
Italian director, born in Pisa (1919) into a Jewish family of ten children. His father, Massimo, was an industrialist and his mother, the former Maria Maroni, came from a line of doctors. The family traditionally provided a scientific education for sons and a literary one for daughters....Gillo originally prepared for a scientific career by studying chemistry at the University of Pisa, but was soon dissatisfied with the academic milieu. The time spent at the University of Pisa was not in vain, however, it provided him with a technical background useful later in his filmmaking and also brought him (at the height of the fascist period) into contact with a number of antifascist students and professors.

Because of severe anti-Semitic laws (of the sort illustrated in De Sica’s *Garden of the Finzi-Continis*) Gillo went to Paris to begin a career in journalism. He secured a position with Agence Havas (now Agence France-Presse and later as a correspondent for the Italian newspapers *Repubblica* and *Paese Sera*. While reporting on a mining strike in northern France he recognized that in such situations photographs could bring home the facts more forcefully than words, thereafter turning increasingly to photojournalism.

In 1941, two years after the outbreak of World War II, Pontecorvo joined the Italian Communist Party. His clandestine Party activities took him to northern Italy, where he helped create a network of partisans and participated in the guerilla activities of the Garibaldi Brigade. Under the *nom de guerre* of “Barnabas” he was a leader in the Resistance in Milan from 1943 to the Liberation in 1945.

Pontecorvo’s work with the Party during the war furnished him with valuable political and military experience. After the Liberation he stayed in the Communist Party as a full-time militant member, although, according to Franco Solinas, that was a difficult time to be a Communist in Italy. As a Party worker Pontecorvo had a dual responsibility, serving in the leadership of the youth movement Fronte della Gioventù and also assisting in the preparation of newsreel material for Party archives. Pontecorvo demonstrated an absolute fidelity to Party ideology until the Hungarian crisis of 1956. The Soviet intervention was one of several factors that drove him from the Party, though he did not completely break his ties with its underlying Marxist principles or his Communist associations.

Meanwhile, Pontecorvo’s interest in sociopolitical film had been growing, especially since his first viewing of Rossellini’s neorealist account of the Italian Liberation *Paisà*, made in 1946. He compared the experience to being struck by a lightning bolt and says it was at that moment that he decided to switch from journalism to cinema. Pontecorvo had his first taste of feature filmmaking in 1946, when he served as third assistant on Aldo Vergano’s photo-neorealist tribute to the Italian Resistance, *Il sole sorge ancora* (*Outcry*, 1947); Pontecorvo also makes a brief but effective appearance in this film as a martyred partisan. His real apprenticeship came through working as an assistant to Yves Allégret (*Les Miracles n’on lieu qu’une fois*, 1950), Giancarlo Menotti (*La medium*), and Mario
Pontecorvo made his own first films in the early 1950s, when he bought a 16mm Paillard camera and—usually at his own expense—made between fifteen and twenty documentaries (he himself is uncertain of the exact number). A notable early example was the thirty-minute Missione Timiriazev (The Timiriazev Mission, 1953), shot in 16mm and afterwards blown up to 35mm. It dealt with the flooding in the Po delta region of Polesine. The following year came two documentaries with Rome as the setting: Cani dietro le sbarre (Dogs Behind Bars) shows the city pound where the animals were prepared for death, recalling the old man’s search for his pet in De Sica’s Umberto D; Porta Portese (The Portese Gate) deals with the city’s flea market.... Perhaps the most successful of these early documentaries was Pane e zolfo (Bread and Sulfur) filmed in 1956 with the financial assistance of the Ministry of Labor....For Pontecorvo, these documentaries served as a transition between his photographic work as a journalist and his documented political fiction films. His first fictional film was a short—one of the five episodes in Die Windrose (The Windrose / The Compass, 1956). This portmanteau film, supervised by Joris Ivens, had been commissioned by the Women’s International Democratic Federation to explore some of the problems women faced in different contemporary societies. Pontecorvo’s episode “Giovanna,” which he co-scripted with Franco Solinas, was a comparatively modest contribution to the film, but was made in an atmosphere of creative freedom such as he experienced only once again, during the making of The Battle of Algiers. ...

