

France in the age of *Bonjour Tristesse*

I. Introduction

Bonjour Tristesse, the first novel of Françoise Sagan, was published in 1954. Set in a wealthy family's hired holiday home on the Côte d'Azur, the novel at once both reflects and subverts *la vie bourgeoise* in the postwar years, and yet it is also a surprisingly self-contained text, with almost no commentary on the issues that faced France in the mid-1950s.

Between March and May 1954, the year of the book's publication, France suffered a catastrophic defeat at the hands of Communist insurgents in its colony of Indo-China, at the **Battle of Dien Bien Phu**, which soon led to the partition of Vietnam. The roots of the near two decade war between the US-backed South Vietnam and the Chinese and Russian-backed North Vietnam can be found in the 1954 settlement that followed Dien Bien Phu. At the same time France was also dealing with a national uprising in another colony, **Algeria**. Whereas the effects of the Indo-Chinese war were most strongly felt in Asia, those of the Algerian war would rock France to its foundations. A few months after the publication of *Bonjour Tristesse*, in November 1954, the existing low level Algerian insurgency broke out into a full scale civil war. Disagreements within France's military and political leadership over the direction and conduct of this war would lead to the fall of the Fourth Republic, the threat of an army mutiny, and terrorism on the streets of Paris. The agony of Algeria would not end until France's withdrawal in 1962. France's process of decolonisation was traumatic and brutal – and the legacy of the Algerian war continues to influence French politics today, as many French army veterans and white former colonists joined *Le Front National*, founded in 1972.

The 1950s was a decade in which memories of the Second World War, in public at least, ceased to be the main focal point of public debate and political life. Politically, France was in an uneasy truce across the 1950s – a powerful Communist left had not forgiven the conservative and Catholic establishment for its support for the Nazis' Vichy puppet state, while Charles de Gaulle remained for most of the decade on the margins of power. Radical new proposals emerged in 1950-1951 for the merging of the French and German Coal and Steel industries, which would later become the EEC in 1957, the forerunner of the present EU. Many in France simply wanted to forget the lean years of rationing and the bitter memories of German occupation and its aftermath. Sagan was only nine years old when the Second World War ended, and the book does not contain a single reference to this cataclysm.

Some of Sagan's early critics dismissed her work as an 18 year-old's self-indulgent fantasy of night clubs, fast cars and romance. And yet it is far more than this. Sagan was chronicling the rebirth of a South of France that had been ravaged by wartime occupation, atrocity and eventual liberation in August 1944. Once more the Cote d'Azur was becoming the playground of the international jet-set. The Cannes Film Festival had been inaugurated in 1946, and in 1955 the *Palme d'Or* was instituted as the main prize. That same year **Grace Kelly** met **Prince Rainier of Monaco**. By the end of the decade stars such as **Brigitte Bardot** and Marilyn Monroe were making Cannes the centre of world press attention for ten days every April or May. **Christian Dior's New Look** had already re-established Paris as the global capital of fashion, making femininity rather than utility the new priority in design. While it would be premature to talk of a feminist *movement* at this time, 1949 had seen the publication of one of modern France's most controversial texts, **Simone de Beauvoir's *Le Deuxième Sexe***, and Sagan herself would later become associated with feminist causes of the 60s and 70s including abortion law reform.



Christian Dior



Christian de Castries – French commander at Dien Bien Phu, 1954



Beginning of the Algerian national uprising | November 1954

2. French Politics in the 1950s

French politics in the 1950s was highly chaotic and unstable, but essentially peaceful and democratic. Whereas in Britain there was basically a two party system with the possibility of one party gaining a clear majority (such as Labour in 1945, or the Conservatives in 1951), French political parties tended to be fragile coalitions. Regional attachment was very important, and French politicians tended to be loyal to, and motivated by, their local political base as much as by their national party.

French governments were formed when the President of the Republic appointed a Prime Minister who could hold together (even if only briefly) a majority in the *Assemblée Nationale*. The President from 1954-1959 was **René Coty**, a figure of limited charisma and energy. Between 1947 and 1958 there was an average of at least one Prime Minister per year, a symptom of the tendencies of parties to fragment and re-emerge, sometimes forming new but temporary coalitions.

In the year that *Bonjour Tristesse* was published the Prime Minister was **Pierre Mendès France**. A Socialist and a Portuguese Jew by ancestry, he had been elected to the *Assemblée Nationale* in 1932, and first served in government in the leftist **Popular Front** of 1936, later becoming an officer in the French Air Force when war broke out. After France's defeat in 1940, he rejected the Vichy Collaborationist regime, and was imprisoned but fled to North Africa the following year, joining the Free French and pledging allegiance to **Charles de Gaulle**.¹ At the Liberation Mendès France was made a government minister by de Gaulle, but then split with him over the issue of wages and prices (he wanted price limits to protect the poor), and returned to his 1930s left-wing roots as a Radical.

