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Marie-Monique Robin, Director. *Death Squadrons: The French School.* New York: First Run/Icarus Films: 2003. 60 Minutes color. Sale: Video/DVD, \$390. Rental: Video, \$100.

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Ever since it was reported in the media that in 2003 the Pentagon screened Gillo Pontecarvo's *The Battle of Algiers* (1966) as a training film in preparation for the war in Iraq, public and scholarly interest in the French-Algerian War and its lessons for America's "war on terror" has continued to grow. Significantly, interest in France's war in Algeria has led to the theatrical re-release of *The Battle of Algiers*—along with a new 3-DVD box set from the Criterion collection (2004) that contains a sharper, digitized version of the film, as well as relevant interviews and documentaries—and to the publication of best-selling books and memoirs such as *My Battle of Algiers* by Ted Morgan (the French Pulitzer Prize-winning author and war veteran). Within the next few months, new editions of Alistair Horne's unrivaled history of France's war in Algeria, *A Savage War of Peace*, and Henri Alleg's 1958 banned best seller *The Question* are slated for re-release with new commentaries by the authors on the relevance today of the Algerian question for France and the American military in Iraq.[1] Along with these two books, the *Summa Theologica* of counterinsurgency theory, Roger Trinquier's *Modern Warfare: A French View of Counterinsurgency*, will also soon be available in a new paperback edition.[2]

For scholars and general readers following debates in France about the legacy of the Algerian conflict and of European decolonization more generally, there have been other developments of interest, most especially those discussions relating to the French use of torture during the war in Algeria.[3] Important books and arguments have been advanced in recent years, and key French commanders such as Gen. Jacques Massu, Gen. Paul Aussaresses, and others have come forward with either apologies or justifications for their decision to resort to torture in Algeria.[4] As has been well reported and analyzed after General Aussaresses broke his silence with his tell-all memoir—*The Battle of the Casbah: Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism in Algeria, 1955-1957* (French 2001, English 2002), which detailed and justified his penchant for torture, assassination, and disappearing—he was stripped of his Legion of Honor affiliation and forbidden the customary right of wearing his uniform. Ironically, at least from a moral point of view, Aussaresses's crime was not that he had committed crimes against humanity (an actionable charge from which he is shielded by a general amnesty for military personnel issued by Charles de Gaulle) but for *talking/writing* about the deeds he committed in the name of France.

Unfortunately, the French state's response—very much in contrast to French intellectuals—has been consistent on the Algerian conflict for the past several decades and has exhibited a desire to ensure the public's selective consciousness regarding the effects of French colonialism overseas, especially in North Africa. The French state's cumulative angst over the colonial past therefore led logically first to the National Assembly's passage (February 2005) then reaffirmation (November 2005) of Law 2005-168 requiring in article 4 that educators put a positive spin on France's colonial past.[5] Notably, the French legislators first took this action almost undetected but then reaffirmed the controversial law despite the almost unanimous protest by leading French historians such as Claude Liauzu and a massive petition drive meant to reverse this strange, if not utterly surreal, turn of events in France.[6] President Chirac did in the end finally reverse this positive spin doctrine in January 2006 by a controversial executive decree.[7]

All of these important developments point to the net effect of decolonization on contemporary France—especially the loss of the French state’s ability to claim to represent universal values, most especially in the realm of human rights.[8] Yet, while decolonization did unquestionably strip France of its universalist claims (but not pretenses) in the eyes of many in France and around the world, it also had another terrible effect as well, and this is the subject of an extremely important and timely documentary film by Marie-Monique Robin, *Death Squadrons: The French School*. [9] Robin’s provocative documentary, which is a must-see and a must-teach for anyone interested in the unsettling links between the French struggle to halt, or at least delay, the process of decolonization as it applied to Algeria, and the erosion of human rights around the globe. *Death Squadrons* is a mini-genealogy of contemporary torture and an untoward history of the French state’s hand in universalizing this most hideous practice. It is, above all, the French part of the story in the genealogy of torture that sheds new light on many aspects for the contemporary period (late 1950s through the 1980s) in Latin America and beyond.

The story presented in the documentary is a critical aspect of the contemporary torture saga, which has often been presumed by American historians to trace its lineage primarily to the CIA. Without denying CIA involvement in the spread of torture, Robin’s story provides another, more nuanced picture of the story that has often been lacking in American historians’ interpretations of the CIA and narratives of the evolution of contemporary torture. In fact, as the documentary demonstrates, the French helped prepare the American intelligence officers (who worked with the CIA) as they geared for the conflict in Vietnam; therefore, the picture that emerges from the documentary offers a comparative perspective that helps understand the global dimensions of state violence.

