

Algeria's message for Pretoria

A Savage War of Peace - Algeria 1954-62
by Alistair Horne published by Macmillan, London

DOZENS of books, mostly in French, have been written about the Algerian war of independence. This is the first to try and put the whole story together in English, a difficult task on which the author spent three years. Alistair Horne was encouraged to write the book by Harold Macmillan, the former British Prime Minister whose family publishing house accepted the work.

It is now fifteen years since the war came to an end. This time gap, as the author points out, is both still sufficiently recent for many of the participants to make appropriate recollections and sufficiently distant to allow for a historical perspective to be formed.

Horne attributes the lacunae and the occasional contradictions in the evidence to a natural reticence among the Algerian people and a sense of fatalism: the past is the past. It is reasonable to suppose also that the disciplines and distractions imposed by the war, as well as the prudence which must regulate a guerrilla fighter's existence, prohibited the keeping of diaries and journals.

Yet despite the lacunae, *A Savage War of Peace* is a masterly history of the struggle. On practically every page there is sufficient political, military or personal drama to make a book in itself; for Alistair Horne has tried to record rather than to judge. He leaves it to the reader to seek out his own heroes and villains in a story replete with both.

For most readers, the principal villains will be the extremists among the *Pieds noirs*, the extreme right wing of the settler population whose secret army, the OAS, perpetrated the most wanton excesses in the latter stages of the war.

It was this organisation, standing in defiance of France and in defence none the less of *l'Algérie française*, which in the end made it impossible for the settlers it purported to protect to have any future in a free Algeria. Real protection could come only from goodwill, and this the OAS destroyed. In the final great exodus more than a million colons left.

The war, even by twentieth century standards, was a major one. At its end, French estimates put the Muslim dead as follows: 141,000 male combatants killed by the security forces; 12,000 members of the FLN killed in internal purges; 16,000 Muslim civilians killed by the FLN; 50,000 Muslims abducted, and presumed killed, by the FLN. . . . In metropolitan France another 4,000 Algerians were killed.

Today the Algerians put the death toll at one million, a figure which Horne believes to be nearer the truth than the French estimates. The French themselves lost

nearly 18,000 soldiers killed and 'European civilian casualties, caused by 42,090 listed acts of terrorism, are put at over 10,000, among them 2,788 killed (including the OAS victims in the final years of the war). . . .

One figure stands out among the antagonists - the grim, magnificent Charles de Gaulle. The account of how de Gaulle, restored to power in France by the settlers in Algeria, moved step by step towards accommodation with the settlers' enemies, is pregnant with irony.

Horne describes the process and its inherent contradictions with skill. He finds many of the old general's actions and changes of policy difficult to explain. They become less puzzling, however, if one starts from the premise that de Gaulle was *not omniscient and that he did not* have his plans worked out from the very beginning.

It is clear from the record that de Gaulle had no grand strategy for Algeria. He had hopes and ambitions. Above all he wanted Algeria to remain an integral part of France. But he was also a political pragmatist; when it was clear that he could not retain *l'Algérie française* he was prepared to change his stance.

He went through the full range of colonial devices: integration, association, partition, self-determination, and, finally, independence. At each step he conceded more, unwillingly but realistically, to the immovable Algerians. He failed to get what he wanted, but he did what was right. The arch-nationalist of France bent before the new nationalism of Algeria.

Unlike the individual leadership of de Gaulle, that of the Algerians was collective; and on its part the FLN, as grim and as magnificent as *le Grand Charles*, stuck to its guns. Throughout, the Algerians held fast to the principles and objectives with which they had launched their struggle in the manifesto of November 1 1954, proclaiming the *Front de Libération Nationale* as the 'movement of regeneration.'

'The truly remarkable feature of the FLN proclamation,' Horne says '... was that its basic principles were to be adhered to with absolute fidelity during seven and a half years of war, right through to the final settlement.'

The single-mindedness of the FLN was the more remarkable for the collectiveness of its leadership. There was, in truth, a great deal of dissension and quarrelling, the consequences of which are starkly shown in the figure quoted above - 12,000 members. . . killed in internal purges.

Strangely enough, the rifts in the movement's exiled leadership were to escape the otherwise all-pervasive scrutiny of the French intelligence services. More strangely still, the divisions did not notably arrest the momentum of the struggle. But perhaps it is a lesson of history that a people's struggle has its own irresistible momentum.

Certainly, *A Savage War of Peace* offers many lessons to those engaged in a similar conflict of liberation in southern

Africa. Horne refers, inevitably, although in passing, to parallels between Algeria and South Africa. These parallels lie both in events and *attitudes*; they strike the reader with force. It was not, of course, the author's purpose to sound warnings to the rulers of southern Africa; but if the historian's aim in recounting the past is to guide the future then Alistair Horne has amply succeeded.

This book should be compulsory reading in Pretoria, for there the lesson has still to be learned that human dignity is not divisible; it cannot be fed scraps. Algeria shows what happens when the scraps are thrown, too few, too late. If this is understood in Pretoria, then perhaps South Africa will be spared the scale of horror which marked *A Savage War or Peace*.

S.C.