

Women and Psychological Warfare during the Algerian War (1954-1962)

Key questions:

1. What is psychological warfare? How does it function? How can we measure its effectiveness?
2. In the specific case of the Algerian War, how and why did Algerian women become a target for psychological warfare? How did they respond?
3. In order to answer these questions, what are the sources historians use and how do they use them?

Why was Algeria different from the rest of the French empire?

Why was psychological warfare important to both the French government/army and the National Liberation Front (FLN)?

What aims does psychological warfare have and what forms can it take?

Why were women a particular target for psychological warfare during the Algerian War?

Mao: 'The people are like water and the army is like fish' *Aspects of China's Anti-Japanese Struggle* (1948).

Techniques used by the French government/army to win over women

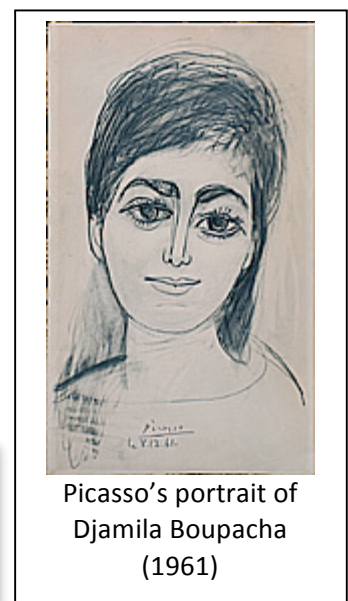
Between January 1957 and late 1959 the military-civilian regime in Algiers launched an 'emancipation' strategy:

- SAS (Specialised Administrative Sections) were created in September 1955, EMSI (Mobile Female Medical Teams) were particularly aimed at women – provide medical care in rural areas.
- Improved access to schooling for girls; youth training.
- European-Muslim women's circles.
- Extension of the vote to Muslim women.
- Reform of family law.
- Nafissa Sid Cara, elected to the French National Assembly in Paris in November 1958, became the first Muslim woman to be named a Junior Minister in a French government in 1959.



Techniques used by the FLN to win over women

- FLN launches its own propaganda: women can only achieve equality by fighting for a country freed from colonial domination.
- FLN newspaper *El Moudjahid* declares a revolution in gender relations, publishes 'diaries' of women in *maquis*.
- Cases of rape and torture of women promoted on world stage (case of FLN activist Djamila Boupacha, arrested, tortured and raped taken up by French lawyer Gisèle Halimi and feminist and intellectual Simone de Beauvoir in 1959).
- FLN networks of social workers and medical teams.
- Use of family ties, networks – note use of language, brother (*khouya*)/ sister (*oukh't*)



Fanon: 'Algerian society reveals itself not to be the womanless society that had been so well described. Side by side with us, our sisters upset a little more the enemy's plans of attack and definitively liquidate old myths.' *L'An V de la Révolution algérienne* (1959)

Primary sources

We will be using the following primary sources to think about the **different ways** in which **psychological warfare** functioned during the Algerian War and how **effective** it was. Primary sources always need to be interrogated using the 'who, what, when, where and why' questions:

1. Who produced this source?
2. What kind of source is this?
3. When was it produced?
4. Where was the person who produced the source at the time (i.e. how have they obtained this information)?
5. Why has the author created this source – i.e. what is the purpose of the source?

→ Once you have answered these questions, summarise how the historian might use each of these sources. It may help to think about the following questions: what are the advantages and limitations of each source? What is the difference between a 'useful' and a 'reliable' source? Why do we need to pay particular attention to language?

1. Zohra Drif, *La mort de mes frères* [The Death of My Brothers] (Paris: François Maspero, 1961) Available in the British Library. 10 page pamphlet, originally published in weekly *Afrique Action*.

'In this Algerian War, in which civilians – all the Algerian population – are both participants in the struggle for emancipation and victims of repression, my own participation, as a young female student, is a natural and quite common reaction. Algerian women have seen their brothers, their husbands, their sons tortured, massacred before their eyes. Young girls have been raped in the houses of the Casbah, and all across Algeria, in front of their brothers, their fathers, [who stand] powerless under the threat of machine guns.'



Zohra Drif, member of the FLN Algiers bomb network, second from the left

2. 'These smiling nurses are "killers"' article in French magazine *Jours de France*, August 1956



These photos were taken by the FLN to use at the United Nations, the negatives were captured by the French army when the three women in the photos – Safia Bazi, Meriem Belmihoub and Fadaela Mesli – were arrested, and passed on by the army to the French press.