With the backing of *L'Express* newspaper, Mendès France wanted to restore a strong republic and appealed across parties, causing further fragmentation and realignment of political groupings. During his Prime Ministership he negotiated an end to France's war in Indo-China in 1954. However in January 1956 the radical party itself split and Mendès France could no longer command a majority and resigned.

Just over two years later, amid the growing turmoil of the Algerian Crisis, the Fourth Republic collapsed, as mutinying French Army generals in Algiers on 13 May 1958 called for the return of De Gaulle. Fearing both an army coup from the right, and a Communist counter-coup from the left, the main political parties invited De Gaulle (not at that time an elected politician) to return to power and form a government. De Gaulle would dominate French politics for the remainder of his life briefly as Prime Minister (1958-9), but longer as President (1959-1969). He died in 1970.



Mendès France and De Gaulle, 1945. Allies – for a while at least



Jacques Massu – France's most controversial soldier of the post-war period, accused by the French left of using torture in Algeria. One of the generals behind the fall of the Fourth Republic in April-May 1958

¹ Mendès France describes his escape in the Marcel Ophüls documentary *Le Chagrin et le Pitié* (1969), Part I, from 1hr, 16 mins.

3. Les Trente Glorieuses ?

The 1950s are commonly seen as the first decade of the so-called *Trente Glorieuses*, the 30 years of economic growth that ran from liberation until the petroleum price shocks of the mid-1970s. However, France was still a country with significant poverty, especially in rural areas and among the urban working classes. On 1 February 1954 **Henri Grouès**, a Catholic priest, former Resistance leader, and a shelterer of Jews in wartime Grenoble, made a broadcast on Radio Luxembourg. Speaking under his wartime cognomen of **Abbé Pierre**, he described a very different world to that of Sagan's *Bonjour Tristesse*:

Mes amis, au secours...

Une femme vient de mourir gelée, cette nuit à 3 heures, sur le trottoir du boulevard Sébastopol, serrant sur elle le papier par lequel, avant-hier, on l'avait expulsée. Chaque nuit, ils sont plus de 2000 recroquevillés sous le gel, sans toit, sans pain, plus d'un presque nu. Devant l'horreur, les cités d'urgence, ce n'est même plus assez urgent!

Écoutez-moi ! En trois heures, deux premiers centres de dépannage viennent de se créer : l'un sous la tente au pied du Panthéon, rue de la Montagne Sainte Geneviève; l'autre à Courbevoie. Ils regorgent déjà, il faut en ouvrir partout. Il faut que ce soir-même, dans toutes les villes de France, dans chaque quartier de Paris, des pancartes s'accrochent sous une lumière dans la nuit, à la porte de lieux où il y ait couvertures, paille, soupe, et où l'on lise sous ce titre « centre fraternel de dépannage », ces simples mots : « Toi qui souffres, qui que tu sois, entre, dors, mange, reprends espoir, ici on t'aime ».

La météo annonce un mois de gelées terribles. Tant que dure l'hiver, que ces centres subsistent, devant leurs frères mourant de misère, une seule opinion doit exister entre hommes : la volonté de rendre impossible que cela dure. Je vous prie, aimons-nous assez tout de suite pour faire cela. Que tant de douleur nous ait rendu cette chose merveilleuse : l'âme commune de la France. Merci! Chacun de nous peut venir en aide aux sans abri. Il nous faut pour ce soir, et au plus tard pour demain: 5.000 couvertures, 300 grandes tentes américaines, 200 poêles catalytiques.

Déposez-les vite à l'hôtel Rochester, 92, rue de la Boétie ! Rendez-vous des volontaires et des camions pour le ramassage, ce soir à 23 heures, devant la tente de la montagne Sainte Geneviève.

Grâce à vous, aucun homme, aucun gosse ne couchera ce soir sur l'asphalte ou sur les quais de Paris.²

Abbé Pierre's appeal and call for an *insurrection de la bonté* led to the founding of the **Emmaüs** charity, and support from the unlikely quarter of the socially and politically conservative [Le Figaro](#). While the 1950s was a transformative decade, best known for its leaps in productivity and household purchasing power, over 73% of Parisian homes in 1958 still had no bathroom, and 37% of all French people lived in overcrowded conditions.

