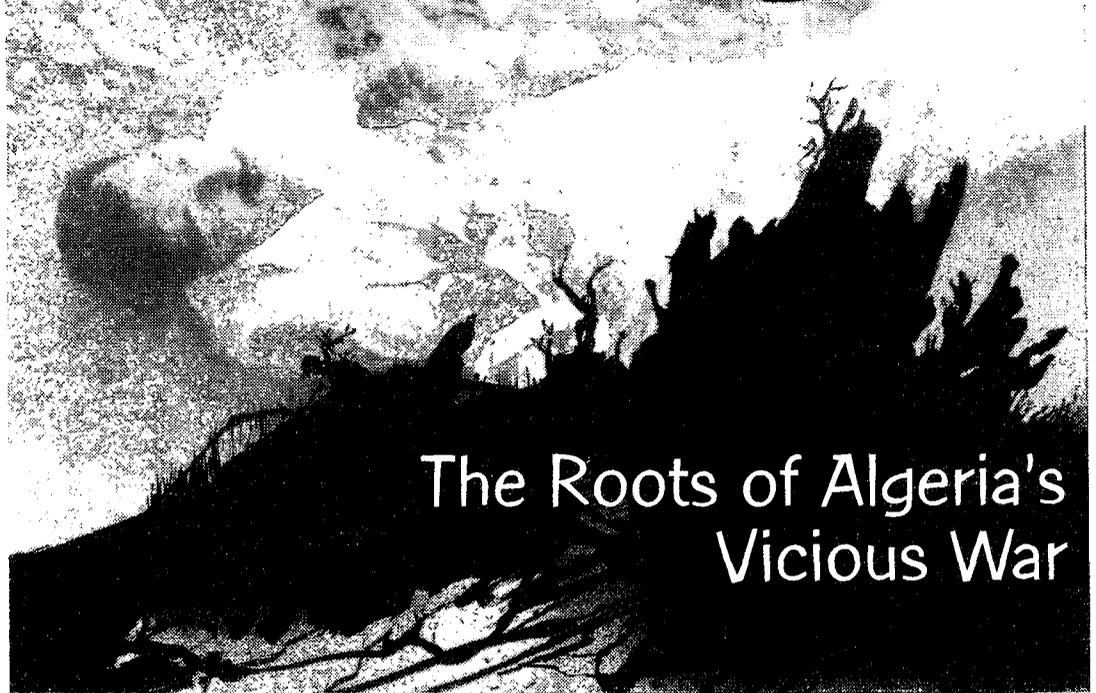


The Battle of Algiers

BY JAMES CIMENT



The Roots of Algeria's Vicious War

The Algiers suburb of Bentalha is a bleak place in the best of times. A maze of dusty streets wind their way around crumbling brick buildings and heaps of burning refuse. Tens of thousands of people live piled on top of each other; extended families share a single apartment with the latrine out back.

The young women escape to the rooftops; the young men, mostly unemployed high school graduates, hang out in the streets and squares, earning the Algerian epithet, *hittiste*, which translates as “those who keep the walls standing” (by leaning against them).

This tedium was shattered on the night of September 22, when the Armed Islamic Group (GIA, its French acronym) descended on the suburb. In four hours of mayhem and bloodshed, the guerrillas massacred more than 85 people.

The scene that greeted rescue workers the next morning was horrific but all too familiar—disemboweled, mutilated and burned bodies on street corners and in living rooms. Bentalha is just one in a series of massacres (three in September alone) that have terrorized the suburbs and towns south of the capital—a region Algerians call “the triangle of death.”

An estimated 60,000 to 100,000 people have lost their lives since the conflict between militant Islamists and government security forces began in early 1992, after the military canceled elections that the fundamentalist Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) was poised to win. Yet the Algerian conflict makes barely a ripple on the global stage because few foreign journalists have

visited the country since a 1993 *fatwa* was issued by Islamist guerrillas calling for the death of “foreign infidels.”

