

**Guy Mollet's Third Way:  
National Renewal and the French Civilizing Mission in Algeria**

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In the early hours of 1 November 1954, small groups of armed men carried out a series of coordinated attacks across Algeria. Many of the incidents took place in the bleak mountainous Aurès region in the southeast of the country, a region with a long established tradition of the rejection of French rule. As well as assassinations and sabotage, police outposts were targeted and tracts distributed within which a hitherto unknown group—the National Liberation Front (FLN)—called for the end of French rule and the establishment of an independent Algerian state.<sup>1</sup> Eight in total were killed.<sup>2</sup>

In French Algeria, the press and politicians were intransigent. This was a criminal act that had to be met with force. In the metropole, the reaction of the press was slower. In *Le Monde*, the violence merited just two columns on the following day; the communist daily *L'Humanité* did not devote an editorial to the subject until 8 November. The right-wing press, meanwhile, was clear that this was a foreign plot orchestrated by the Arab League.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> On the history of the FLN see Mohammed Harbi, *Le FLN, mirage et réalité* (Paris, 1980) and Gilbert Meynier, *Histoire intérieure du FLN, 1954-1962* (Paris, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> Bernard Droz and Evelyn Lever, *Histoire de la guerre d'Algérie* (Paris, 1982), 60.

<sup>3</sup> Mohammed Harbi, *La Guerre commence en Algérie* (Bruxelles, 1984), 26.

These basic facts are a reminder of the gulf between the event and the subsequent mythologization. In post-independence Algeria, 1 November became a talismanic event, the cornerstone of the country's values to which all must subscribe.<sup>4</sup> In reality, however, few understood that this was the beginning of a long war of decolonization. It was only over the course of the ensuing years, as the conflict became bloody and complicated, that 1 November assumed the status of a *journée historique*. In the beginning it was not a mass uprising, but a disaggregated phenomenon begun by a vanguard minority. When and how it started differed from region to region and even from village to village. For the first ten months, it was restricted to rural eastern Algeria. It was also overshadowed by the much greater violence in Morocco.

In recognizing the need to carefully calibrate how the conflict spread, this paper will focus on one moment, from the election of the Republican Front in January 1956 to the 6 February “day of the tomatoes” demonstration in Algiers. The aftermath of these events, with the pushing through of the special powers bill and the recall of the reservists, was when the war finally came home to metropolitan France in large-scale fashion. In what terms, therefore, did the Republican Front, a non-communist left-wing coalition government led by the Socialist Party (*Section Française de l'Internationale Ouvrière*—SFIO), justify the intensification of war in February 1956? Why, too, was victory in Algeria seen to be central to the renewal of France as a moral and political force, halting a process of decline that had haunted the political elite since defeat in 1940? In the eyes of the Republican Front this was not the last gasp of imperialist hubris. It was about creating a reformed Algeria that, in reconciling the two communities and giving them a shared sense of cultural unity, would be an example of France's civilizing mission in the world.

#### The Reformist Tradition: November 1954 to December 1955

Confronted with the FLN, Pierre Mendès France, the leading figure in the Radical Party whose government had been in power since 18 June 1954, was forthright. He might have carried out decolonization in Indochina and he might have accorded internal autonomy to Tunisia, but Algeria was different. This was an integral part of France, ruled since 1830, where one million settlers lived side-by-side with nine million Arabs and Berbers.<sup>5</sup> Mendès France's sentiment was given unequivocal backing by his Minister of the Interior, François Mitterrand, who declared on 12 November to the National Assembly: “Algeria is France. And who among you, *Mesdames, Messieurs*, would hesitate to employ every means to preserve France?”<sup>6</sup>

As Sylvie Thénault has underlined, Mitterrand's utterances reflected the political consensus within the Fourth Republic.<sup>7</sup> They were part of a fixed repertoire of ideas which defined the political horizons of a nexus of radical and socialist

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<sup>4</sup> On this see Martin Evans and John Phillips, *Algeria: Anger of the Dispossessed* (London, 2007), 1-10.

