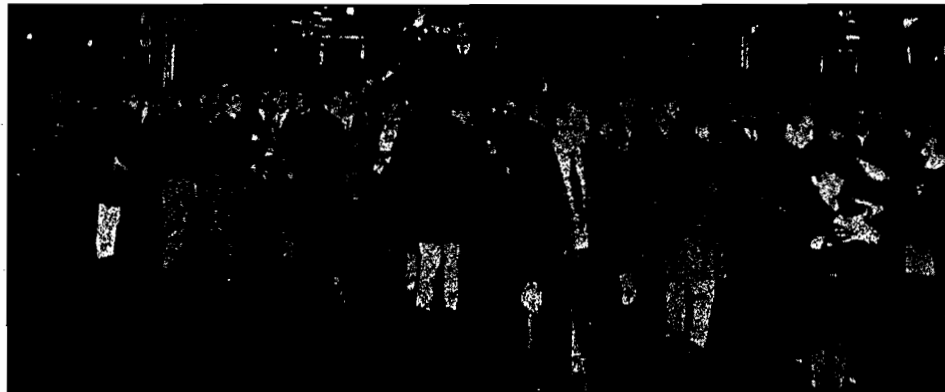


THE WAR fought between Algerian nationalists and French settlers between 1954 and 1962 was one of startling brutality. Both sides resorted to torture, reprisal killing and terrorism and both sides used such tactics against supposed traitors in their own camp as well as each other. The legacy of mistrust and hatred bred by the war haunts Algeria today and has exacerbated the crisis brought about by the rise of Islamic fundamentalism. However, memories of the war seem less painful, and less politically significant, on the other side of the Mediterranean. This apparent forgetfulness seems all the more surprising when French reactions to the Algerian war are compared with American reactions to the Vietnam war: America is still haunted by the Vietnam syndrome, while many French children grow up never having heard of the Algerian war. The 1988 presidential elections that were held in America and France showed the contrast. The American campaign reflected the continuing importance of Vietnam: George Bush even pledged to "heal the scars of Vietnam" in his inaugural address. In France, on the other hand, no reference was made to Algeria, although two of the candidates (Chirac and Le Pen) had fought there and a third (Mitterrand) had been intimately connected with the war as Minister of the Interior.

The relative lack of attention given to Algeria certainly does not reflect any lack of suffering among the French people (suffering among the Algerians was worse, but that is another subject). Casualties among French troops in Algeria were slightly higher, as a proportion of total population, than American casualties in Vietnam. But this shows only a small part of the war's effects. Algeria was inhabited by a million people of European origin, or *pieds-noirs*. Most *pieds-noirs* had been born in Algeria and as late as Christmas 1961 most assumed that they would stay. The announcement of imminent French withdrawal and the savage last-minute fighting, which soured relations irretrievably with the Algerian nationalists, changed this. Between April and September 1962, 865,000 people sold off their possessions cheap, visited family graves for the last time and boarded boats heading for a country that many of them had never seen. When they arrived in Marseille most *pieds-noirs* had nothing to show for generations of life in North Africa but a couple of suitcases and bitter memories.

Withdrawal was made more painful by fighting among the French. A few Frenchmen, such as Francis Jeansen, joined the Algerian nationalist FLN. Many more *pieds-noirs*, soldiers and right wingers on the mainland sought to resist French withdrawal. They did this first by rebellion (notably the general's putsch of April 1961) and then by terrorist activity in the Organisation de l'Armée Secrète. The OAS moved its operations from Algeria to mainland France and made such determined attempts to assassinate de Gaulle, who was blamed for the fate of *Algérie Française*, that the general was obliged to spend the last decade of his life with an entourage of bodyguards and doctors carrying flasks of blood in case a transfusion should be necessary.