Algeria is unique among the nations of the Arab world. The country was colonized by the Europeans longer than any other Arab nation (from 1830 to 1962) and has undergone the only real anti-colonial struggle in the Arab world (aside, perhaps, from the Palestinians). This history has bestowed on Algerians a complicated mix of revolutionary pride, war-induced secretiveness, deep Muslim faith and Western tastes.

The National Liberation Front (FLN), which led the country to independence from France in a bitter eight-year conflict, ruled Algeria for the nation's first 30 years. Combining a strident anti-imperialist foreign policy with state-led economic development, the FLN lifted Algeria from the colonial morass in which the French had left it to the higher rungs of the Third World ladder. The literacy rate doubled to over 75 percent among men (women still languished below 50 percent), and infant mortality fell by two-thirds.

Blessed with massive fossil fuel reserves discovered shortly before independence, FLN leaders spent lavishly on social welfare programs, industrial infrastructure and themselves. Over time, the party grew corrupt, nepotistic, inefficient and incompetent. With the collapse of oil prices in the '80s, the country nearly went broke, amassing a foreign debt of more than \$26 billion by the early '90s. Austerity measures

imposed by international lenders and privatization schemes concocted by a new generation of Western-educated elites resulted in slashed payrolls at state-run factories and a ravaged social welfare system.

The suffering populace had few outlets for its outrage since the FLN had foreclosed all legal avenues of dissent. It banned opposition parties, muzzled the press, and smothered independent trade unions, youth organizations and agriculture collectives.

The inevitable result was rioting. After the Algerian trade union federation called a general strike on October 5, 1988, violence erupted across the country. The government imposed a state of siege and sent the armed forces to quell the disturbances. In an episode that Algerians refer to as "Black October," troops shot and killed more than 200 demonstrators (the opposition says the toll was closer to 1,500). For many Algerians, the massacre marked the end of the Algerian "revolution" and undermined what little legitimacy the FLN had left.

Genuinely shocked by the violence, the FLN embarked on a democratization program. It lifted restrictions on the press and legalized opposition parties. Despite constitutional prohibitions against religious parties, the government even legalized the FIS. "The FLN thought that the FIS would behave like European parties with the word Christian in them—you know, Islam and Christian as a handle, not a political creed," says Ramtane Lamamra, Algeria's ambassador to the United States.

In retrospect, they probably should have known better. Islamist politics have a long and illustrious history in Algeria. The first sustained rebellion against French invaders in the mid-19th century was premised on the *jihād*, or Islamic holy war. And while the FLN professed a leftist agenda in the mid-20th century, it always couched its appeals to the Algerian people in Islamic terms.

After independence, the FLN tried to harness Islam for its own ends. It took control of the Islamic academic community and appointed local imams (the Muslim equivalent of ministers). In the '70s, the FLN encouraged Islamists in the universities to organize politically, in the hope that they would provide a counterweight to rising leftist activities.

But the Islamists had their own agenda. Through the network of "free mosques" that they established in villages and slums, Islamists provided much-needed social welfare services. The network of mosques also provided a separate space in which Islamists could formulate their distinctive social model and preach a political doctrine of free-market capitalism, revitalized patriarchy and rigid social conformity.

Unlike the Shi'ite forces gathering political momentum in Iran at the same time—with their critique of U.S. imperialism and their calls for an activist Islamist state—Algerian Islamists were a fundamentally conservative lot with few bones to pick with the West—with the exception of France, the villain of virtually every Algerian political creed.

Beginning with municipal elections in 1989, the FIS made its power felt, winning control of over two-thirds of all local village, town and city councils, including the capital of Algiers. The government then tried to undermine the FIS by choking off funds to the councils and changing the rules for

the parliamentary elections, scheduled for June 1991.

Mass demonstrations by Islamists and secular opponents—the latter composed mostly of intellectuals, trade unions and women's organizations—caused the government to postpone the elections until December. But the protests also forced the FLN to back down and repeal the new election laws. The result was an overwhelming FIS victory in the first round.