The French critics at the time of the 1956 Venice Film Festival, according to Pontecorvo, spoke of “Giovanna” as reflecting “the purest of neorealist styles.” The director has often referred to himself as “a late son of neorealism,” following most closely in the footsteps of Rossellini—his ideal director, he says, would be three-quarters Rossellini and one-quarter Eisenstein.

For Kapò, Pontecorvo and Solinas traveled about Europe for eight months interviewing survivors of the [Nazi] death camps, centering their story on an actual incident—an escape by a group of Red Army soldiers from Treblinka. The film was shot in black and white in a camp Pontecorvo built near Belgrade. After numerous experiments, he and his regular cinematographer Marcello Gatti achieved the grainy effect and high contrast he wanted—the look of an old newsreel—by the “dupe negative” process: taking a negative from the positive print.

Pontecorvo himself provided the music for Kapò, orchestrated for him by Carlo Rustichelli. In a Film Quarterly interview with Joan Mellen (Fall, 1972), he explained that “the rapport between music and image for me is extremely important. First of all because the only thing I like deeply in my life is music—more than movies. I wanted to become a composer, but for economic reasons I could not....For all my documentary films I wrote the music....I think that any director begins with a little fear the morning when he goes to the set to shoot. But I go with great fear. Sometimes I arrive without knowing where to put the camera and what to do with it. If I’ve thought of the scene before and tried to compose the theme of the music, if I have found this theme, my behavior is completely different. I become extremely sure of myself and I know what exactly to do or not to do....Apart from the story that any movie has to tell, there is sometimes, though not always, another story—which tells the inner story: the hope, the sorrow, the fragility of happiness or hope, the absurd, the great themes of the human condition. For me when I am ready to tell this second story, to express its presence, I depend very much on music.”...

Over the next six years, Pontecorvo considered thirty-three scripts, including three of his own collaborations with Solinas, but for one reason or another made none of them. The script that perhaps came closest to production was Para. This Pontecorvo-Solinas collaboration centered on a French paratrooper—an attractive and articulate member of the upper bourgeoisie who had fought against the independence movement in both Indochina and Algeria. Fearing retaliation from the right-wing French “secret army,” the film’s backers dumped the project, but something of it survived in Pontecorvo’s next film, La Battaglia di Algeri (The Battle of Algiers, 1966), universally regarded as his masterpiece.

Yacef Saadi, the elegant and handsome president of Casbah Films, had fought in the struggle for Algerian liberation as commander for the autonomous zone of Algiers. In 1964 or 1965 he went to Italy to set up an Algerian-Italian coproduction dealing with that struggle. Of the three Italian directors he approached—Francesco Rosi, Luchino Visconti, and Gillo Pontecorvo—only Pontecorvo was both willing and able to accept the assignment. He did so on condition that he be given a very large measure of autonomy and creative freedom. Pontecorvo and Solinas then devoted six months to intensive research into the eight years of the campaign, studying everything from newsreels to police archives and interviewing thousands of witnesses—French veterans of the war as well as Algerian revolutionaries. Yacef Saadi contributed his own view from the top. After the research came a further six months of scriptwriting.

Along with this patient pursuit of accuracy of content went a determination to achieve unparalleled verisimilitude in presentation. With the cooperation of the Bourmedienne government, Pontecorvo was able to shoot on location in Algiers, both in what had been the European section and in the Casbah, where the streets were so narrow that only hand-held cameras could be used. He arrived there with nine Italian technicians, making up the remainder of his crew from local workers with no previous film experience, patiently trained by his cinematographer Marcello Gatti and others.

