

“The Battle of Algiers” – blueprint for revolution/ counterrevolution?

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Gillo Pontecorvo's *The Battle of Algiers* dramatises a well known episode during the Algerian War of Independence (1954–1962). It began as the National Liberation Front (FLN) made a calculated decision to move the existing conflict into the capital. By making Algiers a central battlefield and deliberately striking against civilians, the rebels could count on media coverage as well as French reprisals that would in turn gain them popular support. Their move was effective: In January 1957, after a string of bombing attacks on cafés and public places, the army was called in to deal with the „emergency situation“. General Jacques Massu and the 6,000 men of his 10th Paratrooper division responded with indiscriminate violence, torture and repression. This event was called only afterwards “Battle of Algiers” – it lasted until September 1957, when the last FLN-activists were either killed or arrested. Though the French won it, they proved to lose the war, granting independence to Algeria in 1962 (Horne 1977: 183–202).

Pontecorvo's film would probably never been made, had the FLN not displayed an interest in telling its story. Saadi Yacef, who had commanded the bomb-network during the last months of The Battle of Algiers and had come to hold the post of government-minister, proved critical. Not only did he publish a memoir, but he also founded the first production and distribution company to make a movie about the struggle. He enlisted Pontecorvo and script writer Franco Solinas and with a budget of US\$ 800000, half from private sources and half from the Algerian government, The Battle of Algiers was then produced on location during five months in 1965. The film was an outstanding success: it won the grand prize at the Venice Film Festival, and survives as one of the most important movies in cinema history (Mellen 1973: 16–23). This contribution explores not only the film's extraordinary impact on left wing revolutionary groups since the late 1960s as a model for revolution, but also the usage of *The Battle of Algiers* as a training device for anti-guerrilla warfare by different militaries. In regard to sources, this article draws almost exclusively focuses from Western publications.

A model for revolution?

Because of Pontecorvo's goal of realistic representation ("dictatorship of the truth") through a distinct grainy newsreel-like cinematography, use of real locations and pedantic observance of both factual information The Battle of Algiers still resonates across the years as an authentic and unique insight into the Algerian conflict. Part of this intimate knowledge came from personal experience: Since Pontecorvo was a leading member of the antifascist resistance in Northern Italy during the Second World War, he was familiar with the inner workings and tactics of an underground movement: „The methods of concealment of an underground movement in Rome, as in Paris, as in Algiers, are very similar, so I remembered many things that we ourselves had done when we were an armed underground movement" (Srivastava 2005). As Turin erupted in insurrection in 1945, Pontecorvo took command of the „Eugenio Curiel assault brigade": "He was intensely involved in propaganda for the insurrection: writing slogans and painting placards [...]. He once hijacked a fruit seller's truck with a loudspeaker, put a tape of anti fascist speeches inside it, and left it with the tape playing in Turin's main square, under the Germans' noses. Again, it is hard not to imagine that this was the origin of the scene in The Battle of Algiers when a young boy starts making pro-FLN statements from a PA set

up by French soldiers.” (Behan 2008). Furthermore the movie is based on extensive *recherché*: Before starting shooting Pontecorvo and Solinas spent eight months researching all aspects of The Battle of Algiers, meeting representatives of the FLN in Rome, Paris and Algiers, but also taped hours of interviews with French commanders and veterans. For days, former FLN-activist Sala Bazi toured the filmmakers around the Casbah, and told them how his organization made explosives and put them to use. Ultimately, the casting of Saadi Yacef as the rebel leader – the same position he filled out during the real Battle of Algiers – added much plausibility: “I played that part for real. [...] I told myself (that by being in the film) I would be able to guide Pontecorvo, warn him when something didn’t ring true. All the events in the film, we shot them in the exact spot where it happened “ (Interview by Liza Bear 2004).

As final product of this process *The Battle of Algiers* reveals much of the tactics inherent in asymmetric war – such as random shootings, bombings of public places and even a „suicide“-like mission – but also explores the rationality and effectiveness of “asymmetric” terrorism. The adaptation of a „cell“-like organisational structure is explained in detail as well as the propagandistic aspect of pamphlets and communiqués. „Perhaps no other film in the history of the art has shown so sympathetically and so minutely the delicate workings of a revolutionary organisation“ (Mellen 1973: 68). Thus, from the beginning it was argued that the film could be adapted as a blueprint for revolutionary action. For instance, Jimmy Breslin declared on TV in 1968 that *The Battle of Algiers* is a „training film for urban guerrillas“. Pontecorvo did not challenge such assessments: „The film champions everyone who is deprived of his rights, and encourages him to fight for them. But it is an analogy for many situations: Vietnam for example“ (Egbert 1969). Indeed, *The Battle of Algiers* had such a “stirring” effects upon its audiences. At the New York Film Festival in 1967, a *Newsweek* commentator noticed an aspect that troubled him: “Many young Negroes cheered or laughed knowingly at each terrorist attack on the French, as if *The Battle of Algiers* were a textbook and prophecy of urban guerrilla warfare to come” (Hoberman 2004). Within the radical Afro-American community, there was a heated discussion, if and how the film could be used in the major black ghettos. “Are The Revolutionary Techniques Employed in *The Battle of Algiers* Applicable to Harlem?”, asked an essay by Francee Covington in 1970. She reached negative conclusion, arguing that „importing“ revolutionary techniques may prove

disastrous results, since popular support for a revolution was lacking even within the Black community (Covington 1970).

