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Henri Alleg, *The Question*. Translated from the French by John Calder. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press Bison Books, 2006. xlv + 102 pp. Foreword, introduction, preface, afterword. \$16.95 U.S. (pb) ISBN 0-8032-5960-3.

Review by Kim Munholland, University of Minnesota, Twin Cities.

“Why republish, indeed, why read a book about a journalist who was tortured by French soldiers during the Algerian revolution of the 1950s?” This is the opening question that Ellen Ray poses in her foreword to a new edition of a classic of anti-colonial, prison literature, written nearly fifty years ago, that has immediacy for today’s conflict in Iraq (p. vii). Ellen Ray’s foreword, James D. Le Sueur’s introduction, which provides the historical context and significance of the book’s publication, and a thoughtful afterword by Henri Alleg all connect past and present. The University of Nebraska Press is to be commended for bringing out this classic at a time when testimony from the past has something to offer to current debates over the Iraq war. It also contributes to the ongoing reexamination of what the war and its memory has meant for French society. Jean-Paul Sartre’s “A Victory,” the powerful preface to the original edition was an integral part of *The Question*’s impact in shaping French intellectuals’ opposition to the war in the late 1950s and 1960s. What follows is less a review of the book than a consideration of its significance: as an event in French history and memory of the Algerian War and as a comment upon the continued practices of torture in the context of American military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan.

When *The Question* first appeared in 1958, it immediately caused a sensation. Between 60,000 and 75,000 copies were sold before the French government banned it. This best seller stunned a nation and raised an outcry. Evidence of torture in Algeria had appeared before *The Question*’s publication, but this book, along with the Audin case,^[1] mobilized an opposition to the war, led by prominent French intellectuals. Despite their political differences, Jean-Paul Sartre, François Mauriac, Roger Martin du Gard, and André Malraux protested the government’s seizure of the book and demanded an investigation into Alleg’s charges. In the name of human rights and justice, they called for an official condemnation of the use of torture.^[2] The French intellectual class became engaged.

The book was written as a prison journal, following Alleg’s arrest in June 1957 at the height of the Battle of Algiers. The pages were smuggled out of prison one or two at a time and given to Jérôme Lindon at Éditions de Minuit, who published the full account in 1958. Written under pain and duress, Alleg’s narrative was personal, powerful and yet remarkably detached. This critical detachment on the part of a French citizen describing his torment made his story extremely effective although, as Alleg admitted, “I have never written anything with so much difficulty” (p. 95). To read *The Question* today is to experience Alleg’s pain and, through his eyes, to see his interrogators’ brutality, to feel his contempt and to fathom his determination to defeat them.

After the government’s ban, clandestine copies of *The Question* were smuggled back into France from Switzerland, and it was immediately translated into English and several other languages (p. xv). Despite official government censorship, the book remained popular. A survey of forty-six bookstores in fifteen French towns, taken in April 1958, revealed that *La Question* was second in popularity only to Anne Frank’s *Diary*.^[3] Alleg’s was the first but not the last book to be banned. Twenty-two others fell to official censure between 1959 and the end of the Algerian War in 1962.^[4] While other books also exposed and condemned the use of torture, *The Question* became a major event that turned French

opinion against the Algerian “dirty war,” influenced its course, and exposed the gangrene eating at French society.[5] Finally, it evoked an international response, including sharp criticism in the United States.

Once the Evian agreement was signed in 1962 and Algeria gained its independence in July that year, the official position was to deny that this had been a war and say nothing about the practice of torture. Using his decree powers President Charles de Gaulle granted amnesties to the torturers over the next several years, even those who had been involved in OAS attempts to assassinate him. François Mitterand continued the amnesties under his presidency. An official amnesia, or state of denial, was one way of containing the gangrene, as French attention turned to other issues in a post-colonial world. Not until 1999 would President Jacques Chirac recognize that the war in Algeria was in fact a war and not a domestic insurgency.

The war appeared to be forgotten, and this French “dirty war” that ended in defeat became transformed into a Gaullist myth about an adroit, honorable exit from empire, a step forward in the process of decolonization, bringing with it a new conception of French republicanism shorn of its imperial legacy.[6] Yet the war would not go away, nor was it truly forgotten, despite official silence. The imperial legacy, including the memory of torture in Algeria, persisted as a continuing, racist cancer within the French republic, despite official denial.[7]

