A Chronology of the Algerian War of Independence

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May 8, 1945. While France celebrates VE Day, Muslim protesters in Sétif organize to demand Algerian independence. What begins as a march becomes a massacre: the protesters murder more than 100 European settlers, or pieds-noirs, and French armed forces retaliate by killing (according to various estimates) between 1,000 and 45,000 Muslims.

November 1, 1954. Emboldened by the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu, the Front de Libération Nationale (FLN) launches armed revolts throughout Algeria and issues a proclamation calling for a sovereign Algerian state. The French are unimpressed but deploy troops to monitor the situation.

August 1955. The FLN begins targeting civilians, inciting a mob that kills more than 120 people in Philippeville. Between 1,200 and 12,000 Muslims are killed in retaliation by French troops and by pied-noir “vigilante committees.” Jacques Soustelle, then governor-general of French Algeria, resolves not to compromise with the revolutionaries.

September 30, 1956. The FLN attempts to draw international attention to the conflict by targeting urban areas. The Battle of Algiers begins when three women plant bombs in public venues. Algiers erupts into violence.

May 1958. A mob of pieds-noirs, angered by the French government’s failure to suppress the revolution, storms the offices of the governor-general in Algiers. With the support of French army officers, they clamor for Charles de Gaulle to be installed as the leader of France. The French National Assembly approves. De Gaulle is greeted in Algeria by Muslims and Europeans alike.

September 1959. Increasingly convinced that French control of Algeria is untenable, de Gaulle pronounces that “self-determination” is necessary for Algeria. Pied-noir extremists are aghast. The FLN is wary of de Gaulle’s declaration.

April 1961. A few prominent generals in the French army in Algeria, clinging to a hope of preserving Algérie française, attempt to overthrow de Gaulle. This “generals’ putsch” is unsuccessful.
May 1961. The first round of negotiations between the French government and the FLN commences in Evian, but is not productive.

March 1962. After a second round of negotiations in Evian, the French government declares a cease-fire.


July 1, 1962. A referendum is held in Algeria to approve the Evian Agreements, which call for an Algérie algérienne. Six million Algerians cast their ballots for independence.

https://sites.tufts.edu/atrocityendings/2015/08/07/algeria-war-of-independence/

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Introduction

France first occupied Algeria in 1830 and considered it to be an integral component of the French metropolitan state. More than one million French, Italian, and Spanish nationals were settled there by 1959 and comprised 10 percent of the general population. Despite their working-class background, these colons—or pieds noirs as they became more commonly known—enjoyed a status that elevated them above the Algerian population. This fostered widespread mistrust and disconnect between the groups, which festered into a low-grade insurgency that began in response to the May 1945 Sétif massacre to November 1954 when armed groups joined together to form the Front de Libération Nationale (FLN).

The Setif massacre occurred on May 8, 1945, the day that Germany surrendered in World War II. In celebration, Algerian forces, who fought for France, displayed an Algerian flag as a symbol of freedom. French soldiers responded by shooting, several demonstrators were killed. Riots followed and after five days of chaos, 103 pieds noirs were killed. The subsequent French retaliation was overwhelming: a conservative estimate places the dead at 15,000 Muslims.
The *pied noirs* lobby was powerful in Paris, and it pushed for apartheid-like white dominance. This—in combination with the engrained perception that Algeria belonged to the *Metropole*—made the French government unwilling to address even the moderate demands of nationalist Algerian groups. The French military instead responded to small-scale revolts with disproportionate force, effectively catalyzing a more violent response by insurgents who targeted both *pied noirs* and moderate Algerians. The scale of French retaliations instilled fear and anger among the Algerian population and vengeance among the *pied noirs*. This trajectory silenced the voices on both sides that called for moderation, and the Algerian War of Independence (1954-1962) was thus characterized by FLN terrorism and French brutality.

**Atrocities (1954-1962)**

The full-scale insurgency began when the FLN started launching coordinated, small-scale attacks against French military posts, while also killing small numbers of civilians, including European-born *pied noirs* and loyalist Algerians. The French military responded with *ratissage*, the “raking over” of towns and villages through bombing, arrests, and torture. This attempt at pacification by employing both targeted raids as well as mass punishment characterized the French strategy throughout the conflict.

In 1957, the FLN altered its strategy, moving into Algiers, where it could better hide among civilians while exacting higher costs for the French. As combat moved to the capital, casualties peaked over the next year during the two, back-to-back battles of Algiers. The violence first skyrocketed when the French responded to an FLN-led general strike and bombings by combing the city for pro-independence fighters. The military relied primarily on neighborhood raids, arrests, and torture, focusing its sweeps in the Casbah slum, an opposition stronghold. It killed thousands of Algerian civilians and combatants during the crackdown, successfully quelling FLN operations within Algiers.