*Pieds-noirs* and OAS veterans remained bitter and continued to express their bitterness, especially during the lifetime of de Gaulle. But they were a comparatively small group: when Tixier-



At least two Algerians were killed and hundreds injured during this 1961 Paris demonstration. Right, Ben Bella's victorious troops enter Algiers in 1962

## Taming of the jackals

The legacy of the Algerian war in France has left surprisingly little bitterness, Richard Vinet says

Vignancour ran for the Presidency on an *Algérie Française* ticket in 1965 he obtained only 5 per cent of the vote. Among the wider public, memories, or at least the expression of memories, faded remarkably fast: a book on images of the Algerian war in French cinema was entitled *A History of Forgetfulness*.

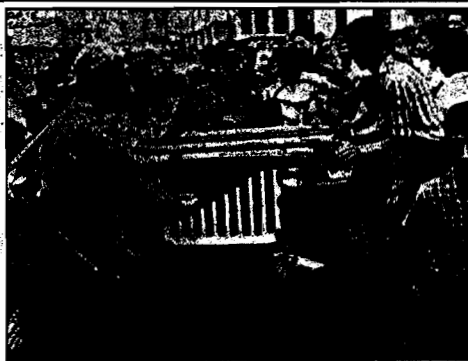
The reasons why Algeria is not remembered in France as Vietnam is in America are rooted in events that occurred after both these wars. The Vietnam syndrome was so potent because defeat in war blended in with Watergate and the oil price rise of the early 1970s to induce a sense of decline and corruption. The Algerian war, by contrast, was followed by a period of exceptional optimism. Politics were more stable than at any time since the 1870s, the economy felt the full effects of the unprecedented growth that had begun in the previous decade, and de Gaulle's neutralist policies, and superhuman self-importance, seemed to give France a role in world affairs again.

However, public forgetfulness did not mean that Algeria was not important. In some ways the very changes that allowed forgetfulness were themselves the products of the Algerian war. Departure from Algeria was a pre-condition of Gaullist foreign policy: freed from this embarrassment he was able to present himself as the friend of the third world and an opponent of super power domination while giving the French army the resources to develop an independent nuclear bomb. Departure from Algeria was also an economic boon. The private suffering of the *pieds-noirs*, forced to take unskilled manual jobs in industry, provided public benefit: labour shortage had been the main handicap of the French economy until 1962.

Most importantly of all the Algerian war brought greater political stability to France. De Gaulle's return to power in 1958 and the constitution of the Fifth Republic, which gave greater powers to the president, were products of

the Algerian war. France had never been far off civil war during the 15 years that followed the Liberation, and for a time Algeria had seemed to bring this possibility closer than ever: ageing Sherman tanks were rolled out to protect Parliament during the general's putsch. But by 1962 two crucial threats had been overcome. The first of these was the threat of military intervention in politics: when de Gaulle dismissed the leaders of the 1961 putsch as "a bunch of pensioned off generals" he ensured that there would never be another Boulanger or Pétain or, for that matter, another de Gaulle.

The second threat overcome because of the Algerian war was that posed by the extreme right. Before 1958 there had been many unrepentant Pétainists in the broad conservative parties that provided ministers for almost every government. But, where the anti-Communism of the Fourth Republic had brought the extreme right into the mainstream, the obsessive anti-Gaullism that followed the loss of Algeria marginalised it. Anti-Gaullism separated rightwingers from their own nationalist tradition and electorate, though the electoral loss was camouflaged by the support that the new *pied-noir* electorate gave to anti-Gaullist rightwingers during the 1960s. Those who grieved over the loss of *Algérie Française* opposed France's independent nuclear bomb, and even the maintenance of historic monuments on the grounds that these were part of the "Gaullist regime". Many sought allies on the anti-Gaullist left by supporting François Mitterrand in the second round of the 1965 Presidential election — some leaders of the *Algérie Française* lobby, like Georges Sauge — supported Mitterrand right up to 1981. The situation became farcical in May 1968 when Pierre Sergeant (an ex-parachute captain, OAS chief and future leader of the National Front) returned from exile to proclaim his support for the riot-



ing Maoists and situationalists on the grounds that any enemy of de Gaulle's was a friend of his.