Many other revolutionary forces had a different take: Both the Black Panthers and the IRA are said to have screened *The Battle of Algiers* for its members and according to Bruce Hoffman the film is the „favourite“ of Velupillai Prabhakaran, leader of the Tamil Tigers (Hoffman 2002). It is however difficult to determine if there was any direct nexus between the viewing *The Battle of Algiers* and the evolution of insurrectionary strategy/tactics. Certain is that the film's inspirational force roused passions, made people identify with the cause of anti-colonialism and international struggles, which were in full swing at that time. Time observed that the leftwing radicals of the early 1970s looked up to the depicted Algerian rebels as role models for their own fight: „Young people have plenty of examples of glamorous, if not always successful revolutionaries [...] Cops in San Francisco and New York both say that the movie *The Battle of Algiers* influenced much of the bombing surge. It centres on the moral dilemma of killing innocent people in the cause of revolution“ (Time 1970). During the „Days of Rage“, a violent 1969 demonstration in Chicago's fashionable Gold Coast district, the „Weatherpeople“ imitated the terrifying war whoops of the Algerian women. „We shrieked and screamed as we ran, ululating in imitation of the fighters of *The Battle of Algiers*,“ Bill Ayers tells us, „I saw us become what I thought was a real battalion in a guerrilla army, and it felt for the moment like more than theatre, more than metaphor“ (Ayers 2003, 170). A few months later, Weather Underground leader Mark Rudd would urge his comrades to wage their own *Battle of Algiers* against military installations and police departments in the US (Time 1970).

Of course, young Western European spectators were also receptive: An admirer and observing student was Andreas Baader, leader of the Red Army Fraction, Western Germany's most prominent urban guerrilla group, who regarded *The Battle of Algiers* as his favourite movie. Biographers Klaus Stern and Jörg Herrmann noted remarkable analogies between the movies and Baader's path. They even claim that Baader orchestrated the „Dreierschlag“ of 1970 – three bank robberies in West-Berlin during only 10 minutes – after the model of guerrilla action as depicted in *The Battle of Algiers* (Stern and Herrmann 2007: 104, 105). Only three years before, when the Student revolt was in full swing, Baader had planned to make a „socialist“ movie about the events in West-Berlin – closely modelled on *The*

Battle of Algiers. He is said to have handed director Peter Fleischmann a script, which is now lost (Stern and Herrmann: 90).

And finally, in an interview for the documentary “Terrors advocate” (2007), Yacef Saadi, recalled how he watched the movie in the company of Carlos Ramirez Sanchez, also known as the “Jackal”: After the attack on the OPEC-conference in Vienna (1975), this “international terrorist” and his group had taken a pause in Algiers and were comforted by the government: “Carlos had already seen *The Battle of Algiers*. They asked to see me. I went there, we saw the film again and we even played soccer. [...] We tried to have fun like that.” (Schroeder, 2007). Far from suggesting any direct connection between Middle Eastern terrorism and “postcolonial” Algeria this anecdote illustrates the film’s resonance with all kinds of resistance forces.

Since then *The Battle of Algiers* and the memory of the French-Algerian War as a revolutionary call to arms slowly faded. Pontecorvo himself had remained “silent” after his last movie *Ogro* (1979): “Because (our) certainties have failed. And to make an epic film you can be wrong about the idea behind the film, but you must believe it strongly. Then maybe you will communicate. Now, everyone is uncertain” (Glass 1998). Much of the “grand narratives” Pontecorvo was referring to may indeed have been lost since, but recently the War on Terror and the occupation of Iraq sparked a new wave of political films like *The Road to Guantanamo* (2006), *Redacted* (2007) or *Battle for Haditha* (2007) – all of which were referring aesthetically to the “dictatorship of the truth” and reflected contemporary struggles. And before his death in 2006 Pontecorvo witnessed renewed recognition and interest in his work. Against the background of mounting political and social discontent time is “ripe” again for a new *Battle of Algiers*.

A model for Counterrevolution and Counterinsurgency?