The memory of torture in Algeria remained active within popular memory through film, literature, and memoirs. Alleg’s book remained in print, as did other accounts of torture in Algeria. Novels based upon soldiers’ experiences in Algiers, as well as first-hand accounts, described its widespread use. Gillo Pontecorvo’s “The Battle of Algiers (1965)” in which the scenes of torture reflected the influence of Alleg’s *The Question* reminded the nation of how the Algerian War had been fought. A movie version of *La Question* appeared in 1977, as did other movies that enjoyed commercial success. In these movies the issue of torture “obsessed the cinema of the Algerian War.” Polls taken in the 1970s and 1980s showed that French public opinion was fully aware of the use of torture and considered it to be unacceptable. The condemnation was strongest among a younger generation born after the end of the war in Algeria. According to a poll of 17-30 year olds taken in 1991, ninety-four percent believed the army had practiced assassination and torture in Algeria.[8]

The *gangrène* continued to fester. It was lanced by a number of events in the 1990s. One was the publication of Benjamin Stora’s *La Gangrène et l’Oubli: la mémoire de la guerre d’Algérie* (1991) that focused upon the official blocking of memory. A number of scholarly studies followed, and the Algerian War began to replace the Vichy syndrome among the topics that engaged a new generation of historians. Between 1991 and 2004 historians reopened the Algerian question, forcing the political elites to confront the crimes of the past.[9]

While the scholarly turn was significant in prying open the official memory of the Algerian War, two memoirs shocked the nation, as had Alleg’s *The Question* nearly fifty years earlier, by reopening the issue of torture. On June 20, 2000 *Le Monde* published an interview with Louise Ighiharhiz in which she revealed that she had been tortured and raped by officers of the Tenth Paratroop Division under the command of General Jacques Massu during the Battle of Algiers. She indicated that Massu himself had witnessed her agony, as had Colonel Marcel Bigeard. Louise Ighiharhiz’s purpose in giving the interview was to discover the fate of Dr. Francis Richaud, whom she credited with saving her life.[10]

Confronted with Louise’s accusations, General Massu denied having been present during her torture, but he regretted its use, which he said was not necessary. In his account, Bigeard accused Louise Ighiharhiz of lying, as Jim Le Sueur notes in his introduction (p. xxii). Bigeard then went on to accuse those who brought up the issue of torture of being communists or intellectuals whose “treason” gave comfort to the FLN during the war. By reviving the issue Bigeard claimed, citing former defense

minister Pierre Messmer, that these same intellectuals and leftists were creating an obstacle to French-Algerian reconciliation and dishonoring the Army. He justified the French Army's practices as necessary to counter the atrocities committed by the FLN.[11]

The most astonishing response to the Ighilarhiz interview was that of General Paul Aussaresses, who not only admitted but boasted about using torture and personally claimed credit for "disappearing" twenty-four Muslim members of the FLN. He, too, wrote a book in which he was unrepentant and said that if faced with the same situation, he would do it again.[12] The pardon of the state immunized him from prosecution for crimes against humanity, but he was tried for "justifying war crimes" and fined 7,500 euros and deprived of his Legion of Honor (p. xxii). He also lost certain tax benefits and his right to reduced fares on the SNCF. Whatever defenses or, in the case of Massu, semi-apologies were made, the "Aussaresses affair" revealed that the issue of torture during the Algerian War was another of those events in contemporary French history that would not go away. The issues raised at the time of Alleg's publication and in Sartre's preface retained a moral dimension in their critique of the methods employed by the French in the conduct of their wars of decolonization. This central issue is now being confronted, even if, as Alleg argues in the afterword to the new edition of his book, minimally (pp. 100-101).

What, then, is the relevance of *The Question* and the French debate over torture within the context of the U.S. led invasion and occupation of Iraq? The obvious answer is that torture is again being used, seen in the television images of Abu Ghraib, reports and testimonies from Guantanamo Bay and Baghram in Afghanistan, which has "rightly scandalized the American public," according to Ellen Ray (pp. vi-vii).

Yet, if scandalized, the growing opposition to the war has not mobilized the public or American intellectuals in the way that Alleg's *The Question* mobilized a French opposition. Central to the French intellectual elites' protest was the immorality of such practice. Scenes of torture on television, testimonies from the camps and legal briefs filed on behalf of detainees' civil rights have not driven the American opposition to the Iraq war. This opposition has been expressed primarily in terms of "a mistake" or a blunder: that is, an instrumental rather than a moral argument.[13] Americans have not experienced the effect--the outrage--that the Alleg/Audin affair produced in France in 1958, despite the fact that the United States military has employed the same methods in Iraq, Cuba and Afghanistan that the French Army employed during the Algerian war. As George Herring notes, "...the process of intellectual engagement that Schalk recounts for Algeria and Vietnam has not recurred." [14] Why is that? After all, Vietnam produced protest, civil disobedience and a mobilization of the intellectuals, including prominent clergy, in the United States during those years, but the intellectuals' protests against the war in Iraq have been relatively muted or at least channeled away from the moral issue of torture.

