Algeria

Introduction

The Algerian freedom fighter Zohra Drif was born 140 miles southwest of Algiers in the city of Tissemsilt. She moved to Algiers as a teenager to attend secondary school at Lycée Fromentin. In the fall of 1956 she was studying law at the University of Algiers when the foremost nationalist organization, the National Liberation Front or *Front de Libération Nationale* (FLN), brought the resistance against French colonization to the city. She joined the war as a freedom fighter that year. She was just 22 years old. She fought with the FLN for about a year, until she was arrested by French police on September 22, 1957. She spent the rest of the war in prison and was freed when Algeria gained its independence in 1962. She was still alive when this module was written (2024) and is considered one of Algeria's national heroes. She is mostly remembered for bombing the Milk Bar Café in one of the segregated French zones of Algiers on September 30, 1956. This is the event at the center of our lesson.

Colonization and Resistance in Algeria

In order to understand Drif's participation in Algeria's War for Independence, and her bombing of the Milk Bar Café more specifically, we need to understand the history of French colonization and resistance in Algeria. The French first invaded Algeria back in 1830. At the time, the Regency of Algiers was one of the Barbary States, a group of North African kingdoms loosely connected to the Ottoman Empire. The French king, Charles X, used an insult that the *dey*, or ruler, of Algiers expressed to the French king's consul over unpaid debts as a pretext to invade the country. His motives were to stop privateering, or state-sanctioned piracy, from the Barbary States and shore up his popularity amidst unrest at home. Defeated in a three-week military campaign, the *dey* fled North Africa and France began a colonial occupation of Algeria that would last until independence in 1962.

Charles' invasion of Algeria turned into a brutal war for conquest that dragged on for seventy-five years. Two primary groups resisted France's occupation: indigenous North Africans, collectively known as the Berbers, and Arabs whose ancestors had migrated into the Maghreb, or North Africa, starting in the 7th century. Religious and military leaders, Berber and Arab, arose on the coast and in the interior to lead revolts against the French during the 19th century. This period, known by the French as the "pacification of Algeria," was devastating to native peoples. Perhaps 800,000 Algerians, a quarter of the population, died from the combined effects of war, disease, and famine. To break the resistance of Berber and Arab peoples, the French waged a ruthless campaign of total war. Their violence is epitomized by the Dahra Massacre of 1845, in which the whole of the Ouled Rhia tribe, roughly 700 people, were suffocated to death as they sought refuge in a cave.

Key Terms:

Zohra Drif

Algeria

Pied noirs

Front de Libération Nationale (FLN)

Battle of Algiers

Bombistas

Milk Bar Café Bombing

The Battle of Algiers, 1966

Inside the Battle of Algiers

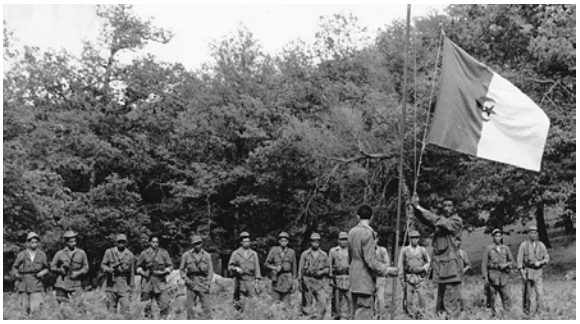
Family of Pieds Noirs – European settlers of French Algeria – at a restaurant in Algiers.

France sought to secure and profit from its conquest of Algeria by promoting European settlement to the area. European settlers, colloquially known as the *pieds noirs,* began arriving in the 19th century and accelerated at the end of the "pacification" in the early 1900s.[1] By 1950, the European settler population had reached a peak of one million. Unlike the mostly single men who migrated temporarily to other colonies of Africa to administer extractavist projects, the *pieds noirs* were extended families of men, women, and children who moved permanently to Algeria. About half of them came from southern France and half came from Spain and Italy. While they lived in Algeria, their cultural home remained in Europe. They spoke French, listened to French radio, read newspapers in French, and even vacationed and sent their children to school in France.

Life for the *pieds noirs* was based on the oppression of native Algerians. The Sahara Desert extends across roughly 90% of Algeria. This environment was unfamiliar to Europeans and unsuitable for agriculture, so the *pieds noirs* concentrated their settlement on Algeria's temperate Mediterranean coast. Here, they evicted natives from the country's most fertile land and turned it into plantations for producing luxury goods, primarily wine, for the European market. Meanwhile, they segregated the cities into zones limited to either French or native inhabitants. Native Algerians were prohibited from owning property or living outside of their designated neighborhoods, even though they were forced to work in the "French zones" throughout the day, serving European settlers in restaurants, shops, and cafés and cleaning up after them in concert halls, stadiums, and theaters.