This victory can be interpreted in two ways. The FLN, the military and the secular opposition believe that the massive turnout for the FIS was a protest vote against the ruling party. While the Islamists acknowledge that anger at the FLN contributed to their triumph, they argue that the vast majority of Algerians support their agenda for the Islamicization of society, politics and the economy.

Not willing to take any chances, the military canceled the second round of elections, temporarily banned all political parties and permanently outlawed the FIS. Claiming to be defending democracy, military officials repeated like a mantra the warning that a FIS victory meant "one man, one vote, one time."

Within weeks of the military coup, armed conflict broke out between security forces and Islamist militants, with each side blaming the other for initiating the violence.

At first, the government claimed the upper hand by jailing thousands of Islamists and their sympathizers regardless of their involvement in guerrilla or terrorist activities. But the strategy backfired. With self-proclaimed non-violent Islamist leaders like Ali Belhadj and Abbasi Madani in jail—and their organizations forced underground—more militant elements came to the forefront. By 1993, the shadowy GIA, formed in 1991, had taken command of the armed struggle.

Secretive and lacking in visible spokesmen, the GIA's political agenda is unclear, though it probably resembles that of the FIS. The main difference between the two seems to be their tactics. When the FIS began to talk of negotiating with the government in 1994, the GIA turned on its former ally and began to assassinate its leaders.

In its six-year history, the GIA has earned a nasty reputation in Algeria and abroad. While some Islamists blame the government for much of the killing, the vast majority of Algerians believe that the GIA is responsible for the murder of foreigners, journalists and villagers, and the rape and murder of more than 500 women for violations of Islamic propriety like going out in public without a veil. French authorities blame GIA terrorists for a spate of bombings in France last year and the hijacking of an Air France jetliner in December 1994.

Government troops—most of whom are poorly-trained conscripts—are no match for the GIA guerrillas, who are well-financed tacticians with a long history of killing behind them. Known popularly in Algeria as "Afghanis," many were trained by and fought for the CIA-financed resistance to the Soviet Union in Afghanistan during the '80s.

"The GIA has a reputation for ferocity, and the conscripts are scared to death of them," says Hamid Kherief, former head of the Algerian-American Association, who recently spent two months traveling around Algeria. The GIA's typical strategy is to send hundreds of guerrillas against areas guarded by

handfuls of soldiers.

The GIA is attacking villagers because most government targets—police stations, public officials and state offices—are now heavily protected. Moreover, it wants to send a message. “The GIA’s mission,” says Kherief, “is to show the people that the army can’t protect them.”

The source of the GIA’s financing is murky. But most believe that the group gets its money and weapons from private interests in Saudi Arabia. Security forces caught FIS leader, Abbasi Madani, with a hefty check from Saudi Prince Cussama bin Ladden in his pocket in 1991.

Rumors abound in Algeria about secret connections between the United States and the Islamists. A 1996 Rand study commissioned by the U.S. Army, which was recently made public, added fuel to the fire. The report downplayed GIA atrocities and advised Washington to work with the Islamists, arguing that they were inevitably going to play a major role in Algerian affairs. It also noted that the Islamists were not necessarily enemies of the United States, since they have openly called for U.S. investment to replace that of the hated French.

In the hothouse atmosphere of Algerian politics, that sort of analysis constitutes tacit, if not direct, support. This, naturally, has raised hackles in both Algiers and Paris. Both governments have made insinuations about the conspicuous absence of Americans among the lists of foreigners killed by Islamists in Algeria.

The prospects for peace in Algeria remain bleak, at least in the immediate future. The security forces are unlikely to curb Islamist attacks. Making their job especially difficult is the fact that there appears to be no centralized GIA leadership. Instead, the group has cells across the country and abroad acting on their own initiative.

Given the austerity measures imposed by international lenders, the government will be hard-pressed to expand housing, job and educational opportunities, even with new gas and oil fields scheduled to come on line by 2000. Moreover, the government has failed to crack down on corruption; management positions at the huge state-run firms largely remain sinecures for members of the political and military elite and their relatives.

