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Algeria

# The other 8 May, 1945: a mass colonial massacre in Algeria

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**While VE (Victory in Europe) is celebrated on 8 May, a huge massacre began on that day in 1945 in Algeria. Fabrice Riceputi, historian and author of several books, looks back at the events which occurred 81 years ago. [1]**

In 1942, the Anglo-American landings in North Africa reignited nationalism in Algeria. As early as 1944, a mass movement unified all its factions: the AML (Friends of the Manifesto and of Liberty, a reference to the Manifesto of the Algerian people demanding independence).

But the European minority refused any challenge to the colonial order. The authorities feared revolts and prepared for them. On 25 April, 1945, the deportation to Brazzaville of Messali Hadj, leader of the main militant force, the Algerian People's Party (PPA), "set the stage for the fire" according to the historian and FLN (National Liberation Front) member Mohamed Harbi.

On 1 May, 1945, the PPA (Party of the Algerian People) and the AML (Military Liberation Army) organized separate marches throughout Algeria, distinct from those of the PCF (French Communist Party) and the CGT (General Confederation of Labour), with the slogans "Free Messali" and "Independent Algeria." The Algerian flag, strictly forbidden, was displayed for the first time. In Algiers and Oran, the police opened fire and killed demonstrators. Numerous AML and PPA activists were arrested.

The celebrations on 8 May were the next opportunity for nationalists to make their voices heard. They took place in all Algerian cities without major violence, except in the North Constantine region.

Two large areas near Constantine were affected, one around Sétif to the west and the other Guelma to the east. The events, participants, and timelines are different, but the extreme brutality of the repression is the same.

As during the conquest of the country after 1830, and during all subsequent Algerian revolts, France practiced "pacification" through terror, based on the principle of the collective responsibility of the "natives."

## In Sétif

In Sétif, the "capital" of Algerian nationalism, the "muslim" procession had been carefully prepared by the AML and the PPA: it followed the parade of European women, with the strict instruction that it be peaceful. Searches were carried out to ensure compliance. The slogans were the same as on 1 May and the Algerian flag had to be waved.

The procession set off from the mosque at 8:30 am in an impressive order: 200 Muslim scouts at the head, followed by a wreath and Allied flags for laying at the war memorial, then 6,000 to 7,000 people. The Algerian flag was waved by a young man. At the entrance to the European district, the procession was stopped at 9:15 am by the police who demanded the removal of the banners and the flag.

A 26-year-old man, Bouzid Saâl, seized the fallen flag and was shot dead by Commissioner Olivieri. Gunfire from police officers, as well as from balconies in the European district, caused panic and killed about twenty Algerians. The demonstrators retreated towards the market, where many people from the countryside had gathered.

This sparked an explosion of anger and accumulated hatred against European settlers, 21 of whom were killed. In the countryside, a full-blown insurrection then broke out, spreading as far as Petite Kabylie and particularly Kherrata: roadblocks, sabotage, attacks on the farms of French settlers, and the murder of some European women.

The number of insurgents is estimated at 40,000. In total, the insurrection, which lasted until May 12, resulted in 90 European deaths in the Sétif region.

## The repression

There was a full military operation against mostly unarmed civilians, conducted almost exclusively by the army, under the command of General Duval and on the orders of De Gaulle. On 11 May, the head of government sent a laconic telegram: "Please take all necessary measures to repress all anti-French activities by a minority of agitators." A communiqué from the Governor General, dated 10 May stated from Algiers that "disturbing elements, inspired by Hitler, launched an armed attack in Sétif against the population celebrating the capitulation of Nazi Germany. The police, aided by the army, are maintaining order, and the authorities are taking all necessary steps to ensure security and suppress any attempts at disorder."

2,000 soldiers "pacified" the region through terror. Armoured cars mowed indiscriminately. The air force, called in from Morocco and Tunisia, strafed and bombed. Forty-one tons of bombs were dropped on the rebel villages. The guns of the cruiser Duguay-Trouin fired eleven times at the coast. The artillery fired 858 shells. Corpses were left on the roads. In Kherrata, hundreds of bodies were thrown into gorges. European militias joined in the killings in several areas of the region until 24 May.

## In Guelma

In Guelma, the AML and PPA were very active. On 8 May, their march began at 5:00 pm, unaware of what was happening in Sétif. Approximately 1,500 Algerians marched, mostly youth from the city and countryside who had come to the souk, with the same organization as in Sétif. Five hundred meters from the war memorial where it was supposed to end, the procession was stopped by Sub-Prefect Achiary, a former Vichy police commissioner and torturer, now a Gaullist. Following a scuffle, police gunfire caused one death. The demonstration ended at 6:00 pm. Here, there was no deadly riot like in Sétif, and no European casualties. However, the repression was extremely violent.

A curfew was imposed, and roundups began in the city. These operations were carried out in Guelma by a European militia trained and armed by Achiary, with the police and gendarmerie as auxiliaries. There were nearly 800 Europeans, representing all political opinions and professions. A so-called "Military Tribunal" carried out mass executions. From 9 May to 26 June, 13% of the city's male population was killed. Eighty percent of these deaths were based on their political affiliation: the Muslim Scouts, the AML (Association of Muslim Students), or the CGT (General Confederation of Labour). To prevent any investigation, mass graves were dug, and 600 bodies burned in the lime kilns of a settler in Heliopolis.

Around Guelma, from May 9 onwards, air raids provoked an insurrection in the countryside that lasted until 11 May. The army then proceeded with what it called the "cleansing" of the mountains where tribes had taken refuge, as in the Sétif region.

# How many Algerians died?

Only the number of “European” deaths is known with certainty: 102. As in all colonial massacres, the number of “native” victims remains impossible to establish precisely. Concealing or destroying the bodies of the colonized was easy. Furthermore, the tribes that had been bombed did not report their dead to the French authorities. The latter admitted to 1,165 “Muslim” deaths. The range accepted by many historians is between 15,000 and 30,000 deaths.

In France, the colonial dimension of the events is, of course, denied. An insurrectionary “plot” of “Hitlerist” persuasion was invented by the government led by De Gaulle to justify the repression, including in the French Communist Party press.

Spectacular ceremonies of collective humiliation were then organized. The assembled tribes had to publicly atone for their guilt, ask for forgiveness, and swear loyalty to France.

## A point of no return

Historian Mohamed Harbi wrote that “the Algerian War began in Sétif.” Many Algerians understood then that their liberation from colonialism could only be achieved through armed struggle. General Duval, who commanded the repression, told the French government: “I have given you peace for ten years.” It was only nine years later that the FLN began the Algerian War of Independence.

Translated by [Anti\\*Capitalist Resistance](#) from [l'Anticapitaliste](#).

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[1] Photo: Setif 8 May 1945.