The thesis of *Death Squadrons* is appropriately powerful and simple. Put simply, it is that the French military, having perfected counter-insurgency theory during its colonial war in Indochina and the techniques of “interrogation” in Algeria during the infamous Battle of Algiers, quickly began to export its new commodities (read: skilled consultants in torture and assassination) to other governments who were fighting mostly leftist “insurgencies”—especially to Latin America, but also to the U.S. and Israel. As the film demonstrates, this strange export business began as early as 1957, even before the torture devices could be unplugged or the blood cleaned from them in Algeria. As perhaps postmodernism’s worst nightmare—a kind of Frankenstein meets the Frankfurt School scenario à la Adorno that grounds the often too ethereal notions advanced by theorists of “empire” such as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri—France commodified these new military assets of domination and began to set up schools, in a decidedly French tradition, in “counter-insurgency.” It was in these schools that many of the worst French offenders of human rights violations in Algeria educated some of the most ruthless human rights violators in Central and South America (and, via the CIA and American intelligence officers, in Vietnam). Offering a combination of theoretical and technical education, the French curriculum in torture, assassination and counter-insurgency theory moved from one conflict zone to the next over the next two decades via a core group of military attachés assigned directly by the French ministry of defense.

Robin’s thesis thus takes even Sartre’s argument about systemization of torture, as well as my own—that torture was the logical culmination of France’s hegemonic colonial authority—even further.[10] As the film claims, therefore, not only was torture systematic and logical, but also the French state, with this new skills set in hand, was open for business and was a key player in the globalization of the torture trade. Keenly aware that such charges need proof, the documentary sets off to connect the missing dots by providing important interviews and discussions of critical historical documents. Most of the documents considered in the film were recently captured during arrests outside of France by prosecutors in Latin America, which reminds me in many ways of how Robert O. Paxton was able to crack the story of Vichy’s relationship with the Nazis by using captured German archives. As for the interviews, some key French military officers involved in the “French School” did refuse to talk on film

about the documents that establish their and the French government's connection to some of the worst regimes of the twentieth century, while others gleefully granted interviews, including the never-so-camera-shy *bête noire* of the French military, Aussaresses himself.[11]

All in all, Robin has done a rather remarkable job of holding the film's hard-nosed investigative narrative together. And, as it turns out, the French torture consultants were a ubiquitous presence indeed. Aussaresses confirms that he was sent by the French government to various Latin American hotspots and to Fort Bragg (when he was one of ten military attachés stationed at the French Embassy in Washington, D.C. with similar duty assignments) in 1961 in order to teach American military intelligence personnel how to prepare for counter-insurgency warfare.[12] Eventually, the French curriculum helped pave the way for a covert intelligence operation in Vietnam (directed by the CIA) that became known as Operation Phoenix. The American Phoenix program thus relied on assassination techniques learned from Aussaresses and company and used Trinquier's *Modern Warfare* as its theory textbook.

Aussaresses and his colleagues were sent abroad on this special mission by the French ministry of defense on the request of foreign governments, as Aussaresses states himself, because they were specialists in the interrogation of prisoners, torture, and seizure—all subject areas in which Aussaresses and a core group of his colleagues in Algeria excelled. Aussaresses's statements are confirmed by the American Gen. John Johns and Col. Carl Bernard, both Aussaresses's pupils at Fort Bragg. In addition, Aussaresses confirms that another French commander in Algeria, General Bigeard, perfected the technique known as disappearing--dropping live victims (known thereafter referred to as "Bigeard's shrimp") from planes and helicopters to sea with cement weights attached to their feet).[13]

According to the film, torture techniques and disappearing learned from the French elite forces were later applied by the military juntas that terrorized the civilian populations in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Paraguay, and Uruguay.[14] By interviewing key eyewitnesses and actors, such as Pierre Messmer, French minister of defense (1960-1969), the director is able to document the transfer of knowledge in counter-insurgency theory and techniques to the other governments. The French were therefore directly involved in the planning and execution of Operation Condor (a centralized, coordinated effort of the major juntas in South America that ruthlessly crushed leftist opposition through torture and disappearing during the 1970s). As the film points out, Operation Condor even went on to conduct assassinations and kidnappings of alleged leftist activists in the United States, France, Spain, Portugal, and Italy, all with the home governments' consent and help.