A surprising after-effect of *The Battle of Algiers* is that it not only inspired revolution, but also counterrevolution. In some paradox way, the movie can be read as an ode to the Para, which projects all those familiar clichés of military precision, virility, stealth and omnipotence. But also the film’s insight and documentary quality has been crucial in attracting the attentions of right wing dictatorships and many different militaries across the world. From their perspective, the movie, with its attention to the mindset of the French military, can function as a guide in defeating revolution and insurgency. This „expertise“ is articulated through Lt. Colonel Mathieu,

described by one reviewer as „the very model of the modern counterinsurgency warrior“ – handsome, supremely confident, steely and by far the most developed character in the film. Through him the viewer becomes familiar with the tactical dilemmas of the paratroopers and their counterstrategy: They have to fight an enemy, who not only disregards the „rules of war“, but moves unrecognisably within a densely populated urban area. The FLN is protected by its clandestine structure in different „cells“ of only three activists with the least possible contact one below the other. Thus according to the Colonel, the challenge is to „know“ an enemy, who does not know even „himself“ – which means collecting any kind of relevant information – names, addresses and hideouts: „For this we need information. The method interrogation. [...] We need to have the Casbah at our disposal. We must shift through it [...] and interrogate everyone.“ In a very graphic way, Mathieu compares the FLN to a tapeworm, who can only be killed, if it loses its head (Solinas 1973: 117).

Quotes such as these form together an effectively compressed analysis of the thinking behind the French counterinsurgency approach. Mathieu is in fact a „composite“ character combining several key officers, one of them Colonel Yves Godard, who served as Chief of Staff during the battle. Like his alter ego in the film, Godard emphasized the overall necessity of intelligence. For him a bomb layer was only an „arm“ that could be replaced, so it was much more important to identify the „brain“ behind the attacks. Without a „brain“ there would be no more terrorism (Hoffman 2001: 81). That meant of course subjecting the Muslim population of Algiers to an indiscriminate and complete „screening“ process in order to get the needed intelligence. In the process of „fishing“ through the cordoned off casbah, the French arrested according to some estimates between 30 and 40 percent of the male population; many of them were „interrogated“ by special teams and subjected to gruesome torture. When the battle was concluded, police commissioner Paul Teitgen, who had personally signed warrants for 24,000 detainees, reported 3.024 persons „missing“. Many of the „disappeared“ had been thrown out of helicopters into the sea or were shot in secret by an execution squad outside Algiers (Horne 1977: 201). As the film demonstrates, the blank „organigramme“ was filled little by little with information coming directly out of the torture centres, symbolizing the dismantling of the FLN network through a long and painful process. The cornering of the last remaining leader Ali La Pointe brings The Battle of Algiers to its conclusion. Unwilling to surrender with three companions,

their hideout is blown apart. A General present at the scene comments: „And so the tapeworm no longer has a head“ (Solinas 1973: 153).

Although the French eventually lost the Algerian War, *The Battle of Algiers* was considered a victory. Thus their accumulated „expertise“ was in demand and France established several military missions to war academies and training centres both in the US and a number of Latin American countries. For instance, the teachings and instructions of Algerian War veterans such as Colonel Paul Aussaresses, who had been in charge of secret torture teams in Algiers, fell on fertile ground within the Argentinean military. From 1975 on, the Junta was involved in „crusade“-like struggles against „subversives“ and, in this “Process of National Reorganisation”, many of the „methods“ which had been used by the French in Algeria were applied. That meant for example making torture victims „disappear“ by dumping them from „death flights“ into rivers and the ocean. As General Reynaldo Bigone told researcher Marie-Monique Robin, he and his comrades had learned „everything“ from the French: “The squaring of territory, the importance of intelligence in this kind of war, interrogation methods. Our model was *The Battle of Algiers*“ (Robin 2005: 50).

The film was itself integrated into these teachings as a visual aid: In 1967 – after exiled French Colonel Jean Gardes, a veteran of the battle and member of the rightwing Secret Army Organisation (OAS) delivered a series of counterinsurgency-lectures at the School of Naval Mechanics (ESMA) in Buenos Aires – *The Battle of Algiers* was screened for the cadets. One of them recalled: „They showed us that film to prepare us for a kind of war very different from the regular war we had entered the Navy School for. They were preparing us for police missions against the civilian population, who became our new enemy“ (Verbitsky 2005). The movie was also used during courses for Latin American police officers at the International Policy Academy (IPA) in Washington. One scene was picked out in particular: therein French policemen and hardcore elements of the settler population conspire to counter-terrorize the Muslim population by putting a bomb in front of a block of flats in the Casbah, which is promptly destroyed with loss of innocent lives. In reference to clandestine police tactics used by some Latin American dictatorships, A. J. Langguth for example has pointed out, that *The Battle of Algiers* was in fact used as a blueprint for police-terror (Langguth 1978: 120). Martha Huggins reached the same conclusion: „Interestingly [...] *The Battle of Algiers* was banned from movie houses in

Brazil during most of the military period for fear that Brazilian victims of security force violence might recognise that the French techniques of search, arrest, and torture depicted in the film were those used by Brazilian security forces“ (Huggins 1998: 135).