Like in Britain, centralised economic planning was in vogue in the 1950s, and its architect in France was **Jean Monnet**, a highly experienced technocrat who had negotiated US war loans in 1940, and who is widely regarded as the founder of the EU. Annual growth reached 6% in the 1950s (double that of Britain), and the lives of women were in particular transformed by labour saving devices in the home, such as *le frigo* and *la machine à laver*. Magazines such as [Elle](#) and [Marie-Claire](#) were initially geared towards celebrating the domestic role of the 1950s housewife. The mid 1950s also witnessed the growth of motoring, with Citroën marketing the 2CV for the ordinary farmer, and for the bourgeoisie the iconic *Déesse*, of which the Philosopher Roland Barthes wrote in 1957: «*La nouvelle Citroën tombe manifestement du ciel dans la mesure où elle se présente d'abord comme un objet superlatif.*»³ (Sagan herself had a lifelong love of cars, which are mentioned frequently in *Bonjour Tristesse*.)

One of the factors powering the economic growth of the 1950s was the growth of population, both through an increased birthrate in peacetime, and increased immigration, some of which was due to returning colonists from Indo-China and Africa. Housing poverty remained an acute issue, and shanty-towns (**Bidonvilles**) of migrant workers and the homeless grew up in the mid-1950s around the outskirts of Paris, such as at Créteil and Nanterre, which were later redeveloped as new towns. The mid 1950s also saw the mass building of municipally owned rented housing, the **HLM** (*Habitation à Loyer Modéré*).

In the French countryside a combination of increased mechanisation and migration to the cities, transformed rural life. Tens of thousands of semi-subsistence *paysan* households were replaced more economically viable commercial farmers

² <https://radionotredame.net/2014/societe/il-y-a-60-ans-le-1er-fevrier-1954-labbe-pierre-lancait-son-appel-21563/>

³ <http://www.citroenet.org.uk/passenger-cars/michelin/ds/32.html>

(cultivateurs). However, in the Southern départements agriculture was slow to modernise, and gradually a great divide emerged between the *cultivateurs* of the north and the *paysans* of the south.

4. Women's lives

Any consideration of women's lives in the 1950s cannot go far without referring to Simone de Beauvoir's *Le Deuxième Sexe*. De Beauvoir's analysis of the condition of women was heavily shaped by her Existentialist philosophy and her connections to **Jean Paul Sartre**. A woman was « *l'autre* », marginalised by male society because of her sex. De Beauvoir regarded women as an oppressed cast, divided and isolated by marriage and motherhood. The immediate effect of this text was to attract ridicule and criticism, even from the left, as well as the predictable condemnation from conservative and catholic circles when reading claims such as « *le principe du mariage est obscene* ». The judgement of *Le Figaro Littéraire* (Novembre 1949) that « *Cette tentative de destruction de la femme par une femme de lettres est d'abord pénible, et m'a laissé plus affligé de lassitude que de dégoût* » was typical of the reaction of male reviewers.

Extrait de *Le Deuxième Sexe*, vol ii, 'La Mère' (Gallimard, 1949) quoted in *The Condition of Women in France, 1945 to the Present, a documentary anthology*, ed. C. Laubier (Routledge, 1990), p. 23.

(L'avortement)

Il est peu de sujets sur lesquels la société bourgeoise déploie plus d'hypocrisie: l'avortement est un crime repugnant auquel il est indécent de faire allusion. Qu'un écrivain décrive les joies et les souffrances d'une accouchée, c'est parfait; qu'il parle d'une avortée, on l'accuse de se vautrer dans l'ordure et de décrire l'humanité sous un jour abject: or, il y a en France chaque année autant d'avortements que de naissances. C'est un phénomène si répandu qu'il faut les considérer comme un des risques normalement impliqués par la condition féminine. Le code s'obstine cependant, à en faire un délit: il exige que cette opération délicate soit exécutée clandestinement. Rien de plus absurde que les arguments invoqués contre la législation de l'avortement. On prétend que c'est une intervention dangereuse....

C'est au contraire sous sa forme actuelle qu'il fait courir à la femme de grands risques. Le manque de compétence des «faiseuses d'anges», les conditions dans lesquelles elles opèrent, engendrent quantité d'accidents, parfois mortels. La maternité forcée aboutit à jeter dans le monde des enfants chétifs, que leur parents seront incapables de nourrir, qui deviendront les victimes de l'Assistance publique ou des « enfants martyrs ». Il faut remarquer d'ailleurs que la société si acharnée à défendre les droits de l'embryon se désintéresse des enfants dès qu'ils sont nés...

Le Deuxième Sexe, vol ii, 'Formation' (Laubier, p.25)

On ne naît pas femme: on le devient. Aucun destin biologique, psychique, économique ne définit la figure que revêt au sein de la société la femelle humaine; c'est l'ensemble de la civilisation qui élabore ce produit intermédiaire entre le mâle et le castrat qu'on qualifie de féminin. Seule la médiation d'autrui peut constituer un individu comme un Autre. En tant qu'il existe pour soi, l'enfant ne saurait se saisir comme sexuellement différencié.