<sup>5</sup> The territory of Algeria was assimilated into France even if the population was not. In 1848 Algeria was divided into three departments, but in 1865 the population was defined as having the status of French subject rather than citizens. Citizenship was accorded to the Jewish population in 1870. On this see Sylvie Thénault, *Histoire de la guerre d'indépendance algérienne* (Paris, 2005), 20-23.

<sup>6</sup> Alistair Horne, *A Savage War of Peace* (London, 1977), 99.

<sup>7</sup> Thénault, *Guerre d'indépendance algérienne*, 60-68.

politicians over Algeria between November 1954 and May 1958; a reformist perspective that conceived of the Algerian problem as a war on two fronts: one against the FLN and the other against anti-Muslim discrimination. Significantly, this reformist tradition, stretching back to the Third Republic, had never seriously engaged with Algerians themselves, preferring to assume that greater citizenship rights was all they wanted. Equally important, it had always failed to face up to the colonial lobby and deliver even limited reforms.<sup>8</sup>

As the violence endured during the winter of 1954, Mendès France doggedly stuck to this reformist agenda, hoping to make up for past mistakes and speed through change. In January 1955 Mitterrand announced ambitious plans for greater employment and educational opportunities for Muslims in combination with a program of public works to bring roads, post offices and town hall offices to even the most remote parts of Algeria. He also proclaimed that voting rights would be accorded to Algerian women and *communes mixtes* abolished as he prepared to apply the 1947 Statute, the reform bill which until then had been blocked by settler interests.<sup>9</sup> However, such promises raised the ire of the colonial lobby led by René Mayer, the Radical deputy for Constantine in Algeria. He accused Mendès France of preparing the ground for a sell out of French North Africa, and the government was overturned by 319 votes against 273 on 6 February 1955.

One of Mendès France's final acts was to appoint Jacques Soustelle as Governor-General on 25 January. Born of Protestant working-class stock in Montpellier, he had carved out a career for himself during the 1930s as a lecturer in ethnology at the *Musée de l'Homme* in Paris, specializing in Aztec and Mayan civilizations. Politically speaking he was part of the non-communist anti-fascist left who rallied to de Gaulle in June 1940. After the Liberation, Soustelle, elected as deputy for Lyon, styled himself a left-wing Gaullist republican.

The new government, led by the radical Edgar Faure, kept Soustelle on despite intense hostility from the settler lobby, and during 1955 he became the driving force behind French policy in Algeria. Soustelle's analysis was uncompromising: new thinking that combined new military methods with a concerted attempt to win over hearts and minds was needed to defeat the FLN. In practical terms, this meant the introduction of a new military strategy based upon the establishment of the *Sections Administratives Spécialisées* (SAS) where speed and guile would be all.<sup>10</sup> Trained by the military but under the orders of the Prefect, the SAS officers' mission was to work amongst the people. Their brief was to symbolize good governance, building bridges with poor Muslims through the introduction of education and health care.<sup>11</sup> It meant, too, the continuation with the reformist program outlined by Mitterrand, now baptized

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<sup>8</sup> For example, in 1936 a bill introduced by Léon Blum, the prime minister, and Maurice Viollette, a former governor general of Algeria, offered citizenship and voting rights to 25,000 Algerians out of six million. However, even these meager reforms were sabotaged by the settler lobby within the National Assembly.

<sup>9</sup> The *communes de plein exercice* were based upon the metropolitan model of a ruling mayor and elected municipal council. Within the *communes mixtes* all Muslim representatives were appointed by the administration. These were the norm in areas that were predominantly Muslim.

<sup>10</sup> Jacques Soustelle, *Aimée et souffrante Algérie* (Paris, 1956), 73-94.

<sup>11</sup> On this see Ryme Seferdjeli, "'Fight with us, women, and we will emancipate you': France, the FLN and the struggle over women during the Algerian War of National Liberation" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of London, 2005).