3. Interview with Fadaela Mesli by Natalya Vince, Algiers, Algeria, 20 December 2005

'These photos had an explosive effect in Algeria. There were many people [men] who joined the maquis when they saw these photos. They said 'How's that, women can fight and we're like "women" – in inverted commas – staying at home.' [...] The local press said that we were Egyptian women; they could not believe that Algerian women were joining the maquis. [...] There was no problem [about three young girls being in the maquis]. No problem, that's what's surprising. When you want to make your presence felt, that gave a boost to the [male] combatants to see that women were there, and that they were fighting just like them, it was extraordinary.'

4. Service historique de la défense (French Army Archives), Vincennes, Paris, France. Box 1H 163. Photocopy of a FLN document, captured 28 October 1960 in the pocket of a schoolboy 'of North African origin'.

ALGERIAN REPUBLIC – NATIONAL LIBERATION FRONT – NATIONAL LIBERATION ARMY.

WILAYA OF ORAN, ZONE V. FROM CAPTAIN SI ALLAL COMMANDER OF ZONE 5 TO SECOND LIEUTENANT SI ZOUBIR, COMMANDER OF REGION 4.

I remind you for the last time that it is forbidden to recruit female soldiers and nurses without authorisation into the zone. In independent Algeria, the liberty of the Muslim woman ends at the threshold of the front door. Women will never be equal to men. Because he broke the rules on this issue, I have removed ZINE Edinne, Commander of region 3 bis, from his functions until further orders. He will provisionally be replaced by ABDELHADI. The order has been given by the zone to track and kill:

- The female soldier FADILA, who was recruited by Mansour
- The female soldier MIMOUNA, who is in BEL ABBES [near Oran]
- The nurse of region 3 bis, i.e. the mistress of Zinedinne.
- The wife of Younès, former soldier in Region 3
- The wife of SI ABDELKADER Commander of Region 3, i.e. RACHIDA de CHITOUANE.

Revolutionary greetings

Captain Si Allal, Commander of Zone V.

5. Service historique de la défense (French Army Archives), Vincennes, Paris. Box 1H1644. Captured FLN leaflet.

Army Headquarters (Etat Major General), Region 2, zone 6, wilaya 4.

Algerian sister!

Algerian woman!

From the mountains, the valleys and the rivers, your sisters in the maquis demand your attention.

Algerian woman, listen, don't you hear the boots of the French occupier stamping on our pavements? They are fleeing faced with the armed mujahidin [holy resisters] and violently attacking the unarmed people with their characteristic barbarianism.

Listen, from bombed and burnt villages, from concentration camps, torture chambers and dungeons a huge cry can be heard. Can you not hear the cries of Algerian men and women massacred and tortured? Can you not here the proud call of Djamila Bouhired?

They all demand: no, our suffering and sacrifice must not be in vain. Reject with disdain the hypocritical solicitations of colonialism which would like to, under the cover of an emancipation synonymous with depersonalisation, cut you off from us, cut you off from your people, denature you, kill your soul, kill your honour; do not betray the national ideal for which so many Algerian men and women have died, do not betray our motherland, its flag, its history and civilisation. To betray them is to betray yourself, to renounce them is to renounce yourself, to empty yourself, debase yourself, to commit yourself to dishonour, to disdain, to the fury of the people and future generations. [...]

The hour is exultant; a future of dignity, happiness and free and intense fulfilment awaits you! Know how to earn it!

With the help of God, because our cause is just and sacred, Algeria will be FREE AND INDEPENDENT.'

6. Algerian National Archives: Fonds du GPRA/MAE/78: *The First Afro-Asian Women's Conference, Cairo 14-23 Jan 1961: Reports, speeches, resolutions.* Pamphlet. Speech by FLN member Ferhat Abbas, head of the Provisional Government of the Algerian Republic (GPRA). 'In Algeria, the Woman's contribution in the armed struggle [i]s not limited to a secondary part. She is taking part in this struggle arms in hand, just like her fighting brothers. However, in Algeria – like in other Afro-Asian countries, the role of women could not possibly be limited to this first stage of the liberation struggle. In these countries, women are the symbol of the new generation and it is therefore towards the process of shaping the new societies that their efforts should be guided. It is in this line [sic.] that the woman could really free herself and be considered as an essential element of progress.'

7. Service historique de la défense (French Army Archives), Vincennes, Paris. Box 1H1246/D2. Diary of Baya Hocine. Seized at Barberousse prison, during a search on 13 April 1958



Entry 29 Feb 1957

'We are many. We have all fought for the same cause, each in their own way. We have students, doctors, those qualified in law, humanities teachers, pharmacists, trade union leaders, old Muslim women. All these people belong to different parties: FLN [National Liberation Front], PCA [Algerian Communist Party], PC (Christians) and MNA [Algerian Nationalist Movement] anarchists. It is difficult to unite them. A scission is slowly forming.'