Le Deuxième Sexe, vol ii, 'La Femme mariée' (Laubier, p.27)

... le travail que la femme exécute à l'intérieur du foyer ne lui confère pas une autonomie; il n'est pas directement utile à la collectivité, il n'est débouché pas sur l'avenir, il ne produit rien. Il ne prend son sens et sa dignité que s'il est intégré à des existences qui se dépassent vers la société dans la production ou l'action: c'est dire que, loin d'affranchir la matrone il la met dans la dépendance du mari et des enfants; c'est à travers eux qu'elle se justifie: elle n'est dans leurs vie qu'une méditation inessentielle. Que le code ait effacé de ses devoirs « l'obéissance » ne change rien à sa situation; celle-ci ne repose pas sur la volonté des époux mais sur la structure même de la communauté conjugale. Il n'est pas permis à la femme de faire une oeuvre positive et par conséquent de se faire une oeuvre positive et par conséquent de se faire reconnaître comme une personne achevée.

Le Deuxième Sexe, vol ii, 'La Femme indépendante' (Laubier, p.27)

C'est par le travail que la femme a en grande partie franchi la distance qui la séparait du mâle; c'est le travail qui peut seul lui garantir une liberté concrète. Dès qu'elle cesse d'être une parasite, le système fondé sur sa dépendance s'écroule; entre elle et l'univers il n'est plus besoin d'un médiateur masculin. La malédiction qui pèse sur la femme vassale, c'est qu'il ne lui est permis de rien faire: alors, elle s'entête dans l'impossible poursuite de l'être à travers le narcissisme, l'amour, la religion;

productrice, active, elle reconquiert sa transcendance; dans ces projets elle s'affirme concrètement comme sujet; par son rapport avec le but qu'elle poursuit, avec l'argent et le droit qu'elle s'approprie, elle éprouve sa responsabilité.

De Beauvoir's text was a remarkable manifesto, a cry of anger and a cutting analysis of the lives of French women in the years immediately after the Second World War. Ten years later, in its December 1959 issue, **Elle** summarised eighteen changes that it thought had been most important for everyday life. Some, such as no. 4, would have been approved by De Beauvoir, others she would doubtless have viewed as more trivial.

Elle, décembre 1959. Ces idées, ces héros, ces objets, expliquent l'histoire d'une décade [All taken from Laubier, p.32]

1. Le Microsillon tourne en France, depuis 1951. Le vente des électrophones (50,000 in '56) décuple.
2. Le transistor est vendu on France en 1957.
3. Le permis de conduire a été attribué à près de 200,000 femmes dans l'année. En 1949 à 26,000 femmes seulement.
4. L'accouchement sans douleur naît à Paris en 1952. Les methods et les centres officiels de preparation se multiplient. Et, depuis le 2 février 1955, les mamans ont obtenu un congé-payé et post-natal de 14 semaines au lieu de 12.
5. Le Self-Service se répand en France en 1953. Un seul ticket de caisse totalise vos achats.
6. Le mur de son est franchi pour la première fois en France le 28 Octobre 1952 sur "Mystere II."
7. Les textiles artificiels, à partir de 1950, se perfectionnent et se répandent.
8. Brigitte Bardot épouse en décembre 1952 Roger Vadim, qui en fait « BB ». Avec premier film de Vadim, BB lance la nouvelle vague, qui s'illustrera avec Resnais, Malle, Truffaut, Chabrol.
9. Le Potage en Sachet a juste 10 ans et se mange bien.
10. James Dean, hero de « La Fureur de Vivre » devient le héros d'une certaine jeunesse internationale, romantique, nonchalant et violente. A 24 ans, le 30 septembre 1959, l'idole se tue au volant d'un bolide.
11. De Gaulle devient le premier président de la Vième République et de la Communauté. La nouvelle Constitution a été adopté par referendum le 28 Septembre 1958. Pour la France, l'Algerie et les pays d'Outre Mer, il y avait eu 31,066, 522 « oui », soit 84.9% s'inscrits.
12. Le Pret à porter s'industrialise, s'améliore, s'épanouit à partir de 1950.
13. Le Collant des danseuses est adopté par toutes les jeunes filles et les femmes frileuses depuis 1956.
14. Le Tailleur Chanel habile les femmes du monde entire. Mme Chanel a fait sa rentrée et sa révolution dans le monde de la couture en '53, après 15 ans d'absence.
15. Le Mixer, précédé de la machine à laver et suivi du moulin à café café électrique, tourbillonne en France depuis 9 ans.
16. Un livret de caisse d'épargne peut être ouvert par une femme mariée sans « l'assistance » de son mari depuis le 27 June 1952.
17. **Bonjour Tristesse**, sorti en Mars 1954, atteint aujourd'hui un tirage de 4 millions d'exemplaires. Encouragés par le succès de cette romancière de 18 ans, jeunes filles et dames écrivent un tiers des romans qui paraissent en France.
18. La Matière Plastique enchante les ménagères. Mais, de 1950 à 1960, le budget de la ménagère a beaucoup varié, 2 pain: 35 fr en 50, 56 fr en 59; le litre de lait: 37 fr en 50, 59 fr en 59.