“integration.” For Soustelle this was a formula rooted in practical realities that simultaneously recognized Algeria’s distinctiveness, while locating this distinctiveness within a French administrative framework.<sup>12</sup>

On the ground, “integration” aroused suspicion amongst settler and Algerian alike and did nothing to stem the worsening security situation. Faure declared a state of emergency in April and opened the first internment camps for Algerian suspects the following month.<sup>13</sup> Then, on 20 August, came the hammer blow of the Philippeville massacres, again in the Constantine department, when the FLN, frustrated by the slow progress of revolt, stirred up the local peasant population to attack settlers in thirty towns and villages across the region. The violence led to 123 deaths, including seventy-one settlers, which in turn brought a wave of counter-repression where the army and private militias killed 1,273.<sup>14</sup>

This was the moment when a phony war spilt over into an all out war. To make matters worse, on 26 September, sixty-one Algerian moderates from the second college signed a declaration rejecting integration as outmoded and denouncing blind repression. Even more worryingly for Soustelle, they argued that the majority of the population now supported the establishment of a separate state. Faced with this situation, Faure dissolved the National Assembly on 2 December and brought the general election forward by six months. His reasoning: dramatic action would do away with uncertainty and lay the ground for a decisive strategy in Algeria.

#### 2 January 1956 General Election

In Algeria, there were no elections because the context was too bloody. Back in the metropole, however, twenty-seven million citizens went to the polls on 2 January, the fourth general election since the establishment of the Fourth Republic in 1946.

Within the campaign, played out in the coldest winter since the end of the Second World War, it was the Republican Front, a coalition of the SFIO, *Union Démocratique et Socialiste de la Résistance* (UDSR), leftist Gaullists and radicals launched on 8 December and vigorously supported by the pro-Mendès France weekly *L'Express*, which took up the reformist mantle over Algeria. Opposed to the government, the Republican Front, it was stressed, was not a return to the 1936 Popular Front, even if it laid claim to the progressive tradition encapsulated in the Léon Blum government. This was a left of center alliance that rejected any alliance with the French Communist Party (PCF) on the grounds that the latter was an agent of the Soviet Union.

The first key figure in the Republican Front was Pierre Mendès France, who made a dramatic bid to take center stage in French politics. Fighting an exhausting campaign, he saw Algeria as the crucial issue. He outlined a precise calendar and program in a major speech in Marseille speech on 26 December 1956. Looking to the Tunisia solution as a blueprint, he underlined that time was of the essence. Otherwise, the conflict would bring social and economic stagnation to France:

At any price we must find a solution to the Algerian conflict before March, as otherwise the war will take on tragic proportions. The Algerian

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<sup>12</sup> Soustelle, *Aimée et souffrante Algérie*, 259-267.

<sup>13</sup> Thénault, *Une drôle de justice* (Paris, 2001), 35.

<sup>14</sup> The FLN would claim that 12,000 were killed by the French forces. On this see Benjamin Stora, *Histoire de la guerre d'Algérie* (Paris, 1993), 18.

Assembly no longer represents anything, and must be dissolved. After a number of stages—but within six months—an honest and controlled election must be held in Algeria. We can then freely discuss the future Statute of Algeria with the legitimate representatives of Algeria, so as to find a solution on Tunisian lines.<sup>15</sup>

The other major figure in the alliance Republican Front was the SFIO general secretary Guy Mollet.<sup>16</sup> With his slicked-back hair and black-rimmed glasses, Guy Mollet had an owl-like demeanor that was every inch the socialist intellectual. Resistance veteran and fervent Anglophile—as a prisoner of war in Germany he wrote a study of English grammar later published by Hachette—he prided himself on being a Marxist who was fiercely opposed to the Soviet model of socialism. There was simmering rivalry between Mollet and Mendès France, despite the outward show of electoral unity. Like Mendès France, Mollet wanted to become the dominant figure on the non-communist left. Like Mendès France, Mollet had campaigned on the Republican Front's platform of "peace in Algeria," even going as far as to describe the war in his final electoral address as "idiotic and with no way out."<sup>17</sup> But in truth this was a vague formula designed to build the broadest possible coalition of support. Yes, many interpreted it as a call for a peaceful resolution of the problem. Yet it could also be seen to contain the seeds for an intensification of the conflict, with peace meaning the re-establishment of law and order and the defeat of the FLN.