Brahim Haggiai, an illiterate peasant whom Pontecorvo discovered in the Algiers market, was cast as Ali la Pointe, a petty criminal who wound up as a rebel leader and martyr. Yacef Saadi recreated for the cameras the role he had played in fact, as the Algiers military commander. Only one major role was assigned to a professional actor—that of the French paratroop commander Colonel Mathieu, played by Jean Martin; primarily a stage actor, he had lost his job for signing a manifesto against the Algerian war. What Pontecorvo called his “choral protagonist” were the 80,000 men, women, and children of the Casbah, the film’s true “hero.”

Pontecorvo and Gatti again employed the dupe negative process used in Kapò, but achieved greater control over their effects through laboratory experiments. Telephoto lenses were used in crowd scenes to intensified the impression of a television newsreel and to “emphasize collective effort rather than individual heroism.” In his interview with Joan Mellen, Pontecorvo said that for these extraordinary crowd scenes “we drew all the movements of the crowd with chalk on the actual pavement, ‘action 1, 2, or 3,
this group goes around,’ etc. This is how we did the great crowd scene, the demonstration down the stairs. When this became automatic, I no longer looked at it and my assistant controlled it when we shot....I took the five, ten, fifteen people who were nearest to the camera and worked only with them. I didn’t even look at the others. I looked to see if the expression on their faces was right. A crowd scene can be spoiled if the expression of only one person is not exactly what you want.” So completely convincing were these techniques that Pontecorvo was obliged to precede the film with this disclaimer: “Not one foot of newsreel has been used in this reconstruction of the Battle of Algiers.”

The film begins at dawn on October 7, 1957. An old Algerian nationalist, under torture, reveals to Colonel Mathieu the hiding place of the last surviving guerilla leader, Ali la Pointe. Mathieu’s paratroops surround the house in the Casbah, ready to blow it up unless Ali surrenders. From the pensive faces of the four freedom fighters within, we flash back to November 1, 1954, when a message from the National Liberation Front had launched the Battle of Algiers.

After this prologue, we follow the three-year history of the Battle. Terrorism escalates on both sides. A harmless Arab worker is accused of killing a policeman and in retaliation the French place a bomb near his home in the Casbah, killing many innocent people. In return, three Arab women, disguised as Europeans penetrate the heavily guarded French sector, wreaking havoc with bombs in two cafes and at the Air France terminal.

But the elite French paratroopers, with their vastly superior resources and training and the ruthless use of torture, systematically destroy the Algerian guerilla movement, cell by cell. When they finally arrest the intellectual Ben M’Hidi and the key leader Saari Kader (Yacef Saadi), only Ali le Pointe remains. We return to October 7, 1957. Ali dies and the Battle of Algiers ends, a victory for the French. But three years later the revolutionary phoenix rises again in the Casbah, leading in 1962 to Algeria’s independence.

In his study of La Battaglia di Algeri, the American critic Pier Nico Solinas wrote that “for Gillo Pontecorvo the making of history, or shooting under what he calls ‘the dictatorship of truth,’ is not simply a recreation of past events through cinéma vérité technique, nor the repiecing of history for history’s sake; it is, rather, a deliberate rearrangement of chosen fact for a didactic purpose.”

Not surprisingly, opinions have differed as to the nature of that “didactic purpose.” Some critics, especially in France, regarded the film as a blatantly pro-Arab, anti-French work of propaganda, pointing out that it was, after all sponsored by the Algerian revolutionary leader Yacef Saadi. The French delegation at the Venice Film Festival boycotted its screening, and also the ceremony at which it was awarded the Golden Lion as best film. La Battaglia was banned by the French government until 1971, and even then screenings were postponed because of threats to intending exhibitors and actual bombings of theaters. The film was widely shown in France, Pontecorvo says, only after the director Louis Malle “took the matter into his own hands.”

However, this primarily right-wing view of La Battaglia as Arab propaganda was rejected by many, and was remote from the stated intention of Yacef Saadi: “The idea of reliving those days and arousing the emotions I felt moved me greatly. But there is no rancor in my memories. Together with our Italian friends, we desired to make an objective, equilibrated film, that is not a trial of a people or of a nation, but a heartfelt act of accusation against violence and war.”