But what exactly did Aussaresses and the other French military attachés teach? According to General Johns (now an anti-torture activist), Aussaresses and his colleagues "explained torture." For example, Aussaresses taught that it was important to have one victim watch another victim being tortured and that after the torturing was over it was frequently necessary to carry out summary execution. With insights such as this, the viewer of this film is thus taken into the secret (and still state-archive-protected) shady business of French military attachés, who advised key military leaders of some of the most lethal foreign governments in the world on how to best combat left wing insurgency forces embedded within the civilian population.[15] And by conducting interviews with important figures from various South and Central American regimes, a rather unflattering depiction of the French state comes to light. Furthermore, linkages between brutal South American dictatorships are also exposed. For example, the role of the French-trained Brazilian intelligence officers who tortured and killed leftist activists in Chile during Augusto Pinochet's 1973 military coup are revealed. Much has been written about the American involvement in these coup d'états, especially Secretary of State Henry Kissinger's support of regimes that murdered thousands of civilians. What is new here is that *Death Squadrons* clearly demonstrates that Aussaresses and his French military attaché colleagues were in Brazil, Chile, and elsewhere in Central and South America during the coups and were there training the right-wing

military elite forces who would eventually terrorize civilian populations under the dictatorships of men like Pinochet. Repeatedly, as the film points out with the interviews of key participants, the worst human rights aggressors were pupils of the French.

It is possible that many of the Latin American military commanders interviewed in this film have overstated the role of the French in order to diminish their own responsibility for the slaughtering that went on during the coup and junta years. Even if they have, there are a number of questions that emerge as a result of this documentary that require further investigation. In particular, I would like to know more about what Aussaresses and his colleagues were doing in Central and South America (and other areas) for so many years. To be sure, the French have had for centuries a paternalistic attitude with regard to the people of Latin America, but the film could have provided more discussion regarding the *longue durée* of the French presence in Latin America, which was very pronounced by the nineteenth century.[16] As for the contemporary period, I would have appreciated more analysis of the motives that guided the French state when it sent these special military attachés around the globe to teach torture and counter-insurgency tactics.

It is clear from the film that the Americans and the French were in an uneasy competition for influence in Latin American politics and that teaching counter-insurgency theory (which is something that quickly went out of fashion in the American military after Vietnam but which is experiencing a revival now because of the war in Iraq) was for each a way to gain influence with the terrible regimes that emerged. Some attention is paid to this rivalry and how it fit into Cold War politics; however, as a viewer, I would like more clarification about what the French hoped to achieve in all this.

There are a number of smaller stories that emerge that will interest many historians, such as the ability of the *Organisation de l'armée secrète* (the extreme right wing paramilitary terrorist group known as the OAS that spun out of the Algerian conflict's final years) refugees from the Algerian conflict to make their way to Latin America, but ultimately I felt myself wanting fewer subplots and more coverage of what the French state could have hoped to accomplish (or did accomplish) by aiding some of the most ruthless human rights-violating regimes of the twentieth century. However, in fairness to the director, the answer to these questions may ultimately remain out of the public's hand for decades to come because of the laws regulating access to archives in France. For now, we are left with a rather strange feeling that there is much more to the life of the French military attachés who emerged from the Indochinese and Algerian conflicts than previously met the eyes. What does meet the eyes in this film is a menacing sense that the French military continued to spread and assist other governments' criminal and inhumane excesses well after they left Algeria.

After viewing this film, I am finally reminded of the superb film by Mark Robson, *The Lost Command* (1966), based on *The Centurions* by Jean Lartéguy. Styled after the real-life character of Jacques Massu, Anthony Quinn plays a cocky but desperate officer by the name of Lt. Col. Pierre Raspeguy, who has accepted his post in Algeria as a form of moral and professional redemption after the humiliating defeat at Dien Bien Phu and after being relieved of his command. Unable to find that redemption in his new posting in Algeria, Raspeguy continues to sink deeper and deeper into the abyss of inhumanity and continues to live uneasily with his violent excesses in Algeria. What seems to be different here in *Death Squadrons* is that after Indochina and then Algeria, Aussaresses and fellow travelers seemed to take delight in the fact that they had gained technical expertise in torture and assassination and were thrilled to have the chance to continue to teach their gospel of counter-insurgency theory for over two decades after the infamous Battle of Algiers. Perhaps the only sense of relief one gets after this disturbing documentary is the knowledge that the one lesson many Latin American governments learned from the mistakes the French made regarding Algeria was not to grant blanket amnesty to assassins and torturers and to hold them accountable for their violent excesses.