Apart from Algeria the other issues were employment, living standards and impact of the growing economic miracle. On the far left was the PCF, still the most powerful party. It commanded the support of huge swathes of the working class and since 1954 had been trying to break out of its Cold War isolationism and reform the alliances of the anti-Nazi Resistance. Thus the language over Algeria was carefully worded. Although opposed to repression and in favour of negotiations the party did not talk about independence or support for the FLN.

On the far right was the *Union de Défense des Commerçants et Artisans* (UDCA), formed in 1953 and led by the pugnacious Pierre Poujade, a stationer from the market town of Saint-Céré in the Lot in the south-west of France. Anti-Semitic, anti-communist and a fervent believer in direct action, Poujade's rabble-rousing populism drew support from those groups threatened by economic modernization—peasants, shopkeepers, and the lower middle classes. He was incensed by the liberal Parisian elite's campaign against the dire effects of alcoholism and in favor of drinking milk. For Poujade this was insulting, symbolic of the way that the old France of wine, cafés and boules was being snubbed out by the new France of consumerism, supermarkets and faceless technocrats. Equally, he railed against weak-willed politicians who were overseeing the end of the French empire.

In calling the election, the moderate prime minister Edgar Faure had hoped for a fresh mandate to strengthen his government. What he got instead was a nasty shock. The results produced a fragmented landscape: Faure's own coalition lost a hundred seats; the Communist Party won 25.8 percent of the votes; and the Poujadists won

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<sup>15</sup> Alexander Werth, *The Strange History of Pierre Mendès-France and the Great Conflict over French North Africa* (London, 1957), 253.

<sup>16</sup> On Mollet see Denis Lefebvre, *Guy Mollet* (Paris, 1992) and François Lafon, *Guy Mollet* (Paris, 2006). On the SFIO see Etienne Maquin, *Le Parti Socialiste et la Guerre d'Algérie* (Paris, 1990).

<sup>17</sup> Droz and Lever, *Guerre d'Algérie* (Paris, 1982), 87.

11.6 percent, or 51 seats—including one for a certain Jean-Marie Le Pen, at 27 the youngest deputy during the Fourth Republic. The SFIO garnered 14.9 per cent, the radicals 14.3 and the MRP 11.3.

With no clear winner, government was paralyzed. What followed were endless rounds of horse-trading during which it became gradually obvious that the only possible contender for power was the Republican Front. After three weeks, President Coty eventually entrusted the premiership to Guy Mollet, who took an ascendant position over Mendès France. The key posts, therefore, went to the SFIO, whilst Mendès France as “Minister of State without Portfolio” had to make do with a freewheeling role.

On matters colonial, Mollet had a pedigree as a liberal reformer and within his investiture speech, delivered to the National Assembly on 1 February, he promised reform and the re-establishment of good harmony between the nine million Muslims and one million settlers. Specifically he talked about the need to recognize the distinctiveness of Algeria (*la personnalité algérienne*) without in any way threatening the link with France. He also appointed the seventy-nine-year-old General Catroux as the resident-general in Algiers, a post that, in an effort to underline the central significance of the Algerian problem, now had cabinet status.

Catroux was widely regarded as a champion of dialogue. For the settlers though he became an instant hate figure. This was the man who had overseen withdrawal from Syria and Morocco. The settlers smelled a sellout, their fear reinforced by the presence of Mendès France in the government. So, when Mollet—desperate to gauge the situation on the ground—announced a crisis visit to Algiers for 6 February, the settler hardliners greeted this news with glee. This was the opportunity to impose their will on Paris.

### 6 February

Within the cafes there was a febrile atmosphere as groups huddled together and conspired. The departure of Soustelle four days earlier had been marked by riotous scenes, with 100,000 settlers shouting “Don’t Leave” and “Catroux into the Sea.”<sup>18</sup> One of the leaders had been Jo Ortiz, restaurant owner and the leading Poujadist disciple in Algiers, who was now instrumental in preparing a hot reception for Mollet.<sup>19</sup> From the moment his plane touched down Mollet received a frosty welcome. The weather was cold, and the crowds stayed away in silent protest as the official cavalcade made its way from the airport to central Algiers.

