook hands with Saadi Yacef. He took my hand in both of his and said with emotion: "Thank you for having spoken to us as you have." Then I left with the guide, and, as I did the first time, I took care not to notice the route we followed...

As a consequence, my personal conviction is that not only did Saadi Yacef intend to stop the attacks against the French civilian population, but he actually did stop them, and he did so throughout Algeria. My conviction is based on the immediate, general, and apparently inexplicable cessation of terrorism on the date of July 4, which is that of the first interview I had with Yacef, and the attempted resumption of terrorism immediately after his arrest, which took place on Tuesday, September 25.

(From Algeria and Algeria: Complimentary Exonyms, © 1981, Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.)

The September 1957 capture of Saadi Yacef as featured in a photo published in Paris Match (photo courtesy of Saadi Yacef).

where Ali la Pointe and other militants were in hiding. Yacef: Yes, that's correct. Ali la Pointe was in the house across the street, so one of the reasons I surrendered was to avoid a catastrophe. The second was the promise that I would be considered a prisoner of war according to the Geneva Convention. I gave a very detailed account of my arrest in my book.

Cineaste: During the Sixties and Seventies, The Battle of Algiers was frequently screened by revolutionary organizations around the world—from the Black Panthers and the Weathermen in the U.S., the Provisional Irish Republican Army in Northern Ireland, and the Red Brigades in Italy, to the Baader-Meinhof Gang in Germany, and the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka. Wasn't it rather naive and ahistorical for these organizations to try to adapt the unique Algerian experience to their own situations?

Yacef: Urban guerrilla warfare is generally divided into three phases. In the first, it is a matter of making oneself heard by stating one's identity. In the second, of organizing in order to be able to carry out a long, erosive war. And in the third of launching the insurrection after occupying the conquered territory. The Battle of Algiers was, in effect, used as a kind of manual by revolutionary organizations throughout the world. Using it like that, however, suggests a lack of perceptiveness. As you so rightly remark, one has to be very naive to try to adapt our particular experience to another group's situation.

Cineaste: The Battle of Algiers has also been screened by the governments and armies and military colleges of various countries, including a screening last year at the Pentagon, presumably in an effort to teach lessons about combating terrorism and urban guerrilla warfare.

Yacef: There are really no teaching methods or training manuals for waging or for combating guerrilla warfare. The governments and armies of these countries, including the Pentagon, will probably never realize that, in effect, they are chasing an illusory idea. What can one seize from an idea? Only one thing—its truth. I would wager very strongly that they will never grasp it, neither they nor those of their ilk.

Cineaste: When The Battle of Algiers was originally released in the U.S., you were credited only as an actor, and not as coproducer.

Yacef: The Battle of Algiers was sold for distribution for a period of eighteen years to a company headquartered in the U.S. In my capacity as principal producer, I never had any knowledge of the sales contract and I never signed any document whatsoever concerning the film. I arrived in Los Angeles only to discover, to my great surprise, that neither my name nor that of my company, Casbah Films, appeared in the film's credits. I consulted lawyers in Los Angeles, who in the end did nothing.

After the death in 1979 of Antonio Musu, the film's coproducer, his son Carlo resold the film to the same company as a firm, lifetime deal, without changing anything whatsoever in the credits. After I threatened to take Carlo Musu to court, he ceded to me all the rights...
his company held, except that he retained the right to distribute the film exclusively in Italy. Before giving the rights to Casbah Films, however, Carlo Musa had become involved with Surf Film in Rome. This company sold the rights to the film in England and Canada and to other companies, including a French cable TV company. Surf Film continues to do this, using subtitled Italian versions. I have put together a group of lawyers to put an end to these illegal practices.

Cineaest: Besides The Battle of Algiers, what other films has Casbah Films produced?

Yacef: The films we produced include a 1966 adaptation of Albert Camus's *The Stranger*, directed by Luchino Visconti and starring Marcello Mastroianni, which was shot entirely in Algeria; a feature-length film about the executioner of Algiers, the man responsible for the deposed job of cutting off the heads of those condemned to death during Algeria's War of Liberation; and we coproduced in 1966 with Dino de Laurentis a spaghetti Western directed by Enzo Peri called *Tre pistole contro Cesarè*, which featured Algerian wearing cowboy hats. We are also now developing a one-hour documentary on Algeria called *Trompe l'oeil*.

Cineaest: You must be most proud of The Battle of Algiers, an international classic which is still being discussed and acclaimed today, nearly forty years after its initial release.

Yacef: It's incredible. It makes me very happy because it helped Algeria enter into history. A film can have that kind of impact. When you say *Battleship Potemkin*, for example, it represents an entire nation. I can tell you that at this point I could die happy knowing that I have helped Algeria.

END NOTES:


2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.


5. Yacef fares somewhat better on the U.K. and Italian DVD editions of the film, both of which acknowledge Yacef and his company for coproducing the film with Antonio Musa's Igor Film company in Rome. The U.K. edition (Argent Films) is quite good, image-wise, being enhanced for 16 x 9 monitors, and includes an interview with Pontecorvo and a photo gallery. The Italian DVD (Surf Video) is a two-disc edition and the 16 x 9 enhanced image is far superior to the U.K. edition, with Italian, French, and English subtitles, but none of the many supplementary items included by Pontecorvo, second-unit director Giovanni Montaldo, cinematographer Marcello Gatti, Carlo Musa (son of the late producer), composer Ennio Morricone, and editor Mario Morra — are subtitled.


9. The bomb that exploded at the Casino de la Corniche on June 6, 1957, resulted in nine dead and eighty-five wounded, half of them women. Since the explosive had been placed beneath the orchestra platform, many of the victims lost their legs.


The Battle of Algiers is distributed by Rialto Pictures, 594 Broadway, Suite 1004, New York, New York, 10012, telephone (212) 379-1274, FAX 212-822-820, rialtophoto@aol.com, www.rialtopictures.com, For bookings, phone Eric Di Bernardo at (212) 472-1911 or e-mail rialtosales@verizon.net.

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