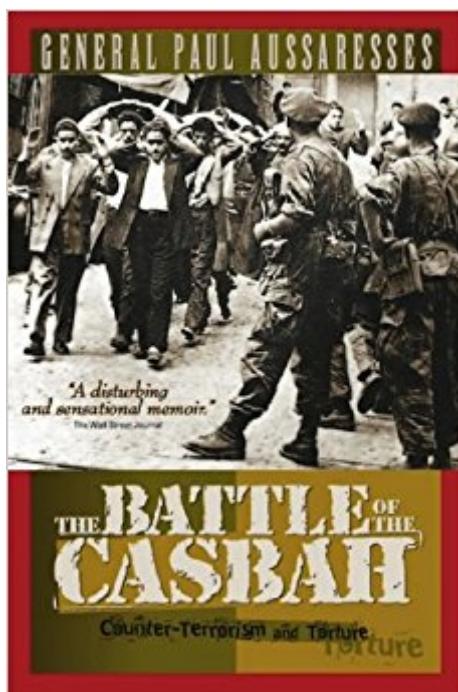


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The Battle Of The Casbah: Terrorism And Counterterrorism In Algeria 1955-1957



Synopsis

No French army officer had ever spoken out in such detail. Many government officials in 1957, including Francois Mitterand--the future president of France--knew and approved of torture and summary executions in Algeria during Algeria's struggle for independence. The public was never told until now about the actual use and function of torture during the Algerian war by someone directly involved, like General Aussaresses.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This is a fascinating but brutal account of a desperate period in history: France's effort to preserve its overseas "departement" from takeover by the main Algerian revolutionary organization, the ultra-violent FLN. The author, then a captain, was the secret counter-insurgency commander in the then-regional capital, Algiers. Essentially, he met terrorism with terror, and justifies his brutal absolutism with grim historical facts that are excluded from Pontecorvo's historically-inaccurate propaganda film, "The Battle of Algiers." Although France was ultimately to lose the war, Aussaresses (as confirmed even by his opponents) won the battle! It puzzles me that so many reviewers refer to Aussaresses as cold-blooded and unfeeling. The book owes its many stylistic faults to the passion and obvious defensiveness of a very emotional man. This gives the brutal story moments of unintentional humour, as in the bizarre anecdote of the Franco-Algerian farmer, his

head "split in half" by a radicalized Moslem, who goes home to bed to die, first relating his experience to the local police chief!!!The claim has been made that Aussaresses' methods had a major political impact on the war's outcome, but I doubt it. As in America's war in Vietnam, France's war was chiefly fought by draftees in the countryside, and it was the growing bodycount among the children of native Frenchmen, fighting for the privileges of a colonial population that was not ethnically French, that lost the war politically. Likewise the issue for the local native population was the cruel reality both of second-class citizenship and of FLN terrorism, as anyone whose political stance was not in accord with theirs was murdered, often with unspeakable brutality.

This book is an important contribution to the English language literature on the French-Algerian War. However, the book's importance goes beyond adding to the historical record of France's occupation of Algeria. The subject of terrorism and how to deal with it became immeasurably more important for Americans after 9/11. This book provides a glimpse of one possible way to deal with terrorism - the fight fire with fire way. Aussaresses recounts how he helped set up and execute an anti-terrorist operation in Algiers. He unapologetically tells how he used nightly raids, torture, imprisonment and summary executions to break the back of the FLN in Algiers during 1955-57 (The movie "Battle of Algiers" is a riveting account of this struggle). In short, this is a good soldier's account of the war. As valuable as this perspective is (and it is very valuable), it is narrow and demands some responses. First, the book fails to provide a context for the war (For context, I recommend reading Alistair Horne's "A Savage War of Peace"). Aussaresses begins with the massacre at Phillipville but there were atrocities on all sides. This war was an [mass] of violence and hatred. Second, there is a number of moral responses I have to Aussaresses's statements in the book. The one I find most appalling is that Aussaresses believes that he and his intelligence officers were restoring "law and order". I guess as an attorney I find this claim most alarming. I might be more accurate to say that Aussaresses was restoring a kind of order but it was hardly lawful. Suspects were picked up in nightly raids, tortured and summarily executed if they were believed to be terrorists. In most thinkers idea of law, there is the concept of equity: fairness and accountability.

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