European settlers arriving in Algiers from the steamship L'Eugène Peréire in 1899 (above); View of the Casbah of Algiers, 1900 (below).

Even though native Algerians resisted French colonization throughout the early-20th century, a nationalist movement only built momentum after World War II. This movement was violently opposed by the French state, most dramatically at Sétif and Guelma in 1945, where colonial authorities and settler militias massacred somewhere between 6,000 and 30,000 Muslims in the aftermath of anti-colonial demonstrations. On October 10, 1954, Algerians founded the FLN. Three weeks later, they declared war on the colonial state, officially beginning the Algerian War of Independence.



Male soldiers of the National Liberation Front (FLN) in 1958, when the army primarily recruited men (above). French troops locking down the Casbah in Algiers on May 27, 1956 (below).

At first, the FLN waged a campaign of guerilla warfare out of the Aurès Mountains in northeastern Algeria. Their mission was to draw international attention to their cause and create paranoia among the settlers by burning their plantations, killing their livestock, and uprooting their crops. In 1955, they succeeded in provoking the French government to declare a "State of Emergency" and deploy 120,000 soldiers to the region to "lockdown" the colony. The following year, FLN leaders decided to escalate the war by bringing the violence to the settlers in the capital city of Algiers. They made a separate command unit for the city called the Autonomous Zone of Algiers (ZAA) and appointed the nationalist revolutionaries Larbi Ben M'Hidi and Saâdi Yacef as its leaders. Over the next year, from September 1956 until Yacef's and Drif's capture by the French army in September 1957, the FLN led an urban guerilla insurgency known today as the "Battle of Algiers." It is in this context that Drif met Yacef, joined the FLN, and orchestrated her bombing of the Milk Bar Café.

The Freedom Fighter Zohra Drif

Drif was a law student at the University of Algiers when the FLN took the war to the city. She had been raised in an upper-class Muslim family in the countryside, attended elite schools in her youth, and had a light complexion that allowed her to pass as European. Despite a sheltered and privileged upbringing, she was of Arab ancestry, identified with non-Europeans, and held anti-colonial views. Her ideas were shaped by at least two influences: the revolutionary sources she encountered as a high school and then university student, and the history of French colonization in Algeria.

Zohra Drif during her arrest by French police in September 1957.

Drif developed her anti-colonial views from reading histories of working-class, anti-fascist, and anti-imperialist movements. She read about the Bolshevik Revolution and the Spanish Civil War and was inspired by films and books about resistance to the Nazis in Europe. She read novels and essays by nationalist authors from the Algerian Communist Party and militant literature distributed by the FLN and banned by the colonial authorities. She read classics on the Enlightenment from the National Library, including the works of French philosophers Montesquieu and Louis de Saint Just. She could recite Article 35 of the expanded French Revolution's *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* by heart: "When the government violates the rights of the people, insurrection is

for the people and for each portion of the people the most sacred of rights and the most indispensable of duties."

Zohra Drif (second from left) among other women FLN fighters, c. 1956.

To these sources Drif added her own study of Algerian resistance to French colonization. She knew about the long history of Berber and Arab leaders who had resisted French occupation going back to 1830, including Fatma N'Soumer, a woman general who had led people from Kabyle in northern Algeria into battles against French soldiers in the 1850s. As she later recounted in her memoir, she understood that Algeria's "nineteenth century was one of mass slaughter that made rivers of our ancestors' blood flow …" But she also knew the "twentieth century was no better." She had read of atrocities like the Sétif and Guelma massacre and had followed the FLN since its founding. She lived in Algiers when two nationalists, Ahmed Zabana and Abdelkader Ferradj, were executed at the prison's guillotine. She saw France's "lockdown" of the city firsthand and looked on as residents of the Casbah, Algiers' historic Muslim district, were profiled, detained, jailed, beaten, and discriminated against with impunity.

By 1956, Drif was resolved to join the struggle against French colonial rule. She believed that the French saw indigenous Algerians in the same way that the US government saw Native Americans, as a "backwards" population that had to be replaced by European settlers. She was angered by the hypocrisy of a French nation that was founded on lofty ideals like "liberty, dignity, and honor" but that treated the peoples it colonized as less than human. She saw native Algerians' "bondage" as going "hand in hand with the system of settler colonialism." Most of all, she was disgusted by the two Algerias she saw side by side: one in which the majority of native people lived in poverty and fear, and the other in which the *pied noirs* lived a carefree life of leisure and luxury.