It was the Iraqi insurgency that aroused a renewed interest: One film critic even claimed, that „Operation Iraqi Freedom, which officially began March 20, 2003, started at the movies“. This referred to the special screening of *The Battle of Algiers* by the Pentagon's Office for Direction for Special Operations and Low Intensity Conflicts on August 27, 2003 (Hornaday 2006). As New York Times writer Michael Kaufman noted, the Pentagon audience – a civilian led group with „responsibility for thinking aggressively and creatively“ on issues of guerrilla war – were „urged to consider and discuss the implicit issues at the core of the film: The problematic but alluring efficacy of brutal and repressive means in fighting clandestine terrorists in places like Algeria and Iraq“ (Kaufman 2003). In a 2004 interview, Pontecorvo said he had found the Pentagon's interest in his film „a little strange“. The most *The Battle of Algiers* could do, he said, is „teach how to make cinema, not war“ (Povoledo 2004). From Pontecorvo's point of view the Americans screened his film not because “they thought the details were identical to Iraq, but because the overall atmosphere is very similar.” But he added that “establishment figures will never like this film, because it shows that when people unite they are strong.” (Behan 2004). Saadi Yacef was equally critical: “Algeria was a settler colony. Iraq is a modern colonial occupation; geographically, economically and sociologically it's unlike the Algerian situation. *The Battle of Algiers* should be able to teach people some lessons, but the Americans are bad students, like the French were, and they are making things worse“ (Harrison 2007: 411).

Conclusion

Utilising film as a showcase in counterinsurgency was a poor choice in the first place: What it did not portray as prominently as torture was how non-violent means, like the recruitment of informers, worked much more effective than simply tormenting people indiscriminately. The French even operated a group of FLN-turncoats, who infiltrated the casbah and reported on the whereabouts of their former comrades. Their information proved critical for the arrests of almost the entire FLN leadership in Algiers (Alexander 2002: 237–242). „The French had gained accurate intelligence

through public co operation and informant, not torture“, notes Darius Rejali and criticises the *The Battle of Algiers* strongly for promoting the „myth of professional torture“ (Rejali 2007: 481) since the FLN in the movie is defeated solely because „torture worked“ (Rejali 2007: 546). The history of the Algerian war tells a far different story on this alleged effectiveness of torture: The violence and repression merely antagonised the Muslim population, harmed France's international reputation as well as the support for the war in the mainland. Further it happened to be the best „recruiting agent“ for the rebel movement. In the end, torture was not an efficient mean against terrorism, but proved counterproductive. It is both ironic and deeply troubling that a movie, which is so committed to reveal the horrors of torture, was indeed used as a blueprint for further violence.

But when insurgent groups looked up to the movie as model closely to follow, they also committed a mistake: Western Germany was not Algeria, nor were the black Ghettos of the US. „Thus the film has been misunderstood, particularly by the Black Panthers who have used it as a manual for guerrilla warfare, because it has not recognised that the terrorist tactics carried out by Ali La Pointe and the others were the means not the victory but to temporary defeat“ (Mellen 1973: 64). The original outcome of *The Battle of Algiers* was a heavy blow on the guerrilla, not only in manpower but also in matters of prestige: “The FLN's own command structures were damaged, and its principal political leaders went into exile in the wake of the battle; this no doubt made it easier for them in important respects to pursue subsequent diplomatic and political initiatives, but it had not been their plan, and it deepened the internal divisions that were to resurface violently after independence. In many respects, the ‘battle’ was a disaster” (Harrison 2007: 398). Employing terrorism had failed; it did not spark any popular insurrection but left the isolated network to be crushed. It was a combination of political and military failures, a sceptical French home front and an extremist, uncompromising stance of the settler population and continuing support for the guerrillas from outside that made „L'Algérie française“ a lost cause. The movie tends to oversimplify this outcome. Depicting the mass demonstrations of 1960, when protesters almost overran the European quarter, the voiceover in the coda tells: „Two more years of struggle lay ahead. And on the 2nd of July 1962, with the advent of independence, the Algerian nation was born“ (Harrison 2007: 401). Constructing this casualty between *The Battle of Algiers*, which was in fact only a minor episode, and Algerian independence is misleading in many

ways: It leaves out the long and desperate guerrilla war in the mountains, as well as the long and difficult path to the settlement. Thus *The Battle of Algiers* should not be seen as documentary „truth“ in literary sense but – in Pontecorvo’s words – as „a hymn in homage to the people who must struggle for their independence, not only in Algeria but everywhere in the third world.“ (Mellen 1973: 24).

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