



*The Algerian women in the revolution*

*Djamila Bouazza*



## Biographical Information

Djamila Bouazza was an Algerian militant of the National Liberation Front (FLN for its French acronym), originally from the province of [Blida](#), born in 1938, and died on June 12, 2015, in Algiers.

She was married to a French communist. At that period, there were large divisions in France to the Algerian question, similar to the colonial question: are you going to support the French bourgeoisie in their colonial project? Or are you going to support Algerian workers and their struggle for independence? For example, this was noted in James Baldwin's analysis of the contradiction between race and racial politics in France during his stay in the country during the 1950s.

During the Algerian war (November 1st, 1954- July 5th, 1962) she was in charge of hiding bombs in her clothing to place in specific settlement zones in Algeria.

### Some information on the bomb attack

- January 26, 1957 her mission was to place a bomb in the [Coq Hardi bar](#), where the Algiers bourgeoisie used to meet.
- The attack killed 4 people and injured around 60.<sup>1</sup>
- Women engaged in this kind of actions during the revolution were called *Fidayate*.
- She was then the first to be sentenced to death, along with her fellow fighter

Djamila Bouhired, by the French military tribunal.

- She was one of six women sentenced to death for "terrorist" acts during the War of Independence.
- The incessant flow of letters did not fail to touch the President, René Coty, who, on March 13, 1958, decided to grant pardon to Djamila Bouazza, Djamila Bouhired and Jacqueline Guerroudj, and to commute the death sentence to life hard labour.
- However, she was released on March 19, 1962.

## Historical Context

Algeria for over 300 years was an autonomous province under the Ottoman Empire. In the 19th century, attempts for territorial acquisition took place without success from the United States fleet army and the combined fleet from the English and Dutch.

By 1830, in the invasion of Algeria, France suppressed Algeria through the taking of their port city, Algiers. This followed a complete annexation of Algeria by 1834. France continued expanding into further regions of the nation maintaining colonial control until 1962.

Despite France's invasion and eventual success in conquering Algerian territory, it was met with fierce resistance and struggle by Algerians. This resistance in the 1830s paved the road for Algerian independence by instilling the broader sentiment for national liberation of Algeria – it had always been

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<sup>1</sup> The idea was not to kill (although they knew that there would be victims), but to draw attention, shock, and traumatize public opinion. Of all

terrorist acts, it's the bomb explosions that strike public opinion and the media the hardest. This is also why they have opted for this modus operandi.

clear that colonization by European rule over the people of Algeria could not become permanent.

Fascism begins in the colonies – state repression forced organizations underground while fascistic military terrorism tried to eliminate fighters of the national liberation and anti-colonial struggles. Colonial powers of this period used people living in the colonies as cannon fodder for the front lines of wars fought between imperial powers (in both World War (WW) I and World War II).

It was in this backdrop of post-World War II and the fight against fascism in the early 20th century that ignited the flames of anti-colonial resistance in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Countries like Vietnam declared independence from France in 1945.

That same year, Algerians held nation-wide demonstrations in celebration of the defeat of Fascism which quickly turned into national demonstrations for the independence of Algeria. In response, the French government and military personnel responded with a level of violence that laid bare the blatant inhumanity with regard to Algerian people. Women, children, elderly, and many more were killed in gruesome tactics in such a high degree of fascist demonstration.

France since the period of annexing Algeria in the 19th century, had reached genocidal proportions with anywhere from 1 to 3 million Algerians killed since occupation.

### **History of the Algerian Liberation Front (FLN)**

The Algerian Liberation Front (Front de Libération Nationale, FLN) was formed in

1954 by Revolutionary Committee of Unity and Action (CRUA). It was comprised of Special Organization (OS) members, where the OS was founded in 1947 as a secret paramilitary group by Mohamed Belouizdad of the Movement for the Triumph of Democratic Liberties (MTLD) to prepare for guerilla war against France. Following a split by the MTLD from the OS and the 1951 capture of Ahmed Ben Bella and subsequent dismantling of the OS, the CRUA was formed.

There was hope among Algerians that they would be rewarded for helping to liberate France from German occupation. Given the ideological turn against colonialism during WWII, Algerian nationalists intended to use the victory in Europe to advocate independence, as expressed in Manifesto of the Algerian People on March 31, 1943, by Ferhat Abbas, arguing for self-determination and an Algerian constitution which would grant equal rights to all Algerians.

Messali Hadj was the founder and president of the MTLD, as well as the Algerian People's Party (Parti du Peuple Algérien, PPA), and supported the Manifesto of the Algerian People, however he was initially opposed to the Algerian War and the FLN.

The turn to armed struggle was a result of fraudulent Algerian Assembly elections in 1948 and the Setif Massacre of May 8, 1945, where French colonial authorities and Algerian-born French militias fired on Algerian civilians at a protest for independence from France, the same day that Nazi Germany surrendered, which was followed by riots and attacks on French settlers, resulting in 102 deaths. French authorities responded to the riots by killing thousands of Muslims, and this was a turning

point leading to the Algerian War of 1954-1962.

The MTLD was formed in Oct 1946 to replace the banned Algerian People's Party (PPA), and won 5 seats out of 15 up in the November "double college" Algerian Assembly election in the first month. People's Party (PPA) was formed in 1937, a successor to North African Star (Etoile Nord Africaine, ENA).