This is an accurate description of the film, in the opinion of its champions. Most frequently cited in support of this view is the scene in which the Arab women, having placed their lethal bombs in crowded places, sadly scrutinize the faces of those who will die. Again, the young paratroopers, having horribly tortured the old peasant into betraying Ali, congratulate him on holding out for so long and press cigarettes on him, as if hungry for his forgiveness. Colonel Mathieu, the nemesis of the Algerian guerrillas, is neither an ogre nor a psychopath but a highly intelligent professional who recognizes that if he is going to win the war for France there is simply no alternative to torture. It is worth recording that Lieutenant Roger Trinquier, veteran of the Tenth Division of Paratroopers and author of Modern Warfare (1964), believed that the film was an accurate representation of the battle and, in a sense, a tribute to the French army.

Many critics benefited from the effectiveness of the film’s musical score, written by Pontecorvo and Ennio Morricone. Jan Dawson wrote that La Battaglia was shot and cut to the rhythms of the score, which “to the crew’s amusement, Pontecorvo whistled throughout the filming so as not to ‘lose the rhythm of the film.’ The same music (in which the percussion is dominant and which finds its human equivalent in the eerie formalised wailing of the Casbah women) accompanies the atrocities on both sides, stressing the drama and the urgency of the action yet also underlining the similarities that link the opposing forces.”

Of the much discussed use of a Bach chorale to accompany the dreadful torture scenes, Pontecorvo says that “the torture used by the French as their basic counter-guerrilla tactic is the low point of human degradation caused by the war. It seemed to me that the religious music I used in those sequences emphasized with even greater authority the gravity of that degradation. But at the same time torture creates a sort of relationship between those who do it and those who undergo it. With human pity the common bond, the music served to transcend the particular situation, making them symbols of an all-encompassing characteristic—that of giving and enduring pain.”

In Britain, Jan Dawson called La Battaglia di Algeri “probably the finest political film ever made.” She praised its “unsectarian humanity and lack of any overt propagandising,” and said “the effect of this moral ambivalence is to break with the cinematic convention of presenting history as a glorious battle between heroes and villains, and to substitute for it the vision of a struggle in which all the participants are victims of the same evil—in this case colonialism.”

The American critic Pauline Kael was more ambivalent. She thought the film “probably the most emotionally stirring revolutionary epic since Eisenstein’s Potemkin (1925) and Pudovkin’s Mother (1926)” and “the inspiration of other filmmakers”—notably Costa-Gavras. “Like Potemkin,” Kael goes on, “The Battle of Algiers is an epic in the form of a ‘created documentary,’ with the oppressed, angry masses as the hero....The hyperintelligent French colonel...isn’t really a character; he represents the cool, inhuman manipulative power of imperialism versus the animal heat of the multitudes rushing towards us as they rise up against their oppressors....The revolutionaries forming their pyramid of cells didn’t need to express revolutionary consciousness because the French colonel was given such a full counter-revolutionary consciousness that he said it all for them....The inevitability of the ultimate victory of revolution is established to your—almost ecstatic—emotional
The battle of Algiers ‘one of the most remarkable films of all time.’

“Anything to Wipe Out a Devil…” [Chapter Fourteen, on Algeria]

The scr ipt was based pri marily on t wo bo oks about the ki lling, and
Pontecorvo’s own interviews with two of the four assassins.

The Observer Philip French February 5, 2006

Current discussions surrounding Spielberg’s Munich, ‘extraordinary rendition’, neocolonialism and the imposition of order upon the chaos of Iraq and Afghanistan have given a new topicality to this masterpiece about the early stages of the Algerian war of liberation in the mid-1950s. In August 2003, the Pentagon arranged a screening of the picture for senior officers and civilian advisers to see what lessons might be learned from it, especially on the issue of ‘how to win a battle against terrorism and lose the war of ideas.’

Shot in newsreel-style black and white, the movie has a documentary immediacy, but though politically committed, it neither depopulates the French colonists nor sanctifies the Algerian revolutionaries.