The conflict then dispersed throughout the country, with the French military relying more heavily on helicopter bombing of opposition territory for the remainder of the war. The FLN continued to target the French military, but as the conflict wore on, it also increasingly launched retributive attacks against civilians. This pattern continued until independence in 1962.

A momentous turn towards Algerian independence came in 1961, but it was accompanied by a new spike in violence against civilians. On January 8, 1961, France held a referendum on Algerian independence. Some 75 percent of mainland citizens voted for independence, while 69.5 percent of the population in Algeria voted for it, and French President de Gaulle opened
secret negotiations with the FLN. The Army attempted to halt these talks, but only succeeded in turning de Gaulle firmly against the *pied noirs*. Talks continued in 1961 in Evian and a cease-fire took effect on March 18, 1962. As the cease-fire was implemented, hardliners amongst the French Army and *pieds noirs* founded a terrorist organization with the aim of keeping Algeria under French control, the Secret Army Organization, through which they organized attacks against de Gaulle, the French government, FLN and Muslim civilians. One of their goals was to provoke the FLN to break the ceasefire by restoring to violence in response to the OAS attacks.

OAS attacks subsided, however, through a combination of arrests and the failure of their project. The French military did not turn to their side, an estimated 1 million refugees of European descent alongside pro-France Muslims moved to France, and the vast majority of the Algerian population refused to compromise on their independence.

A final period of violence occurred after independence. People affiliated with the French rule in Algeria who stayed after the French left suffered retributive violence. “Harki” was a name given to Algerians who were French loyalists. By most accounts, some “tens of thousands” were killed in summer 1962, some fled, and others tried to stay and keep as low a profile as was possible in the new Algeria. Violence against *harki* began even before the ceasefire came into effect, with accounts suggesting a rise in violence in March 1962. Algerians who joined the FLN late once the tide had turned, used violence as a way to prove themselves and to claim material rewards (through looting, for instance). The number of *harki* killed is often reported to be as high as 60,000 and 150,000, but recent historians have suggested the number may be closer to 30,000 (see below). There were also attacks against some of the remaining population of European descent.

As the example of French extremists and *harki* demonstrate, not all violence occurred across the schism of French and Algerian. One additional factor was fighting within the FLN. The FLN was composed of several major groups: the Gouvernement Provisoire de la République Algérienne (GPRA), formed in exile in 1958; the six regional military commands (*wilayas*) that had formed the backbone of the struggle for independence; the Armée de Libération Nationale (ALN) composed of Algerian exiles in Tunisia and Morocco; and the Fédération de France du Front de Libération Nationale (FFFLN) the arm of the FLN that had operated in France.

Fighting between political parties (particularly the GPRA and ALN) resulted in the “deaths of over a thousand members of both sides during August and early September 1962 before a ceasefire was agreed on 5 September.”
On July 1, 1962, Algerians overwhelmingly voted for independence and on July 3, French Pres. de Gaulle officially recognized the vote. Ben Bella, associated with the ALN, became the head of the new independent government, during which time he attempted to concentrate power. He was overthrown in a coup in 1965 led by Abdelaziz Bouteflika.

**Fatalities**

**Minimum estimate of fatalities:** 87,788 (90,000). Overall deaths from multiple causes and including combatants is likely around 300,000.

Martin Evans (2012) provides an overview of the sources and debates over the numbers of people who died as a result of the conflict. Citing work by historian Charles-Robert Ageron, Evans notes an upward trend of violence between the FLN and French Army that begins in November 1954 and peaks in April 1958. Violence committed by the OAS reached its highest point just after the ceasefire period, and anti-**harki** massacres spiked in July 1962.

He also argues that the least controversial of all the numbers put forward by various groups are those concerning the French soldiers, where government numbers are largely accepted as sound. Most controversial are the numbers of civilians killed. On this subject, he turns to the work of Meynier, who, citing French army documents (not the official number) posits the range of 55,000 – 60,000 deaths. Meynier further argues that the best number to capture the **harkis** deaths is 30,000. If we add to this, the number of European civilians, which government figures posit as 2,788.

**Endings**

In 1962, French President Charles de Gaulle signed the Evian Accords, a peace agreement with the FLN leadership. Despite the FLN’s extreme military weakness—France had defeated it in almost every battle—it had significant leverage because France’s now-infamous brutality in the conflict had alienated its domestic citizens as well as the international community. In the treaty, the FLN achieved most of its demands, including complete autonomy and a full French withdrawal.

We extend the period of atrocities into the post-independence conflict, with assaults against the **harki** and remaining European population.