Sensitive to settler feelings, Mollet’s first port of call was the main War Monument. Suitably solemn he laid a wreath to honor those from Algeria who had given their lives for France in the two world wars. Suddenly though, acting on cue, a prepared mob broke through the police cordon to pelt the prime minister with tomatoes and clods of earth shouting, “Mollet to the stake,” “Mollet resign” and “Throw Catroux into the sea.” Surrounded on all sides, Mollet was momentarily in real physical danger. Indeed, he was only saved by volleys of tear gas and baton-wielding riot police.

Henceforth 6 February 1956 would go down in history as the “Day of the Tomatoes” and certainly Mollet himself was badly shaken. Above all it was a shock to discover that the settlers were not rich exploiters but poor whites, many of them

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<sup>18</sup> Stora, *Histoire de la guerre d’Algérie*, 20.

<sup>19</sup> Jo Ortiz, *Mon combat pour l’Algérie française* (Paris, 1998).

socialist supporters. In this frenzied atmosphere Catroux resigned as Mollet, holed up in Algiers, tried to calm the situation. He appointed Robert Lacoste, a pugnacious former resister who was deputy for the Dordogne, as Catroux's replacement and announced that he would spend a further four days in Algeria fact finding and listening to the interested parties. Mollet also underlined that there would be no negotiation with terrorists.

For Ortiz and his supporters this was a momentous victory. They had forced Mollet to yield to the street. Equally for Mollet this was a defining moment. Now vagueness had to give way to concrete proposals as Mollet endeavored to regain control of government policy.

### The French Civilizing Mission

In the ensuing weeks the ideas and arguments flowed forth to justify the Republican Front's mission in Algeria. They were made not just by Mollet but also by Marcel Champeix, socialist senator and one of the senior government members responsible for Algeria, by Max Lejeune, the armed forces minister, and of course by Lacoste in Algiers. In part they were derived from the reformist tradition. But in part too they were conditioned by the international context of 1956. Victory in Algeria was seen as crucial to France's standing in the world. Defeat of the enemy within would allow France to defeat the enemies without, the Soviet Union and pan-Arabism, thereby maintaining French geopolitical influence in the Mediterranean and defending socialist Israel. Moreover, it would be the lynchpin in a reformed empire stretching from Algiers to the Congo.

However, in investing so much energy into Algeria this was not, it was claimed, a war of colonial re-conquest. France's adversaries were not the Muslim majority. Rather they were a minority of hardliners: the FLN terrorizing the population on one side and the cabal of rich settlers blocking reform on the other. Conceived of this way, the Republican Front was engaged upon a double-edged war striking outwards against these two extremes in defense of a Franco-Muslim community in the center. Furthermore, this strategy analyzed Algeria in terms of the traditional terrain of class war. This was a struggle of rich against poor that crossed racial divides. As such, the Republican Front's mission was to bring together poor settlers and Muslims into a shared political culture through the establishment of peace, reconciliation and mutual understanding.

In talking about reconciliation, the Republican Front invoked the concept of the "third way." This concept, fashioned by the Cold War, was one way in which SFIO theoreticians had elucidated an alternative to Soviet communism and American capitalism. In Algeria, the idea came to embody the Republican Front's plan for political and economic renewal. It was the extension of welfare rights that, by inscribing equality, would end racism and give Muslims access to education and employment.