Map of Algiers, showing the districts segregated between European and Muslim residents and the location of attacks by the FLN (green) and French (purple) in the Battle of Algiers.

Drif became an FLN operative through other women involved in the network. Her best friend from Lycée Fromentin, Samia Lakhdari, was approached by Djamila Bouhired, a woman the same age as Lakhdari and Drif who worked as a recruiter for Yacef. Bouhired introduced Lakhdari to FLN leadership at a meeting in the Casbah in August 1956. Here, Yacef invited her to join the movement with a special mission in mind. Two weeks prior, a group of European colonial extremists known as the *ultras* had initiated the use of explosives in the Battle of Algiers when they planted a bomb that killed 73 native Algerians at the Rue de Thèbes in the Casbah.

Photograph of the Milk Bar Café before Drif's bombing on Sunday, September 30, 1956.

This bombing of Algerian civilians changed the nature of the war for the FLN. Yacef intended to respond with a bombing campaign of his own, and he wanted young women like Lakhdari to serve as his bomb carriers, or *bombistas*. With Yacef's permission, Lakhdari shared the mission with Drif that same day.

Drif and Lakhdari had no military experience, and the FLN had never used bombs to launch attacks on civilian targets. Nonetheless, Drif and Lakhdari were enthusiastic about the idea. Gender was at the core of their plan. They argued that women would make ideal *bombistas* because they could "blend into the European civilian population and conduct missions with far less risk of being arrested or killed." French colonists had preconceived ideas about what a rebel looked like. They viewed rebels as Muslim men and saw women, especially European women, as ignorant, innocent, and incapable of violence. Given their light complexions, Drif and Lakhdari argued that they could disguise themselves as French women to move unsuspected in the city's French zones. After Yacef approved the plan, Drif and Lakhdari spent a month preparing with the help of Lakhdari's mother, Mama Zhor. They chose their targets and studied them carefully. They selected their disguises and practiced becoming comfortable in them. They even conducted simulations of the day's events in which they walked their planned routes in their "uniforms" and timed their movements.

Drif after her arrest by French paratroopers on September 24, 1957

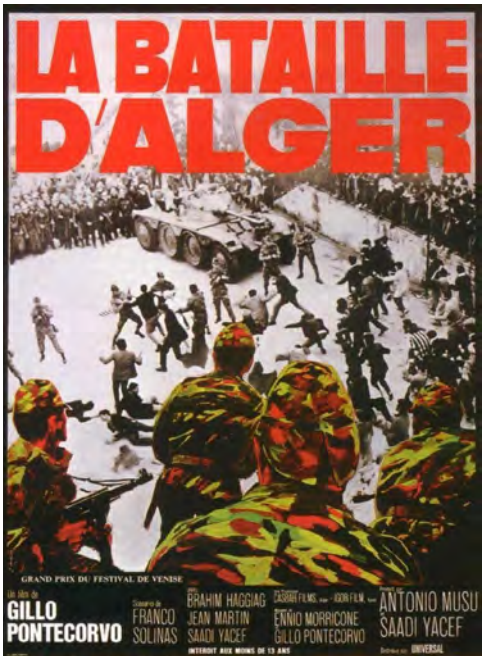
On Friday, September 28, 1956, Lakhdari and Bouhired snuck three bombs out of the Casbah, where they had been assembled by Yacef's bombmaker. Two days later, on Sunday evening, Drif, Lakhdari, and Bouhired conducted their bombings. Disguised as French colonists, they picked up the bombs, stowed them in their handbags, and dropped them off at their targets: the Milk Bar Café on Place Bugeaud, the Cafétéria on Rue Michelet, and the Air France agency at the Maurétania building. Drif and Lakhdari's bombs at the Milk Bar and Cafétéria killed three people and injured fifty. Bouhired's bomb at Air France failed to detonate. Amid the chaos of the explosion, Drif hid undercover at the home of a family acquaintance. Once she regained her composure, she traveled to the group's rendezvous point: Lakhdari and Mama Zhor's house on Rue Salvandy. Just as the FLN had anticipated, the bombings struck terror into the heart of the *pieds noirs* community.