The two central characters are embodiments of ideas. Ali la Pointe, an illiterate drifter with a criminal past and politicised in jail, represents the spirit of Algerian insurrection and is, like his comrades, ruthless and puritanical. Colonel Mathieu, whose military record stretches from the Resistance to Indo-China, is the agent of colonial suppression and is equally ruthless but fundamentally decent by his own lights, and a lucid defendant of torture in the service of political aims. Mathieu is brilliantly played by Jean Martin the only professional actor in the film. In A Savage War of Peace: Algeria 1954-1962, a classic book that anyone interested in the film should read, Alistair Horne calls The Battle of Algiers ‘one of the most remarkable films of all time.’

The Great War for Civilisation The Conquest of the Middle East, Robert Fisk, Knopf NY 2005

‘Anything to Wipe Out a Devil…”’ [Chapter Fourteen, on Algeria]

Most historians agree that the massacre at Sétif in 1945—when European settlers and French gendarmes and troops slaughtered around 6,000 Muslims in revenge for the Muslim murder of 103 Europeans—helped provoke the original struggle for independence. They also agree that France’s subsequent attempts to introduce reforms came too late; not least because “democratic” elections were so flagrantly rigged by the French authorities that Muslims could never achieve equality with French Algerians. Once the FLN declared war in 1954, “moderate” Muslim Algerians were silenced by their nationalist opponents, including a largely forgotten Islamic independence movement, the “Association of the Ulemas,” which saw the struggle as religious rather than political. The first FLN attacks were puny. A French gendarme would be murdered in the outback, the bled—from balad, the Arabic for a village—or in the mountains of Kabylie. The FLN began a campaign of cutting down telegraph poles and setting off small bombs in post, airline and government offices. As the war intensified, up to 500,000 French troops were fighting in the cities and mountains, especially in Lahkadia, eats of Algiers, using air strikes and employing helicopters to hunt down guerilla bands. Sometimes the guerillas were successful—the wreckage of a French helicopter shot down in the bled is today on display in the “Museum of the Martyrs.”

Some Algerians claim that in fact a millions and a half Algerians may have been killed in the eight-year war that ended in 1962, albeit that 500,000 of these may have been slaughtered by their own comrades in internecine fighting. The conflict was one of betrayal of Muslim Algerians by each other, of French Algerians by their own government, specifically—in the minds of so many pieds noirs—by de Gaulle. The guerillas murdered, raped and mutilated captured French soldiers and civilians. The French army murdered prisoners and massacred the population of entire villages. They, too, raped.

The war of independence became the foundation of modern Algerian politics, a source of violent reference for both its supposedly socialist and corrupt pouvoir and those opposed to the government. The war was dirty but could always be called upon as a purifying factor in Algerian life. The revolutionary government of Algiers commissioned Gillo Pontecorvo to make a film of the initial 1954-57 uprising and The Battle of Algiers remains one of the classic movies of guerilla struggle and sacrifice. There is a dramatic moment when Colonel Mathieu, a thin disguise for the real-life General Massu, leads the captured FLN leader Larbi Ben M’Hidi into a press conference at which a journalist questions the morality of hiding bombs in women’s shopping baskets. “Don’t you think it is a bit cowardly to use women’s baskets and handbags to carry explosive devices that kill so many innocent people?” the reporter asks. Ben M’Hidi replies: “And doesn’t it

from The Observer Philip French February 5, 2006

Current discussions surrounding Spielberg’s Munich, ‘extraordinary rendition’, neocolonialism and the imposition of order upon the chaos of Iraq and Afghanistan have given a new topicality to this masterpiece about the early stages of the Algerian war of liberation in the mid-1950s. In August 2003, the Pentagon arranged a screening of the picture for senior officers and civilian advisers to see what lessons might be learned from it, especially on the issue of ‘how to win a battle against terrorism and lose the war of ideas.’

Shot in newsreel-style black and white, the movie has a documentary immediacy, but though politically committed, it neither depopulates the French colonists nor sanctifies the Algerian revolutionaries.