5. Indochina

France's empire, like that of Britain, not only survived the First World War but gained in extent at the expense of the defeated Germany and Turkey. But during the 1920s and 1930s nationalism in Asia and Africa became ever more challenging to the notion of European rule. The Communist revolutions in Russia in 1917, and then later in China in 1949, were taken as encouragement by nationalists in Africa and Asia.

Britain and France emerged weakened and impoverished from the Second World War. Both countries had suffered significant disruption to their trade, and both had transferred vast assets to the USA in order to buy military equipment. Nationalists across the world sensed this weakness, and heightened agitation for independence began in the French and British empires, even before the war against Germany and Japan had been won.



A recruiting poster in early 1950s France recruiting men for the Indochinese war. The tank and the *Croix de Lorraine* are a direct appeal to those French soldiers and resisters who had fought the Germans in 1944-45.

“Strasbourg” had been a slogan of the Free French Army, which declared France to be finally liberated on 23 November 1944, when the *Tricolore* flew again from Strasbourg Cathedral.

In September 1945 the Vietnamese nationalist leader **Ho Chi Minh** (who had first made his demands during the 1919 Versailles Peace Conference) declared an independent republic. As the French had very few soldiers in place, in March 1946, they agreed to Ho's demands for a Republic inside a French Indo-Chinese Federation. However, as Ho Chi Minh travelled to France to negotiate with Foreign Minister **Georges Bidault**, the French leader in Saigon, **Thierry d'Argenlieu**, undercut the deal by declaring a French-ruled republic in Saigon. Ho Chi Minh left the talks at Fontainebleau with no concessions from France, and war broke out. On 23 November 1946 the port of Haiphong was bombed by the French Air Force causing large numbers of civilian casualties. From the Autumn of 1949 Ho Chi Minh was receiving military aid from his fellow Communist, the ruler of China, Mao Tse Tung.

According to Kedward, (*La Vie en Bleu*, p.32) around 560,000 soldiers were raised to fight in Indo China, but the great majority was from Africa and Vietnam, and only about 70,000 were French. As no conscription was imposed for the Indo-Chinese war, it had a low profile in France until the disastrous year of 1954. In March 1954 French paratroopers were surrounded and besieged by General **Vo Nguyen Giap** at Dien Bien Phu. 1,500 French soldiers were killed, and 10,000 were captured.

On 21 July 1954 Vietnam was partitioned in an agreement reached in Geneva. The Communist north was now an independent state, while the South was in the American sphere of influence. Increasingly, the powerful **Parti Communist Français** (PCF) attacked France's colonial strategy of using force to remain an imperial power.

By the end of 1954 the Indo-Chinese war had cost 20,000 lives from metropolitan France, at least 26,000 from its African colonies and more than 45,000 from Vietnam.

6. Algeria

On 8 May 1945, as Europe celebrated the formal ending of the war, the people of Sétif in Algeria joined in the celebrations, but waving placards calling for the freedom of their imprisoned nationalist leader, Messali Hadj.

Many years before, on 10-15 February 1927 in a speech in Brussels, Hadj, one of the founders of Algerian nationalism, had claimed:

L'impérialisme français s'est installé en Algérie, par la force armée, la menace, les promesses hypocrites. Il s'est emparé des richesses naturelles et de la terre, en expropriant des dizaines de mille de familles qui vivaient sur leur sol du produit de leur travail. Les terres expropriées ont été cédées aux colons européens, à des indigènes agents de l'impérialisme et aux sociétés capitalistes. Les expropriés ont été obligés de vendre leurs bras aux nouveaux propriétaires du sol s'ils voulaient continuer de vivre ; des populations qui vivaient dans un état de prospérité qu'elles n'ont pas aujourd'hui, l'impérialisme en a fait des affamés, des esclaves. Et cette expropriation s'est faite comme partout sous le signe de la civilisation. C'est au nom de cette soi-disant civilisation que toutes les traditions, les coutumes, toutes les aspirations des populations indigènes sont foulées aux pieds. Bien loin d'apporter à ce pays l'aide qu'il aurait pu utiliser pour se développer, l'impérialisme français a joint à l'expropriation et à l'exploitation, la domination politique la plus réactionnaire, privant les indigènes de toute liberté de coalition, d'organisation, de tous droits politiques et législatifs, ou bien n'accordant des droits qu'à une toute petite minorité d'indigènes corrompus.⁴