Within this third way socialism stood for personal and social liberation, thereby emphasizing how anti-colonialism was always peripheral to the SFIO worldview, easily outweighed by the belief in a universal mission. In 1925 the SFIO leader Leon Blum could talk about the empire in the following glowing terms:

We are too imbued with love of our country to disavow the expansion of French thought and civilization.... We recognize the right and even the

duty of superior races to draw unto them those who have not arrived at the same level of culture.<sup>20</sup>

This is not to say that Blum denied the existence of abuses. He did not. However, they were the abuses of the Right not the Left to be remedied through the implementation of reforms based upon humanism and socialism. The right to self-determination, therefore, was never a mantra. Each case had to be judged on its merits. It had to be balanced against the competing rights of minorities and individuals. By this measure, Mollet argued at the SFIO party conference in January 1956, Algerian nationalism had to be rejected as anti-socialist because independence would “impinge on the freedoms and rights” of the settler minority.<sup>21</sup>

Paradoxically, this denial of Algerian nationalism was an expression of the Republican Front’s own French national identity. The Republican Front leaders were imbued with a left patriotism that had reached a new fervor at the Liberation in 1944. At the SFIO National Congress in Paris in October 1944, emancipation for the colonies was equated with greater union with the renewed France based upon Resistance values: a fully democratic republic of 100 million assimilated citizens stretching right across the globe.<sup>22</sup> As the Resistance veteran and new Left activist Claude Bourdet subsequently underlined, such euphoria reflected deeply ingrained patterns of thought. The notion that the colonies would aspire to anything else but being French was unimaginable:

In order to explain this one must, I think, go back to the French Revolution. The men of 1793 wanted to establish a great egalitarian entity in which all citizens would be free and enjoy the same rights. The abolition of slavery by the National Convention gave a certain reality to the scheme. This, like other myths stemming from the Revolution, became established as an invulnerable truth. For a hundred and fifty years French schoolchildren continued to learn about the generous and civilising role played by France. And the activists and leaders of the Left were steeped in the same ideology of universalist paternalism.<sup>23</sup>

It was this worldview, therefore, that led Max Lejeune to state unequivocally in the SFIO daily *Le Populaire* on 15 March:

We want the men of Algeria to be more free, more fraternal and more equal, that is to say more French. We must guarantee their political liberties and their social emancipation.<sup>24</sup>

Consciously or unconsciously, this sense of superiority blended into a gut level patriotism that could never countenance independence. Algeria was France, part of a single Republic that stretched from Dunkirk in the north to Tamanrasset in the

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<sup>20</sup> Robert Aldrich, *A Greater France: A History of French Overseas Expansion* (London, 1996), 115.

<sup>21</sup> Guy Mollet, “Déclaration au Conseil National Extraordinaire,” Puteaux, 14-15 January 1956, 378.

<sup>22</sup> On attitudes towards the Empire at the Liberation, see Andrew Shennan, *Rethinking France: Plans for Renewal 1940-46* (Oxford, 1989).

<sup>23</sup> Hervé Hamon and Patrick Rotman, *Les Porteurs de valises* (Paris, 1979), 12.

<sup>24</sup> Max Lejeune, *Le Populaire*, 15 March 1956, 1.

southern most Sahara, whose sanctity all citizens must be ready to defend. As President Coty, conjuring up the spirit of the embattled *poilu* in a speech given at Verdun on 17 June, explained:

Down there, the nation is in danger, the nation is fighting. One's duty is simple and clear. To those not accustomed to military discipline, it means the minimum of civic discipline which forbids all acts that trouble the children of the nation that the Republic has called to arms to vanquish this terrible violence. French strength being inseparable from French generosity.<sup>25</sup>

In contrast to generous French patriotism the FLN "other" was stigmatized as a bloodthirsty minority working at the behest of Colonel Nasser in Egypt, whose expansionist desires were self-evident with the nationalization of the Suez Canal in July. The FLN was driven, Mollet told the 1956 Party Conference, by a racist and religious doctrine that all socialists must resist.<sup>26</sup> In this way Mollet saw international relations through the prism of the appeasement era. He was adamant that the settlers in Algeria and socialist Israel had to be defended against Nasser's pan-Arabism. They must not be sold out like the Spanish Republicans between 1936 and 1939 or the Czechs in 1938.