The two central characters are embodiments of ideas. Ali la Pointe, an illiterate drifter with a criminal past and politicised in jail, represents the spirit of Algerian insurrection and is, like his military record stretches from the Resistance to Indo-China, is the agent of colonial suppression and is equally ruthless but fundamentally decent by his own lights, and a lucid defendant of torture in the service of political aims. Mathieu is brilliantly played by Jean Martin the only professional actor in the film. In A Savage War of Peace: Algeria 1954-1962, a classic book that anyone interested in the film should read, Alistair Horne calls The Battle of Algiers ‘one of the most remarkable films of all time.’

The Great War for Civilisation The Conquest of the Middle East, Robert Fisk, Knopf NY 2005

‘Anything to Wipe Out a Devil…”’ [Chapter Fourteen, on Algeria]

Most historians agree that the massacre at Sétif in 1945—when European settlers and French gendarmes and troops slaughtered around 6,000 Muslims in revenge for the Muslim murder of 103 Europeans—helped provoke the original struggle for independence. They also agree that France’s subsequent attempts to introduce reforms came too late; not least because “democratic” elections were so flagrantly rigged by the French authorities that Muslims could never achieve equality with French Algerians. Once the FLN declared war in 1954, “moderate” Muslim Algerians were silenced by their nationalist opponents, including a largely forgotten Islamic independence movement, the “Association of the Ulemas,” which saw the struggle as religious rather than political. The first FLN attacks were puny. A French gendarme would be murdered in the outback, the bled—from balad, the Arabic for a village—or in the mountains of Kabylie. The FLN began a campaign of cutting down telegraph poles and setting off small bombs in post, airline and government offices. As the war intensified, up to 500,000 French troops were fighting in the cities and mountains, especially in Lahkadia, eats of Algiers, using air strikes and employing helicopters to hunt down guerilla bands. Sometimes the guerillas were successful—the wreckage of a French helicopter shot down in the bled is today on display in the “Museum of the Martyrs.”

Some Algerians claim that in fact a millions and a half Algerians may have been killed in the eight-year war that ended in 1962, albeit that 500,000 of these may have been slaughtered by their own comrades in internecine fighting. The conflict was one of betrayal of Muslim Algerians by each other, of French Algerians by their own government, specifically—in the minds of so many pieds noirs—by de Gaulle. The guerillas murdered, raped and mutilated captured French soldiers and civilians. The French army murdered prisoners and massacred the population of entire villages. They, too, raped.

The war of independence became the foundation of modern Algerian politics, a source of violent reference for both its supposedly socialist and corrupt pouvoir and those opposed to the government. The war was dirty but could always be called upon as a purifying factor in Algerian life. The revolutionary government of Algiers commissioned Gillo Pontecorvo to make a film of the initial 1954-57 uprising and The Battle of Algiers remains one of the classic movies of guerilla struggle and sacrifice. There is a dramatic moment when Colonel Mathieu, a thin disguise for the real-life General Massu, leads the captured FLN leader Larbi Ben M’Hidi into a press conference at which a journalist questions the morality of hiding bombs in women’s shopping baskets. “Don’t you think it is a bit cowardly to use women’s baskets and handbags to carry explosive devices that kill so many innocent people?” the reporter asks. Ben M’Hidi replies: “And doesn’t it
seem to you even more cowardly to drop napalm bombs on defenceless villages, so that there are a thousand times more innocent victims....Give us your bombers. and you can have our baskets.” Mathieu is publicly unrepentant at using torture during interrogation. “Should we remain in Algeria?” he asks. “If you answer yes, then you must accept all the necessary consequences.”

The film contains many lessons for the American and British occupiers of Iraq; nor was it surprising when in early 2004 the Pentagon organised a screening for military and civilian experts in Washington who were invited by a flier that read: “How to win a battle against terrorism and lose the war of ideas.”