The demonstrations in Sétif on 8 May 1945 led to an attack on Europeans that caused around 100 deaths. In response the French occupational authorities launched a counter-attack that claimed 6,000 Algerian lives according to recent estimates, or 45,000 according to the Algerian government after independence. Over the following decade, two other French North African colonies, Morocco and Tunisia, gained their independence. However, in the words of the French Interior Minister, **François Mitterand**, speaking on 1 December 1954, «L'Algérie, c'est la France et la France ne reconnaîtra pas chez elle d'autre autorité que la sienne.»⁵ This was no mere rhetoric from France's future president (1981-1995), as Algeria was governed as three French départements, no less than if it were a part of **La France métropolitain**.

Pierre Mendès France, on 12 November 1954, outlined the government's view on Algeria's future to the Assemblée Nationale.

Il y a quelques semaines à peine, je m'étais fait votre interprète, l'interprète de l'émotion ressentie par tous les Français devant la catastrophe qui, dans la région d'Orléansville, venait d'endeuiller l'Algérie [There had been an earthquake there a few weeks before.]. J'avais alors affirmé la solidarité de la nation entière avec les populations éprouvées. L'Algérie, hélas ! vient d'être frappée à nouveau, et cette fois la violence provient de la volonté criminelle de quelques hommes, mais elle n'est pas moins cruelle, inutile et aveugle. A nouveau la nation doit s'affirmer unie et solidaire devant le malheur, devant les forces de destruction.

Vous pouvez être certains, en tout cas, qu'il n'y aura, de la part du Gouvernement, ni hésitation, ni atermoiement, ni demi-mesure dans les dispositions qu'il prendra pour assurer la sécurité et le respect de la loi. Il n'y aura aucun ménagement contre la sédition, aucun compromis avec elle, chacun ici et là-bas doit le savoir.

On ne transige pas lorsqu'il s'agit de défendre la paix intérieure de la nation, l'unité, l'intégrité de la République. Les départements d'Algérie constituent une partie de la République française. Ils sont français depuis longtemps et d'une manière irrévocable. Leurs populations qui jouissent de la citoyenneté française et sont représentées au Parlement, ont d'ailleurs donné, dans la paix comme autrefois dans la guerre, sans distinction d'origine ou de religion, assez de preuves de leur attachement à la France pour que la France à son tour ne laisse pas mettre en cause cette unité. Entre elles et la métropole il n'y a pas de sécession concevable.

Cela doit être clair une fois pour toutes et pour toujours aussi bien en Algérie et dans la métropole qu'à l'étranger. (Applaudissements à gauche, au centre, à droite et à l'extrême droite.)

Jamais la France, aucun Gouvernement, aucun Parlement français, quelles qu'en soient d'ailleurs les tendances particulières, ne cédera sur ce principe fondamental.⁶

⁴ <http://www.fondationmessali.org/Congres%20de%20Bruxelles%201927.html>

⁵ <http://www.lefigaro.fr/vox/histoire/2016/03/18/31005-20160318ARTFIG00198-19-mars-quand-francois-mitterrand-declarait-l-algerie-c-est-la-france.php>

⁶ <http://coursbastide.fr/dgab/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/DS-2016-1ere-ESL-DECOLO-DOC.pdf>

This increasing militarisation of France's campaign in Algeria turned it into what was arguably the most bitter anti-colonial struggle in all of post-World War II Africa. In 1954 a new Algerian nationalist group was formed, the **Front de Libération Nationale (FLN)**, which launched a spectacular guerrilla war.

A bitter insurgency and counter-insurgency was fought in the Algiers Casbah between the French paratroopers of General **Jacques Massu** and the FLN, a struggle that was later commemorated in Gilles Pontecorvo's 1966 film [The Battle of Algiers](#). Bomb attacks by the FLN resulted in brutal reprisals including torture and hostage killings by the French paratroopers.

On 13 January 1955, Claude Bourdet, a former commander of the French resistance, wrote an article in *L'Observateur* accused the French Army in Algeria of copying the methods of the Gestapo in its treatment of Algerian nationalists. The media storm over torture in Algeria split French public opinion more than any issue since the Dreyfus Case of the 1890s.

Mitterand, as government minister in charge of Algeria, had already commissioned a secret report from Roger Wuillaume, into the use of torture, which was produced on 2 March 1955, and reassured him that *«les procédés du tuyau d'eau et de l'électricité, lorsqu'ils sont utilisés avec précaution, produiraient un choc, au demeurant beaucoup plus psychologique que physique, et par conséquent exclusifs de toute cruauté excessive.»*⁷ The use of torture continued.