Entry 19 August 1957

'Everything I see in prison destabilises me and I trust no one, not even these Algerians who our fate depends on. I believe that I am destined to spend my whole life in prison, or indeed be guillotined; I am scared for my mum. Sometimes I regret this spiral and this story I have thrown myself into without thinking, or rather I did think, and I idealised everyone. I am disappointed and I suffer horribly.'

Photos show, top, Baya Hocine, and bottom, Djouher Akhrour, teenagers condemned to death for carrying out FLN bomb attacks in Algiers.

8. Interview with Fatima Berci by Natalya Vince, Agraradj, Kabylia, 16 June 2005

'The women who joined the maquis, they were luckier than us who stayed, they were less exposed. We were defenceless – at any moment they [the French army] could come, break down the door. [...] The house of my uncle was a refuge for the mujahidin and we did huge amounts of cooking. My husband was in France, at the start they burnt our house down. We left our house. The French came. I left with just the clothes I was wearing, I had two children. The youngest was only one and I was dragging him along and I said I almost wished he didn't exist. The French came, they surrounded us, they made us come out [of the house], they smashed the roof, and the mujahidin they came in turn, they made us rebuild our houses. Where we stocked our wheat, the French brought petrol, and they poured it into the wheat so we could no longer eat it. In my house they burnt 500 kilos of wheat. I was 28 years old. When the French were there, it was OK, but when they brought the goumiers, they knew the population, and the problems started. My sister was imprisoned for two months. They made her drink soapy water. Another woman was pregnant and with everything they did to her she lost her baby. [...] When the mujahidin carried out an operation, like blowing up a bridge, the next day there were reprisals against the population. The men fled towards the forest so they [the French army] only found the women and children. They brought the women to collect stones to rebuild the destroyed bridges. Even women who had just given birth 2, 3 days previously and were in bed. Afterwards there was too much pressure. There was France and there were the mujahidin who made us stay.'

9. Centre des Archives d'Outre-Mer (CAOM) [Centre of Overseas Archives], Aix-en-Provence, France. Box 5/SAS/18.

Entry in daily log of the SAS in Bouzeguen, summer 1959:

'The growing trust is clear, some women during psychological action openly demonstrated their rejection of the rebels, some of them shouted "It's the fault of the fellagas." It is disappointing to not be able to follow up these demands, due to a lack of funding.'

10. 'In Algeria, scenes of pacification.' Les Actualités françaises [French news] 23 May 1956

<http://www.ina.fr/economie-et-societe/vie-sociale/video/AFE85006770/en-algerie-scenes-de-la-pacification.fr.html>

Commentary: 'This village in Algeria is called Bouzajar, destroyed, it is today almost totally abandoned, as are the neighbouring farms, burned down and pillaged. Alongside these images we see tanks arriving at the station in Ain Temouchent, a region which recently endured the massacres and fires of the rebels. As these reinforcements arrive, patrols have been multiplied, security operations have been widened and pacification has been generalised. Having taken position in the *bled* [rural areas] the reinforcement troops work in all areas, not only in defence and policing, but in pacification in the most noble sense of the term. Thus as in the West Constantinois region, different specialist teams have been provided for villagers – military doctors and nurses have replaced civilian doctors and nurses. Elsewhere, classrooms are improvised and it is soldiers working voluntarily who replace teachers. At the hour of pacification, the role of the army singularly goes beyond that of simply providing security.'

11. Photograph of a tirailleur sénégalais (troops from France's sub-Saharan African colonies in the French army) in Algeria, with his Algerian girlfriend. Photograph collected by Cheikh Anta Mbaye of the University of Dakar as part of his MA research ('Les tirailleurs sénégalais dans la guerre d'Algérie', 2011)



12. Photograph of a sewing workshop run by the SAS. Reproduced in *Historia Magazine*, 1972.



13. Photograph of 'French Muslim women' working for the French army providing medical care. Reproduced in *Historia Magazine*, 1972.



14. With the young 'Moudjahidat'. Images taken by Vautier/ Dalmas/ Tallandier. Text reads: 'Muslim women go up into the mountains. They are given auxiliary roles most of the time [such as] teachers [who] give Arabic lessons to [National Liberation Army, ALN] soldiers, nurses, social workers in neighbouring villages. A few take up arms. Reproduced in *Historia Magazine*, 1972.