The politics of race and racism also changed as a result of the Algerian war. Defence of the Empire had been based on assimilationist ideas, which held that culture not skin colour defined the true Frenchmen, and even the right-wing Pétain government of 1940 had contained a black minister. French eviction from Algeria discredited assimilation in the eyes of rightwingers and encouraged them to build a new campaign around resentment at the large number of North African immigrants coming to France to escape the chaos of post-independence Algeria. Algeria also had a less obvious effect on ideas of race in France. Almost 15 per cent of the *pieds-noirs* who left Algeria were Jewish. Most of these were Sephardi Jews who had been in Algeria for centuries before the French arrival. But, having been granted French citizenship by the Crémieux decree of 1870, the Algerian Jews fought with the French against Algerian nationalism and left with the French when this fight failed. The influx from Algeria, and other parts of the North African Empire, changed the French Jewish community for ever. From now on French Jewry, which had been dominated by Ashkenazi Jews since the late 19th century, was predominantly Sephardi. The new arrivals were more conservative (both culturally and politically) than the established Jews; they were also more aggressively Zionist as they showed during the enthusiastic demonstrations that accompanied the six day war. Curiously the extreme right, traditionally a reservoir of anti-Semitism, associated itself with Zionist demonstrations, and even today Jean-Marie Le Pen (leader of the Front National) is pro-Israeli, if not always philo-semitic. This transformation was also linked to the Algerian war: defenders of *Algérie Française* had seen Israel as an ally against Arab nationalism and

there had been rumours of links between the OAS and the Israeli Likud party.

Perhaps the most significant long-term legacy of the Algerian war for France is to be found in the *pied-noir* community. During the immediate aftermath of the war this group was strangely quiet. As a rule the *pieds-noirs* were uneducated people whose main recreations had been football or lounging on the beach, and once it was no longer possible to express support for *Algérie Française* with a gun few cared to express themselves in any other way. The children of the *pieds-noirs* were different. Emphasis was laid on education as a means of regaining the social position that had been lost with Algeria: the children of *pieds-noirs* have been notably successful in the fiendishly competitive French school system, and France's two most médiatique in-

tellektuals — Bernard-Henri Lévy and Jacques Attali — are both *pieds-noirs*.

Lévy and Attali are unusual in the intellectual galaxy of post-war France because they both show a marked distaste for the political dogmatism that has been so popular in the land of Sartre and Althusser. This refusal to think in terms of a simple left/right division is particularly characteristic of Frenchmen raised in Algeria. For the *pieds-noirs* who generally thought of themselves as men of the left (many of them were descended from exiled communards) found that their association with "colonialism" during the 1960s exiled them from their native political tradition just as they had been exiled from their native land by French withdrawal. They also found that there was sometimes a contradiction between the demands of political theory and the realities of personal loyalty. This was an attitude expressed by the most famous of all *pieds-noirs* — Albert Camus — when, asked about army brutality in Algeria, he remarked that he loved justice, but he also loved his mother.

In recent years the *pied-noir* community has become more self-conscious and has begun to re-examine the Algerian war. A wave of autobiographies was published during the 1980s, particularly by young *pieds-noirs* returning to the country that they had left as children. These books no longer seek to make claims about the rights of France to Algeria or the treason of de Gaulle, rather they are marked by a mood of reflection and a desire to understand. They are also marked by a new and refreshing recognition that the Algerians, who suffered French repression and civil war within their own community, were victims of the Algerian war as much as the *pieds-noirs*. There is some evidence that France as a whole is also ripe for a re-examination of the Algerian experience — significantly the first commercial film to deal with the war (*Mon cher Frangin*) was released in 1989. The 30th anniversary of French withdrawal from Algeria, in July 1992, may bring the new thinking about Algeria to a wider audience. If this does happen it will show that France is one of the few nations intelligent enough to learn from her own history.

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