One can only speculate, and no doubt many reasons may be put forward to explain the absence of a stronger, public protest against the illegal and brutal use of torture. One, of course, is the absence of a draft. When President Nixon eliminated the draft, military service became optional, an individual choice rather than an obligation of citizenship.[15] Yet reservists, what we have left of a citizen army, conducted the atrocities at Abu Ghraib and were tried by a hierarchy that washed its hands of the affair. The American public witnessed torture and humiliation on its television sets and was appalled at what it saw, yet the outrage that followed the publication of Alleg's *The Question*, did not follow Abu Ghraib. As Ellen Ray has observed, "The ordinary French citizen was outraged" but in the United States public opinion "has become anesthetized to what is happening" (p. xi).

To be sure, images from the Vietnam War projected into American living rooms had a significant impact upon the opposition to that war. Since then the constant bombardment of images of violence may have produced the anesthesia that Ray finds in response to torture in Iraq, Guantanamo and Afghanistan. We have reports, by Seymour Hersh in *The New Yorker*, subsequently published, and

direct testimonies by those who have endured torture.[16] Still, we have not had the Alleg effect in the United States. Intellectuals have protested in print and deplored violations of human rights and international conventions, but, as noted above, this has not driven the recent opposition to the war. David Schalk gives two essential conditions for intellectuals to become engaged: “a government in power must do something stupid and evil enough to elicit a profound moral reaction from its intellectual elites.” Critics of the war in Iraq have given more attention to its stupidity than its evilness. The second condition is “a minimal possibility that intellectual engagement would have a discernable impact on the surrounding society and have some influence on the decisions of political and military leaders.”[17] Despite early protests the moral stage of the intellectuals’ protest seems to be secondary to realist arguments. Politicians and the media pay more attention to polls than to the arguments of intellectuals.

A possible explanation is that the intellectual, as a bearer of conscience, has become marginalized in the United States. The role of the intellectual as moralist in France has always been more powerful than in the United States where a distinct strain of populist anti-intellectualism produces a suspicion of intellectual elites.[18] Americans appreciate intellectuals more as experts than as moralists who raise uncomfortable questions about a democratic society remaining true to its values. Early on the Bush administration tried to preempt any criticism of the way Bush’s war on terror would be waged. His statement that in the war on terror one was either for or against “us” was an attempt to discredit both foreign and domestic critics of the war and silence dissent by implying that questioning the war was unpatriotic. In their interrogation of Henri Alleg, the French Army used the same tactic. Alleg was accused of being a communist and someone who sided with the enemy. At one point one of the interrogators denounced Alleg’s treason, “Well a Frenchman! He’s sided with the rats against us? You’ll take care of him, won’t you Lo—!” (p. 41). Bush’s division of the world similarly was a preemptive strike to intimidate any domestic opposition to the war. It has not worked, although it has compelled critics of the war to make their criticisms on practical grounds.

What, then, does the new edition of *The Question* bring to present debates over the war in Iraq? Why, to paraphrase the initial question, should it be read? One answer is as mentioned above: the immediacy of the victim’s inner experience that gives emotional depth to the observed results of torture on television or movie screens. Secondly, Henri Alleg’s *The Question* brings a moral dimension to the discussion. Finally, it reveals who were the victors in the Algerian War. We know that before going to war the Pentagon screened Pontecorvo’s “The Battle of Algiers,” apparently concluding that the Battle for Baghdad could be won with the application of force and violence. As it turned out, this was the wrong lesson learned.[19] The military victory in the Battle of Algiers was Massu’s (or President Bush’s landing on the aircraft carrier after the fall of Baghdad), while the moral victory was Alleg’s that Sartre wrote about in his preface to *The Question*. The battle had been won, but the war was lost. The FLN refused to go away. They kept in the field, often on the run, but could not be eliminated or contained either by Massu’s Tenth Paratroop Division or the 500,000 troops, mostly draftees, that the French committed to Algeria. For the French Army the Battle of Algiers, as Matt Connolly notes, was “a Pyrrhic victory.”[20] Despite the record of FLN atrocities, French and world opinion, including that in the United States, turned against the conduct of the war in Algeria, in good measure as a result of Henri Alleg’s *The Question*, which well deserves a second reading. Will it be read and understood in Washington? One wonders.[21]

NOTES

[1] French paratroops arrested Maurice Audin, a mathematics professor at the University of Algiers, twenty-four hours before they trapped Alleg. Audin then “disappeared” shortly after Alleg’s encounter with Audin in prison. It was later revealed that Audin had been killed during his interrogation and his

disappearance was a cover-up.

[2] Cited in David L. Schalk, *War and the Ivory Tower: Algeria and Vietnam* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 67-8. The University of Nebraska Press has just published a paperback edition of David Schalk's book with a new introduction by the author and prefaces by Benjamin Stora and George C. Herring (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2005).

[3] William B. Cohen, "The Sudden Memory of Torture: The Algerian War in French Discourse, 2000-2001," *French Politics, Culture and Society* 19/3 (Fall 2001): 83.