Yet behind these high ideals raw power politics were also at play. Maintaining French sovereignty, even if Franco-Muslim relations had to be reformed, was about defending spheres of influence and controlling resources, paramount since the discovery of oil in the Sahara, against rival powers, notably the USA and Britain, and the hidden hand of the USSR. For what else was pan-Arabism but a Soviet plot, an attempt to encircle the West via the Mediterranean, a point that Alexandre Parodi, the French representative to NATO, made to fellow members on 7 March:

I explained in detail the danger that the Algerian situation posed to the security of Europe.... I indicated that we did not have evidence of direct Soviet intervention, but none the less Algeria was without doubt the continuation, through Arab nationalism, of Soviet action on certain countries such as Egypt.<sup>27</sup>

In practical terms, the Republican Front's ideas were transformed into a three-pronged policy: "pacification," which meant the protection of the local population from the FLN; the quest for intelligence; and the need to win over Muslim hearts and minds.

This last strand, much stressed by the government, involved the raising of Muslim anti-FLN auxiliary units—making a French victory their victory—as well as reaching out to the local population through the provision of housing, education and welfare. It meant, too, the promise of proper and fair elections which would lay the foundation stone of Franco-Muslim reconciliation. In fact in a radio broadcast on 26 February Mollet outlined his policy where he again recognized the existence of a

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<sup>25</sup> Georges Mattéi, *La Guerre des gusses* (Paris, 1982), 1.

<sup>26</sup> Marc Sadoun, "Les socialistes entre principes, pouvoir et mémoire," in Jean-Pierre Rioux, ed., *La Guerre d'Algérie et les Français* (Paris, 1990).

<sup>27</sup> "Parodi à Pineau," 7 March 1956, T.50077, *Archives diplomatiques françaises* (ADF). Christian Pineau was the Foreign Minister in the Republican Front government.

distinctive Algerian personality but argued that this could only properly develop by strengthening the bond with France. As such his speech contained a special plea to Muslims:

I now turn to the Muslims, to all the Muslims of Algeria: in the name of the Government, I renew and clarify before them a solemn commitment: the guns will be silenced, and elections organised within the three months that follow the cessation of the fighting and of acts of violence...today you have a way to make your aspirations known and freely to choose your representatives... are there any among you, who by their refusal to put an end to the fighting, are prepared to assume before the world and before history the tragic responsibility of making the situation irreversible, for preventing your peaceful emancipation, and for destroying Franco-Muslim brotherhood? France, loyal and generous, offers you justice and equality.... I cannot believe that this appeal, which I have made with my utmost conviction, will go unheeded.<sup>28</sup>

With these arguments, Mollet carried the government and the SFIO with him in February, climaxing on 12 March when the National Assembly, including the communist deputies, voted for the special powers 455 against 76. This legislation dramatically increased the powers of repression, whilst also outlining large-scale plans for political, economic and social reforms. Then on 11 April the Republican Front recalled the reservists, finally bringing the war home to the metropole. However, in raising the level of troops to 400,000 in Algeria, their mission, it was underlined, was not to be an army of occupation. They were the expression of fraternity that would make Franco-Muslim community a reality and deliver peace.

### Consequences

Not surprisingly, this policy produced splits and tensions at all levels. Amongst the reservists, many of whom had families and jobs and did not want to go to Algeria, there was a huge wave of opposition amongst barracks across the country. On the train journeys down to the Mediterranean, many felt betrayed by the government, shouting anti-Mollet slogans and brandishing placards proclaiming “peace in Algeria.”<sup>29</sup> Within the government Mendès France resigned on 23 May because, in his opinion, change was too slow. Equality was not being implemented. Repression was winning out over reform. Anger at Lacoste’s policies, seen as “pacification first,” were voiced at the SFIO party conference in Lille from 29 June to 3 July where the final resolution on Algeria, a compromise designed to preserve unity, stressed that pacification was war on two fronts: against terrorism *and* colonial privilege.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, Lacoste’s opponents led by Daniel Mayer and André Philip also made calls for a cease-fire and an opening of negotiations.

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<sup>28</sup> Edward Behr, *The Algerian Problem* (London, 1961), 95-96.