If the war was a constantly revived theme for Algerians, however, it was for almost three decades wiped from the French collective memory. For years, The Battle of Algiers was banned in France, and when it was eventually shown, cinemas were fire-bombed. It took thirty years before French film director interviewed the forgotten conscripts of the conflict in which 27,000 French soldiers died. Bertrand Tavernier’s La Guerre sans nom showed the veterans breaking down in tears as they expressed their sorrow at killing Algerians. In the same year, 1992, the Musée d’Histoire Contemporaine held its first exhibition on the war and published a 320-page guide that did not attempt to hide the war’s brutality. In 2000, President Jacques Chirac rejected calls for a formal apology for the use of torture by French soldiers during the war. When long-retired General Paul Aussaresses, who was coordinator of French intelligence in Algiers in 1957, published his memoirs on 2001 and boasted of the Algerians he had personally executed, Amnesty International demanded an investigation by the French government. Aussaresses claimed that François Mitterrand, who was Socialist minister of the interior at the time, was fully aware of the tortures and executions being carried out by French forces in Algeria. But the contemporary Algerian government maintained what an Algerian journalist called “a cowardly silence” over Aussaresses’s revelations, not least because its own security services had long practised the same tortures on their own people which Aussaresses and his henchmen had visited upon Algerians. Even in Paris, Algerians died by the hundreds when they proteseted in October 1961 against a night curfew imposed on them by the police. French cops ferociously assaulted the demonstrators and as many as 300 may have been murdered, their corpses washed up next day in the Seine. To this day, the authorities have not opened all their archives on this massacre, even though the prefect responsible for the repression was Maurice Papon, who was convicted in April 1998 for crimes against humanity during the German occupation.

Just as the original French claim to have invaded Algeria to “liberate” its people has a painfully contemporary ring, so too do the appeals for support advanced by the French government to the U.S. administration during the Algerian war of independence. France, Americans were told, was fighting to defend the West against jihad, against “Middle Eastern Islamic fanaticism.” This, the French claimed, was a clash of civilisations. They were wrong, of course—the French were fighting a nationalist insurgency in Algeria, just as the Americans found themselves fighting a national insurgency in Iraq—but the Islamic content of the 1954-62 independence struggle has long been ignored, not least by the Algerian government that found itself fighting an Islamist enemy in the 1990s. ...

What primeval energy produces such sadism? Although the cost was terrible, the Algerians won their war against the French. They are all Muslims, all of the Sunni sect. Their huge land stands on billions of dollars’ worth of oil and natural gas deposits. Algeria is the world’s eighteenth-largest exporter of petrol, the seventh for gas. After France and Canada, it is the world’s third francophone country. It should be as wealthy as the Arab Gulf states, its people able to buy property and invest in Europe and America like the Saudis and the Kuwaitis. Yet it suffers 25 per cent unemployment, 47 per cent illiteracy and one of the world’s cruellest internal conflicts....

In 2004, Amnesty International appealed for an investigation into the discovery of at least twelve mass graves found in Algeria since 1998, the latest of them on 29 July, “to establish the truth about these killings. “ The world ignored Amnesty’s appeal. At the same time, U.S. Special Forces began operations in the southern Algerian desert against Al-Qaeda—alongside their Algerian opposite numbers. The very men who were suspected of crimes against humanity were now working with the Americans to hunt down those responsible for crimes against humanity. This military cooperation, the Pentagon declared, was part of “the war on terror.”

Michael Atkinson: Rocket the Casbah. Louder than a bomb: A ’60s masterpiece of agitprop returns with a newfound relevance (Village Voice January 7 - 13, 2004)

This past August, as both Iraqi and "coalition" cadavers piled up in post-"victory" insurgency fighting, the Pentagon’s Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict office sent out an e-mail advertising a private screening of Gillo Pontecorvo’s 1965 The Battle of Algiers. "How to win a battle against terrorism and lose the war of ideas,” the flyer opined: "Children shoot soldiers at point blank range. Women plant bombs in cafés. Soon the entire Arab population builds to a mad fervor. Sound familiar? The French have a plan. It succeeds tactically, but fails strategically. To understand why, come to a rare showing of this film.”