Drif expanded her activism with the FLN after her bombing of the Milk Bar Café. Almost one year to the day, on September 22, 1957, she was arrested by French police at a safe house in the Casbah with Yacef. She was sentenced to 20 years in prison for terrorism but ended up serving only four. While her and Yacef's arrest effectively ended the Battle of Algiers, the FLN continued the war over the next

four years and eventually pressured French President Charles de Gaulle to begin negotiations for peace. Algerians won their independence from France at the Évian Accords in 1962 and around 800,000 *pied noirs*, unwilling to live in an independent Algeria, fled the country for Europe. Drif was pardoned by de Gaulle and released from prison that same year. She resettled in Algiers, where she pursued work as a criminal lawyer and entered national politics.

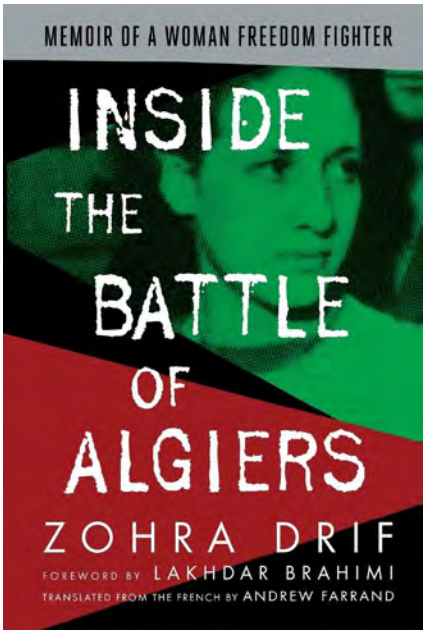
Memory, Gender, and the Battle of Algiers

The story of Drif and the *bombistas* has been told a number of times since Algeria's independence. No interpretation is more famous than a 1966 film adaptation, *The Battle of Algiers*, by the Italian director Gillo Pontecorvo. Shot in Algiers just three years after independence, the film was based on a memoir Yacef dictated from prison in 1962.[2] Yacef was intimately involved in the film's production and even played a version of himself on screen. Pontecorvo's and Yacef's film presents a masculine interpretation of the Algerian independence movement that highlights the bombings even as it marginalizes women's roles in the resistance more broadly. Forty minutes into the film, there is a dramatic, fourteen-minute reenactment of Drif's, Lakhdari's, and Bouhired's September 1956 bombings. Commonly known as the "Ladies' Bombing Scene," this segment makes up about 12% of the film's runtime and is the only time that women revolutionaries are centered as subjects. With perhaps one or two exceptions, the film's three rebel women characters do not speak and are not shown outside of the bombing sequence. Their names are never mentioned, and all of the film's leading characters are men, including Yacef, Ben M'hidi, and the protagonist Ali la Point.



Original French poster for The Battle of Algiers, 1966. That none of the women actors are named is indicative of the marginal roles for women in the film.

Still of actress Samia Kerbash in the act of transforming her hair as part of her French disguise in the 1966 film The Battle of Algiers.



Cover of the 2017 English translation of Zohra Drif's memoir, Inside the Battle of Algiers.

Fortunately, we do not have to guess about Drif's own views of the Battle of Algiers. She survived Algeria's War of Independence and was eighty-nine years old when this module was written (2024). Forty-seven years after Pontecorvo's film, she told her own version of the bombing sequence in a 2013 memoir called *Inside the Battle of Algiers*. This memoir, of which you will be reading a selection, includes Drif's own narration of her bombing of the Milk Bar Café. It includes a number of significant differences from Pontecorvo's film adaptation of Yacef's memoir. Most importantly, it centers the thoughts and actions of the women themselves. For example, in Drif's memoir, it is the *bombistas* who select the locations for their September bombings, not Yacef, as is shown in the film. Also, whereas women rebels are voiceless throughout *The Battle of Algiers*, Drif expounds at length on the complex motivations, conflicted emotions, and inner thoughts of her and her fellow *bombistas*. Instead of men like Ben M'hidi, Yacef, and la Point, it is women like Drif, Lakhdari, Bouhired, and Mama Zhor who are the central agents of the story.

In addition to her memoir, Drif has shared her thoughts on Algeria's War of Independence in many interviews in recent years. The following is just one example. Speaking at Georgetown University in 2018, she explains why she has never doubted that her work for the FLN was justified.

Zohra Drif in an interview about Algeria's anti-colonial resistance movement with Georgetown University's Institute for Women, Peace and Security (GIWPS) in 2018. Drif was 83 years old at the time.

Explore More..

To learn more about Zohra Drif and her role in the Algerian War of Independence, check out the following interview video:

- "Algerian Freedom Fighter Zohra Drif," interview at Georgetown University, March 6, 2018

Further Reading

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Image Citations

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Film still, Gillo Pontecorvo, The Battle of Algiers, 1966.

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