

The Algerian powder keg

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Algeria, annexed to France since 1834 and divided into administrative *départements*, was considered to be an inalienable part of French national territory. But after the end of the Second World War, the country witnessed a series of demonstrations by nationalists calling for independence. The existence of a powerful minority of European colonists (1 million out of a total of 9 million inhabitants in 1954) who were vehemently opposed to the creation of an Islamic Algerian Republic prevented the emergence of any amicable solution.

On 1 November 1954, Algeria was rocked by a series of thirty terrorist attacks. This was the first action by the National Liberation Front (FLN). The FLN and its armed wing, the National Liberation Army (ALN), became increasingly radical, using guerrilla methods and terrorism to achieve their ends.

From 1956 onwards, the government of Guy Mollet in France, which had originally advocated a policy of negotiation, stepped up its military action in Algeria, sending a contingent of more than 400 000 conscript soldiers. France was militarily the stronger party, but it remained unable to restore order. Support for the FLN among the Algerian population continued to grow.

Despite France's attempts to present the Algerian question as a domestic policy problem, the conflict took on an increasingly international dimension. Relations with Arab states became more and more tense, and the diplomatic offensives mounted by African and Asian countries forced the French Government to justify its Algerian policy to the United Nations General Assembly.

In France, the government was in a state of paralysis. Military spending widened the budget deficit, and the country was facing worsening financial difficulties. The Fourth Republic's inability to restore order in Algeria ultimately brought about the collapse of the regime. Rioting in Algiers by supporters of French Algeria on 13 May 1958 led to the return to power of General de Gaulle. He was seen as the only man capable of avoiding civil war and restoring national unity.

But after the FLN formed the Provisional Government of the Algerian Republic (GPRA) on 19 September 1958, General de Gaulle began to realise that nothing would be possible without negotiating with the nationalist movement. On 16 September 1959, de Gaulle took a first major step when he recognised the Algerians' right to self-determination. In a decisive address, de Gaulle offered the Algerian people a choice between three possible solutions: secession, *francisation* (meaning integration or assimilation) or association. The General clearly hoped that the Algerians would not choose full independence but rather the option of remaining associated with France, the latter retaining its prerogatives over the Algerian economy, education system, defence and foreign affairs.

On 8 January 1961, 75 % of the French electorate voted in favour of the self-determination of the Algerian people in a referendum. Public opinion, which had initially favoured war, now chose the path of peace. Two months later, the government announced the opening of negotiations with the GPRA. Speaking at a press conference on 11 April 1961, General de Gaulle justified France's withdrawal from Algeria for economic reasons.

But those who had fought for French Algeria and had engineered de Gaulle's return to power

felt betrayed. Their anger led to political crises, uprisings and power grabs. Back in January 1960, militants had staged a week of riots, known as the 'week of barricades'. Then in April 1961, four generals (Challe, Salan, Zeller and Jouhaud) tried to repeat the coup of 13 May 1958, but this time against de Gaulle. The Algiers putsch failed when the conscript soldiers and the general public refused to follow the generals' call.

Supporters of French Algeria went on to create the Secret Army Organisation (OAS), a civil-military terrorist movement that was formed from members of Algeria's European population and members of the army to fight against Algerian independence. From 1961 to 1963, the OAS carried out a series of attacks in France and Algeria.

But they did not manage to prevent the signing of the Évian Accords on 18 March 1962 by the French Government and representatives of the FLN. These agreements granted sovereignty to Algeria and the French Sahara. France agreed to withdraw its troops after three years and secured trade cooperation with Algeria, thereby protecting its economic interests, particularly with regard to the area's oil reserves.

Two referendums confirmed these decisions. On 8 April 1962, more than 90 % of the French electorate voted in favour of the Évian Accords. On 1 July 1962, 99.7 % of Algerians voted in favour of their country's independence.

Algeria's independence was solemnly proclaimed on 3 July 1962, and Ahmed Ben Bella became the first president of the new republic.

Over the summer of 1962, hundreds of thousands of *pieds-noirs*, people of European origin living in Algeria, left the country and returned to France.