We don't know who attended, or what impact upon Pentagon-think this legendary handmade-bomb of a movie might've had. Former national security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski, for one, remembered it without being reacquainted—at an October 28 D.C. conference called "New American Strategies for Security and Peace," he told the crowd of feds, politicos, and op-ed people that "[i]f you want to understand what is happening right now in Iraq, I suggest a movie that was quite well-known to a number of people some years ago.... It's called The Battle of Algiers. It is a movie that deals with ... [a] resistance which used urban violence, bombs, assassinations, and turned Algeris into a continuing battle that eventually wore down the French." Obviously, this fierce piece of agitprop has seen its moment arrive for a second time. Is it tragic irony, or merely the evolutionary nature of reallpolitik, that such a passionate, righteous revolutionary document is now most famous as an ostensibly training film for neocon strategists?

Who cares; the movie arrives bristling with its own indefatigable legitimacy. Empathize with your enemy, as Robert McNamara says in The Fog of War, but the harsh reality of Pontecorvo’s film only serves to strip down imperialist rationales to their Napoleonic birthday suits. Did the Pentagonians even notice that the film, an Algerian project produced by one of the nation's liberation leaders, sides squarely with the oppressed, bomb-planting Arabs? Has any movie ever made a more concise and reasonable
argument for the "low-intensity," low-resource warfare referred to by powerful nations as terrorism? Famously, a reporter in the film asks an Algerian rebel how moral it is to use women's shopping baskets to hide bombs, to which the apprehended man answers, we do not have planes with which to rain munitions on civilians' homes (which is implicitly, then and now, the far more moral action). If you'll give us your planes, he says, we'll hand over our baskets.

Sound familiar? If any movie squeezes you into the shoes of grassroots combatants fighting a monstrous colonialist power for the right to their own neighborhoods, this is it. There are no subplots or comedy relief. A prototype of news-footage realism, the film makes shrewd use of handheld sloppiness, misjudged focus, overexposure, and you-are-there camera upset; the payoff is the scent of authentic panic.

We follow both sides of the combat—the uprising Casbah natives and the merciless if disconcerted French army—from 1954's initiation of the rebellion to the official French victory, in 1957, over the National Liberation Front. It was a Pyrrhic victory, as the harrowing, riot-mad coda makes clear—the terrorist organization may have been rooted out, but the Algerian people still resisted occupation. Hard-edged he may be, but Pontecorvo cannot be called unromantic: Starting with the grifter-turned-assassin-turned-movement-leader Ali La Pointe (Brahim Haggiag), the actors playing the Arab seditionists were all chosen for their soulful beauty. (Not, it's safe to say, for their chops; nearly all of their dialogue is post-dubbed, another factor in the movie's on-the-fly affect.) Lizard-eyed ramrod Colonel Mathieu (Jean Martin, the only pro actor in the cast) is sympathetic insofar as he affects admiration for his antagonists (including co-producer Saadi Yacef, who essentially plays his FLN-leader self after writing the book on which the film was based) as civilian neighborhoods are obliterated into rubble, and a barbed-wire wall with armed checkpoints (!) is erected between Algiers's Muslim and French quarters. French government officials complained that the film's politics were anything but "fair and balanced," and they weren't wrong—it's a revolt anthem, mature enough to document violative extremes on the Algerian side but never surrendering its moral rectitude.

Pontecorvo interview with Edward Said, 1992, Criterion
I believe that it is important to get inside the minds of both sides, the one and the other, the antagonist and the protagonist. The paratroopers, for instance, why should we make them into monsters or like the SS? The condemnation of colonialism, which was our objective, is better served by placing the blame elsewhere, in the structure, in the intransigency of colonialism.

I've always loved situations whose central theme was man's struggle to improve his lot.

When the film was made, in 1965, there were many problems. It seemed to me the only way to win over an audience to a film very different from what they were used to was to impose a dictatorship of truth. That is, to give the impression of a documentary, a newsreel. This despite the fact that it was a work of fiction.