General Bigeard, one of Massu's deputies, strongly defended his actions on French television in 2000.⁸ Interviewed by *Le Monde* on 22 June 2000 on the question of whether he had used torture, Massu said the only occasion when he had applied electric shocks was *«que sur moi»* although he admitted to having seen in it carried out by Bigeard - *«cela me désole, car cela faisait partie, je vous le répète, d'une certaine ambiance. On aurait pu faire les choses différemment.»*⁹

In spite of the full power of the French state being applied against it, the FLN enjoyed significant support from the nationalist governments in Morocco, Tunisia and Egypt. On 8 February 1958 the French Air Force attacked village in Tunisia where the FLN leadership was hiding, resulting in a large number of civilian deaths, and prompting international outrage. Opposition to the war was growing both inside France and Algeria.

By the spring of 1958 the extreme right in France, and the ultra-French-nationalist white colonists, known as the **pièds noirs**, feared that the government was planning to negotiate a peaceful withdrawal from Algeria. On 13 May 1958 **Massu** and other generals overthrew the French civilian authorities and declared the army to be in charge in Algeria. Two days later the French Army declared that **de Gaulle** should be brought out from retirement to form a new government in Paris.

The return to power of De Gaulle created an unusual paradox. On 28 May 1958 Mitterand and Mendès France walked together in a demonstration that supported De Gaulle and opposed the military coup on Algeria. However de Gaulle was being appropriated by both sides of the argument. The ultra-nationalists and the **pièd noirs** hoped that he would bring stability to an Algeria that would always be French; while the more democratically minded politicians in Paris regarded him as the representative of the Republic against an ultra-right-wing military coup. One of De Gaulle's remarkable achievements was to satisfy both expectations – at least in the short term. On 4 June 1958 he visited Algiers and delivered an ambiguous speech: *«Je vous ai compris ! Je sais ce qui s'est passé ici. Je vois ce que vous avez voulu faire. Je vois que la route que vous avez ouverte en Algérie, c'est celle de la rénovation et de la fraternité.»*

On 16 September 1959 De Gaulle announced that Algeria would be allowed to determine its own future, and the following year, in a television broadcast of 4 November 1960, he accepted that Algeria's future was as a Republic, and not merely as French départements. For the **pièds noirs** and elements of the French Army in Algeria, this was betrayal, and in the winter of 1960-61 the **Organisation de l'Armée Secrète** (OAS) was founded – its title a deliberate imitation of one of the main anti-Nazi resistance groups from the years of occupation.

⁷ http://www.liberation.fr/tribune/2000/12/11/torture-l-etat-coupable-mais-amnistie_347239; *L'Observateur*, 13 Janvier 1955; Pierre Vidal-Naquet. *La raison d'Etat*, (Minuit, 1962), 57-68, 69, 93, 111.

⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tqUhf9NNVWc>

⁹ http://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2000/06/22/la-torture-faisait-partie-d-une-certaine-ambiance-on-auroit-pu-faire-les-choses-differemment_1671161_3212.html

Almost all terrorist organisations in post-World War II Europe were leftist, anti-colonialist and anti-imperialist. However, the OAS was the absolute opposite. Declaring De Gaulle and the French state to be traitors, this secret group within the French Army resolved to preserve French Algeria by any means.

The year 1961 saw the violence of Algeria spill on to the streets of Paris. Determined to accelerate the push the FLN launched attacks in France, killing 22 policemen. On 17 October 1961 a peaceful demonstration of Algerian nationalists and French sympathisers in Paris was broken up by the **Prefect of Police, Maurice Papon**. About 200 of the demonstrators are believed to have been killed in the Police prefecture, and their bodies presumed to have been thrown in the Seine.¹⁰ (In 1998 Papon was belatedly convicted for his role in actively helping the Nazis to deport 1690 Jews from Bordeaux to Auschwitz, while he was Secretary of the Gironde département in 1942-1944.)

On 18 March 1962 the French Government and the FLN signed a ceasefire at Évian-les-Bains, and on 1 July 1962 Algerian independence was proclaimed. In revenge, the OAS authorised the assassination of De Gaulle, although remarkably he survived a shooting attempt by a 12-man hit squad on 22 August 1962.

Algerian independence came at a terrible price. A minimum of 200,000 Algerians were killed, and more than 24,000 French soldiers. The OAS killed around 2,700 victims, mostly Algerian nationalists. After independence, thousands of **Harkis** (Algerians who had joined the French army as auxiliaries) were murdered by the victorious nationalists.

Around 800,000 **pieds noirs** (European settlers) left Algeria, of whom around 80% settled in France. The **Front National** political party was founded in 1972 in the south of France by **Jean Marie Le Pen**, who had served in Algeria as an army intelligence officer.