NOTES

[1] Alistair Horne, *A Savage War of Peace: Algeria 1954-1962* (New York: New York Review of Books Classics, forthcoming 2006); Henri Alleg, *The Question*, trans. Jonathan Calder, preface Jean-Paul Sartre, foreword Ellen Ray, introduction James D. Le Sueur, and afterword Henri Alleg (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, forthcoming 2006).

[2] Roger Trinquier, *Modern Warfare: A French View of Counterinsurgency*, foreword Eliot Cohen (New York: Praeger Security International, 2006).

[3] See Adam Shatz, "The Torture of Algiers," *The New York Review of Books*, vol. 49, no. 18 (November 21, 2002).

[4] For an overview of this debate, see James D. Le Sueur, *Uncivil War: Intellectuals and Identity Politics during the Decolonization of Algeria*, 2nd ed., preface Pierre Bourdieu (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005).

[5] See French National Assembly website for text of law [<http://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/WAspad/UnTexteDeJorf?numjo=DEFX0300218L>], accessed June 12, 2006.

[6] For the petition and other relevant documents and commentary regarding the debate about the French colonial past, see this excellent website [http://www.ldh-toulon.net/rubrique.php?id_rubrique=49], accessed June 12, 2006.

[7] See Béatrice Gurrey, "Colonisation: Chirac évite un débat au Parlement" in *Le Monde*, January 27, 2006. Also see Didier Maus, "Pour résoudre le problème posé par l'article 4 sur la colonisation, le président de la République met le Conseil constitutionnel dans l'obligation d'innover," in *Le Monde*, January 31, 2006; and Florence Beaugé, "M. Douste-Blazy à Alger alors que le traité d'amitié franco-algérien est en panne," in *Le Monde*, April 11, 2006.

[8] For the best and earliest discussions of the effect of torture, see Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Torture: Cancer of Democracy, France and Algeria, 1954-62* (New York: Penguin, 1963). For subsequent discussions of the impact of torture also see Rita Maran, *Torture: The Role of Ideology in the French-Algerian War* (New York: Praeger, 1989). For a comparison between Algeria and Vietnam, see David Schalk's brilliant study, *War and the Ivory Tower: France and Algeria and Vietnam*, 2nd ed., forward Benjamin Stora, afterword George C. Herring (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005).

[9] See Le Sueur, *Uncivil War* and "Decolonizing French Universalism: Reconsidering the Impact of the Algerian war on French intellectuals" in *The Decolonization Reader*, ed. James D. LeSueur (London: Routledge, 2003): 103-117.

[10] See Sartre's preface to *The Question*; James D. Le Sueur, "Torture and the Decolonisation of French Algeria: Nationalism, 'Race,' and Violence in Colonial Incarceration" in *Captive and Free: Colonial and*

Post-Colonial Incarceration, ed. Graeme Harper (London: Continuum, January 2002); also see Raphaëlle Branche, *La Torture et l'armée pendant la guerre d'Algérie, 1954-1962* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001).

[11] See Aussaresses's interview with Mike Wallace on *60 Minutes* (January 22, 2002).

[12] Fort Bragg is where U.S. Special Forces are trained.

[13] Also see my discussion of this in *Uncivil War*, chapter eight.

[14] For more on Bigeard, see *Uncivil War*, 292-94, 299-300.

[15] For the American involvement in similar ventures see Alfred McCoy, *A Question of Torture: CIA Interrogation, from the Cold War to the War on Terror* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2006) and Jennifer Harbury, *Truth, Torture, and the American Way* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006).

[16] During the French intervention in Mexico (1862-1867) Napoleon III supervised his Habsburg puppet ruler Maximilian, who issued his infamous black decree ordering the execution of all insurgents captured by the conservative/French forces. This so-called black decree was later one of the reasons Benito Juárez used to justify his execution of Maximilian in 1867. See Colin MacLachlan and William H. Beezley, *El Gran Pueblo: A History of Greater Mexico*, 3rd ed. (Upper Saddle River: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2004), 65. Also see Jack Dabbs, *The French Army in Mexico, 1861-1867* (The Hague: Mouton, 1962).

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