<sup>29</sup> Jean-Charles Jauffret, “Le mouvement des rappels en 1955-1956,” in Mohammed Harbi and Benjamin Stora, eds., *La Guerre d’Algérie* (Paris, 2004).

<sup>30</sup> During 1956 there were secret contacts with the FLN. However, these contacts never assumed the status of official negotiations. They were talks about talks that were always tentative.

The most profound impact, however, was on Algerians. In the wake of 6 February and the special powers vote, the widespread conclusion was that the Republican Front had sided decisively with the settlers. Attitudes hardened, and any middle ground disappeared, a process accelerated by the repression unleashed by the special powers. In the polarized atmosphere, the balance of power tipped decisively towards the FLN, which now came to predominate over rival organizations such as the Algerian Communist Party (PCA) and Messali Hadj's *Mouvement National Algérien* (MNA).

In public, the Republican Front continued with a bellicose line throughout 1956. The hardliners, personified by Lacoste and Lejeune, won out over those who supported more a conciliatory line. This climaxed with the hijacking on 22 October 1956 of a Moroccan plane en route to Tunis carrying the FLN leaders Ahmed Ben Bella, Mohammed Boudiaf, Hocine Aït-Ahmed and Mohammed Khider. Carried out by the military with the connivance of Lejeune and without the knowledge of Mollet, this effectively destroyed a North African peace conference organized by President Habib Bourguiba of Tunisia. This was then followed by the attack on Nasser on November, the Suez crisis that led to a humiliating withdrawal after pressure from the United States, and, on 7 January 1957, the handing over of police powers in Algiers to General Massu. With instructions to break the FLN by any means necessary, this was the beginning of the "Battle of Algiers."

In January 1957, Philip, explaining his resignation from the SFIO, described the Republican Front's policies thus:

Right wing policies being carried out by men who claimed to be left-wing led to the disappearance of all public opinion in the country: the right was quiet, because its ideas were in power; the left was quiet, because its men were in power.<sup>31</sup>

It was this line of analysis that led the historian Alexander Werth to famously talk about "national molletism."<sup>32</sup> The intellectual Pierre Vidal-Naquet, a determined opponent of torture in Algeria, went even further, describing the Republican Front's policies as giving a real meaning to the term "social fascist."<sup>33</sup>

The Republican Front, the longest-lasting government of the Fourth Republic, fell on May 1957. But, with Lacoste remaining as minister-resident until April 1958, its ideas continued to define policy as successive governments, first under Maurice Bourgès-Maunoury and second under Félix Gaillard, tried to win over all sections of population through a reform program.<sup>34</sup>

In May 1958, the Algerian crisis brought down the Fourth Republic and led to the return of de Gaulle. Initially de Gaulle, feeling his way towards a policy where France would have the upper hand, kept with many of the Republican Front's assumptions. The Constantine Plan, the program of economic and social renewal for Algeria unveiled by de Gaulle on 3 October, was based on research and planning carried out by civil servants since 1956. However, on 16 September 1959, in a televised address to the nation, de Gaulle, in what is widely regarded by historians as

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<sup>31</sup> André Philip, *Le Socialisme Trahi* (Paris, 1957), 225.

<sup>32</sup> Werth, *Strange History of Pierre Mendès-France*, 269-314.

<sup>33</sup> Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *La Torture dans la République* (Paris, 1975).

<sup>34</sup> On this see Guy Mollet, *Bilan et perspectives socialistes* (Paris, 1958), 61-65.

the conflict's turning point, recognized Algeria's right to self-determination.<sup>35</sup> Thereafter, in justifying this line during 1960 and 1962 one theme became insistent above all others, namely that Algeria was blocking national renewal. Like the rest of the empire, Algeria, even a reformed Algeria, was too costly. The Republican Front's grand design could never justify the money and resources. Instead grandeur was to be found in the assertion of a resolutely hexagonal France. Unburdened by colonies, this forward looking France could marry the twentieth century, allowing French people to forge a new identity based upon consumerism, modernization and the white heat of new technology.

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<sup>35</sup> Stora, *Guerre d'Algérie*, 52.