Paris, 17 October 1961.



22 August 1962. 187 bullets were fired by an OAS hit squad at De Gaulle's Citroën DS. 14 bullets hit the car, De Gaulle was unharmed.

7. European unity and disunity

The early 1950s are widely seen as the beginning of attempts to find a permanent settlement to the Franco-German rivalry that had scarred European politics, and had helped to bring about war in 1870, 1914 and 1940. The minds behind the European project were two French politicians – **Jean Monnet** and **Robert Schuman**. On 9 May 1950 Schuman issued his declaration (written by Monnet) calling for the merging of French and German steel production under a common “High Authority.” Schuman’s plan was only workable if Luxembourg (his birthplace) and Belgium were also included, as all four countries formed a single economic unit.

Le gouvernement français propose de placer l'ensemble de la production franco-allemande de charbon et d'acier sous une Haute Autorité commune, dans une organisation ouverte à la participation des autres pays d'Europe.

¹⁰J. House and N. McMaster, *Paris 1961, Algerians, State Terror and Memory* (OUP, 2006) Ch. 1 offers an introduction.

La mise en commun des productions de charbon et d'acier assurera immédiatement l'établissement de bases communes de développement économique, première étape de la Fédération européenne, et changera le destin de ces régions longtemps vouées à la fabrication des armes de guerre dont elles ont été les plus constantes victimes.

La solidarité de production qui sera ainsi nouée manifesterà que toute guerre entre la France et l'Allemagne devient non seulement impensable, mais matériellement impossible. L'établissement de cette unité puissante de production ouverte à tous les pays qui voudront y participer, aboutissant à fournir à tous les pays qu'elle rassemblera les éléments fondamentaux de la production industrielle aux mêmes conditions, jettera les fondements réels de leur unification économique.¹¹

Britain was invited to participate in 1951, but **Churchill** and his Foreign Secretary **Eden**, although both proponents of continental European unity, argued that Britain should remain separate, as a link between the USA, continental Europe, and its own Commonwealth. In 1957 the Treaty of Rome was signed creating the European Economic Community (EEC). After failed attempts under Prime Ministers Harold Macmillan (1962-3) and Harold Wilson (1967), both of which were rejected by President de Gaulle, Edward Heath succeeded in negotiating British entry in 1973.

The early years of the EEC were associated with high economic growth rates in Western Europe, assisted by the legacy of US Marshall Plan investment in the late 1940s, and strong American diplomatic support for unity, expressed through the creation of NATO (the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation) in May 1949. One of the key reasons for strong US support for Western European integration was the context of the Cold War, and fears about the intentions of the USSR.

But the mid-1950s cannot just be characterised as an axis of pro-American West European states against the USSR. (Indeed, one of the most powerful political parties in France in the 1950s was the Communist Party.) Memories in France, and especially in its Army, of the experience of three wars with Germany, were not that easily forgotten.

One of the biggest political issues of the early 1950s was how the new country of West Germany would be allowed to re-arm, while rejecting any possible return to the nationalism of the First and Second World Wars. In 1950 the French Defence Minister **René Plevin** proposed a **European Defence Community**, with a combined European (e.g. Franco-German) army as an alternative to Germany joining NATO. The EDC sparked a bitter debate within France, in which the Army and nationalist politicians argued that the German Army would come to dominate.

Two powerful voices against the plan were those of Charles De Gaulle (out of power 1946-1958), and of Defence Minister **General Marie-Pierre Koenig**, who both attacked the threatened loss of independence.

In a speech of 25 February 1953 De Gaulle argued:

Je viens de dire que le nom donné à l'armée dite « européenne » est un titre fallacieux. Pour qu'il y ait l'armée européenne, c'est-à-dire l'armée de l'Europe, il faut d'abord que l'Europe existe, en tant qu'entité politique, économique, financière, administrative et, par-dessus tout, morale, que cette entité soit assez vivante, établie, reconnue, pour obtenir le loyalisme congénital de ses sujets, pour avoir une politique qui lui soit propre et, pour que, le cas échéant, des millions d'hommes veuillent mourir pour elle. Est-ce le cas ? Pas un homme sérieux n'oserait répondre oui.¹²

After three years of debate, the issue came to a head on 30 August 1954 when the Assemblée Nationale rejected the EDC. In its place, British Foreign Secretary **Anthony Eden** proposed a **West European Union** that enabled West Germany to join NATO, while France's army retained its independence.



Robert Schuman



Jean Monnet



René Plevin



General Marie-Pierre Koenig

¹¹ <http://www.robert-schuman.eu/fr/declaration-du-9-mai-1950>

¹² http://www.gaullisme.net/europe-federale.html#_ftnref6

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