Ultimately, the real tragedy of Algeria is the lack of alternatives, and the frustration and despair that breeds. Few enthusiastically support the government and even fewer are optimistic about its capacity to end the fighting or improve the economy soon. Non-violent Islamists say they have been unfairly tarred with charges of terrorism, painted out of the political picture and targeted by security forces. Meanwhile, secular opposition forces are fractured along political, ethnic and class lines.

As one unemployed worker in Algiers asked in exasperation, “Why do we Algerians always have to fight a revolution just to get an apartment?” ■

James Ciment is the author of *Algeria: The Fundamentalist Challenge*, published this year by *Facts on File*. He is currently working on a book about Liberia.

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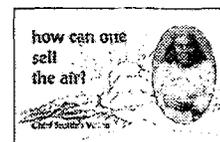
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Holiday Reading

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fiction

By Deidre McFadyen

Canadian poet Anne Michaels' debut novel is a *tour de force*. Every page mesmerizes the reader with incandescent prose and insights into the intricacies of the human heart. **Fugitive Pieces** (Alfred A. Knopf, \$23) traces the life of Jakob Beer, a Polish boy who flees to Greece from the Nazi siege of his homeland. Athos Roussos, a Greek scholar who lives a solitary life surrounded by books, maps and fossils, takes the boy under his wing. After the war, the two migrate to Canada, where Jakob becomes a poet and translator. Little of great moment happens there; Michaels' concern is Jakob's interior drama as he confronts his traumatic past and uses language to bear witness and repair loss.

In her new novel, *¡Yo!* (Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, \$18.95), Julia Alvarez reunites characters from her first work, *How the García Girls Lost their Accents*. Yolanda García, the title character and the author's stand-in, has drawn her family's wrath by using their follies and foibles as the raw material

for her latest celebrated novel. In subsequent chapters, a parade of people whose lives have dovetailed with Yolanda's in profound or tangential ways get revenge by telling their stories. Alvarez uses this literary conceit to play with the notion of self and identity (Yolanda's nickname is "Yo," meaning "I" in Spanish). While the premise may sound strained, Alvarez pulls this novel off with wit and pluck.

Coffee is El Salvador's largest export crop, the source of much of the country's wealth—and misery. It's therefore fitting that its production is the set piece for **Bitter Grounds** (Hyperion, \$22.95), Sandra Benítez's sweeping historical saga of three generations of Salvadoran women. Benítez, who writes in English and lives in Minnesota, probes the class and cultural gulf that divides El Salvador through the interlocking stories of two families: the Contreras, who own the coffee plantation, and the Prietos, a peasant family that picks the crop. While the book sometimes labors under the weight of its epic pretensions, Benítez succeeds in telling a compelling story stuffed with murder, illicit love and betrayal.

"In a person's life, there's always some place that possesses them, I fig-

ure, some place that owns a chunk of your soul," begins **South of Resurrection** (Viking, \$24.95). For Moline Bedwell, the title character, that place is the Ozark town of Resurrection, to which she returns after a 23-year absence. While author Jonis Agee attends to nuances of place, class and regional idiom, her language can be cloying and the plot twists contrived. But readers will be seduced by the novel's affirmation of the possibilities of renewal and second chances.

Don't look for an easy payoff in Deborah Eisenberg's most recent collection of short stories, **All Around Atlantis** (Farrar Straus Giroux, \$23). Eisenberg's stories are full of the compromises, losses and dislocations that mark everyday life. Eisenberg seeks out the moment in people's lives when a sudden change—often a death or break-up—forces them to question their most basic assumptions about themselves and their place in the world. In three of the most engrossing stories in this collection, she punctures the cavalier sense of prepotency and moral immunity of Americans traveling in an unnamed Latin American country—probably Guatemala or southern Mexico—during a brutal counterinsurgency war. ■