[4] Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Face à la raison d'État: Un historien dans la guerre d'Algérie* (Paris: Découverte, 1989), p. 25.

[5] Alexis Berchadsky, *La Question d'Henri Alleg: Un livre-événement dans la France en guerre d'Algérie* (juin 1957-juin 1958), preface by Marc Michel (Paris: Découverte, 1994).

[6] This is a major thesis of Todd Shepard's *The Invention of Decolonization: The Algerian War and the Remaking of France* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2006).

[7] The term "gangrene" first appeared in 1959 when Minuit published in *La Gangrène* five accounts of Algerians who had been tortured. See James D. Le Sueur, preface by Pierre Bourdieu, *Uncivil War: Intellectuals and Identity Politics during the Decolonization of Algeria* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001; Second edition, University of Nebraska Press, 2006): pp. 204-05. The term appears in the title of Benjamin Stora's path-breaking work, *La Gangrène et l'Oubli: la mémoire de la guerre d'Algérie* (Paris: La Découverte, 1991).

[8] This account of the way in which a popular, as opposed to an official, memory was retained is based upon William B. Cohen, "The Sudden Memory of Torture," pp. 83-84. This brief article (and others) reminds us of the loss suffered when Bill's untimely death prevented completion of his book on the Algerian War and French memory.

[9] Examples of this scholarly interest may be found in Mohammed Harbi and Benjamin Stora, eds. *La Guerre d'Algérie: 1954-2004 la fin de l'amnésie* (Paris: Laffont, 2004), which includes Raphaëlle Branche's article, "La torture pendant la guerre d'Algérie," taken from her book, *La Torture et l'armée pendant la guerre d'Algérie: 1954-1962* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001).

[10] In her search she discovered that Dr. Richaud had died three years before the interview. This quest to find and honor Dr. Richaud and her memoir of her torture, escape and subsequent life is told in Louisette Ighilahriz, *Algérienne, récit recueilli par Anne Nivat* (Paris: Fayard/Calmann-Lévy, 2001).

[11] Général Bigeard, *J'ai mal à la France* (Ostwald: Les Éditions du Polygone), pp. 41, 204-05.

[12] General Aussaresses boasted of how after the Algerian War he served at Fort Benning and Fort Bragg, instructing American Special Forces officers heading for Vietnam. Général Aussaresses, *Services Spéciaux: Algérie 1955-1957* (Paris: Perrin, 2001), p. 196.

[13] To cite one example, one of the most devastating critiques of the Bush administration's conduct of the war in Iraq, Thomas E. Ricks, *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq* (New York: Penguin Press, 2006) devotes seven pages, 290-297, to Abu Ghraib. However, his main focus is upon mistaken assumptions, flawed leadership, lack of intelligence and incompetence to denounce what is wrong with the way the war in Iraq has been conducted. The critique is devastating but the issue of torture is not central.

- [14] George Herring's preface "Vietnam" to Schalk, *War and the Ivory Tower* (2005 ed.), xiv.
- [15] Andrew J. Bacevich, *How Americans Are Seduced by War* (Oxford: University Press, 2005), pp. 26-27.
- [16] A recent account is Moazzam Begg with Victoria Brittain, *Enemy Combattant: My Imprisonment at Guantánamo, Bagram, and Kandahar* (New York: New Press, 2006).
- [17] Schalk, "Introduction to the New Edition," *War and the Ivory Tower* (2005), xvi, 170.
- [18] Schalk has explored the situation of the intellectual classes in France and the United States, noting that in France there has been a sense of crisis with some commentators, such as Jean-François Sirinelli, looking back upon the activism of the Algerian War as an Indian Summer for the engaged intellectual. Schalk, *War and the Ivory Tower*, pp. xvi-xx.
- [19] Sheila K. Johnson, "The Battle of Algiers and Its Lessons," published September 7, 2003 by TomDispatch.com and available on <http://www.commondreams.org/>
- [20] Matthew Connolly, *A Diplomatic Revolution: Algeria's Fight for Independence and the Origin of the Post-Cold War Era* (Oxford: University Press, 2002), pp. 131-32.
- [21] As this essay heads to press, Maureen Dowd's article in the *New York Times* discusses President George W. Bush's reading of Alistair Horne's *Savage War of Peace* on the recommendation of Henry Kissinger. Maureen Dowd interviews Alistair Horne and provides the following account: "In May 2005, Mr. Horne gave a copy of his book to Rummy, with passages about torture underlined. 'I got a savage letter back from him,' the author said." Maureen Dowd, "Aux Barricades!" *New York Times*, January 17, 2007, p. A23. One need wonder no longer.

Kim Munholland University of Minnesota, Twin Cities munho001@umn.edu

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