ENA was an early Algerian nationalist organization founded in 1926 by Nationalist politician Hadj-Ali Abdelkader that called for an uprising against French colonial rule, and was part of the two-year (1936 – 1938) coalition of French leftist parties, the Popular Front, that won the election for French Prime Minister for Leon Blum.

Following the dissolution of North African Star (ENA) in 1937 by the Popular Front, for the reason that the North African Star supported Algerian Nationalism, the Algerian People's Party (PPA) was formed and became the MTLD, the largest civil party, advocating for peaceful methods of protest toward independence.

Messali Hadj and the Central Committee of MTLD, including members of the OS, were in conflict on tactical issues regarding independence. The Special Organization (OS), initially part of MTLD, decided freedom could only be acquired by military means, and therefore, following the 1951 capture of Ahmed Ben Bella and subsequent dismantling of the OS expanded as the Comité Révolutionnaire d'Unité et d'Action (CRUA), sought support from the Algerian political organizations to form the Algerian Liberation Front (FLN) following their launch of the Algerian War for Independence in

1954, and split from MTLD in 1954 to form the Algerian Liberation Front (FLN).

The FLN launched the Algerian War on November 1, 1954 following publication of the Declaration of 1 November 1954, by Mohamed Aïchaoui, internally seeking restoration of sovereignty under Islamic principles, including respect for freedom - irrespective of race-, a return to revolutionary nationalism, the cleansing of reformism, liquidation of the colonial system, the internationalization of the Algerian cause, North African unity, and, within the UN Charter framework, affirmation of sympathy to all nations supporting Algerian liberation.

The FLN's armed wing, the National Liberation Army (ALN), was divided into rural guerilla forces and a more traditional army. The ALN established camps in Tunisia and Morocco to provide arms to fighters in Algeria. Houari Boumedienne led the ALN during the war.

Abbas opposed violent struggle, distancing himself from the Algerian War, however following French intensification in 1954, he joined the FLN, and was sent on diplomatic missions and was appoint FLN delegate to the UN. Ferhat Abbas would later become President of the Provisional Government of the Republic of Algeria, from 1958 – 1961, and the Acting President of Algeria 1962-1963.

In March 1962, the French government signed the Evian Accords, a ceasefire agreement with the FLN, and the FLN became the only legal and ruling party.

The Prime Minister of Algeria (1962 – 1963), and subsequently the first President of

Algeria (1963 – 1965) was Ahmed Ben Bella, describing himself as a Nasserist, i.e. an Arab socialist political ideology based on Gamal Abdel Nasser, a leader in the Egyptian Revolution of 1952 and the second President of Egypt from 1956 – 1970.

Political opposition, such as Messali Hadj's MNA was banned. Houari Boumediène overthrew Ben Bella in a coup in 1965 and became the second President of Algeria until his death in 1978.

### **The role of Algerian women**

From the very start of the struggle, Algerian women became involved in sectors hitherto reserved exclusively for men: politics and war. The names of arrested women activists appeared in newspapers as early as 1955, and their photos made the front page of the local press. And in the midst of the war, it was the name of one woman: Djamila Bouhired, who became the symbol of an entire people in struggle.

During the war, women's activism found a favorable echo in public opinion, both at home and abroad, in the Middle East and Europe. However, once the war was over, not only did women quickly disappear from the political scene, but the role they had played seemed to be forgotten.

There was nothing to suggest that the Algerian woman of the 1950s - Mediterranean, Berber, Muslim, colonized and therefore trapped in a restrictive status - could take part in the struggle. The old Mediterranean background and Berber culture have imprinted Algerian society with

a component that is difficult to reduce: a rigorous patriarchy that relegates women to a subordinate social status.

- Pariah status in the workplace
- Almost total illiteracy
- Exclusion from political life
- Only one way out: marriage and family life

The trauma provoked by the events of May 1945, the influence of Messali Hadj, the effervescence of ideas propagated by political parties and medersas, the influence of the family environment, contact with misery or lived misery, revolt in the face of injustice and, for some, simply the shock produced by the war, determined their commitment.

The parties organized by the Algerian People's Party (PPA)<sup>2</sup> -which went beyond the strict confines of membership- were not mixed. Men were invited to parties with a male orchestra, and only female relatives and neighbors listened in, hidden away in other rooms or on other floors. Women tended to gather in the afternoon around a female orchestra. Apart from the fact that some women's orchestras were as sympathetic to nationalist ideas as some men's orchestras, there was an expectation among women that the political parties unfortunately failed to meet.

Admittedly, the political parties didn't give women the importance they deserved, but their ideas did reach the female world through their activists. The nationalist atmosphere (in the case of the PPA and certain ulama), and the ideas of social justice, which they were surrounded by in

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<sup>2</sup> The Algerian People's Party (PPA) was founded on March 11, 1937 by Messali Hadj in France, following the banning of the Étoile Nord-Africaine

(ENA) by the then ruling Front Populaire on the grounds that it was a threat to the authority of the state

their families, were at the origin of the commitment of the wives and daughters of militants. It was often the injustices of daily life or the sight of misery that drove them to fight against colonialism.

Women in the struggle for liberation subverted the colonial lens of gender: using their veils to hide messages, money and weapons, and donning western dress as they entered the French quarters and deposited explosives. They were the *fidayate*<sup>3</sup>.

*Fidayeen* carried out armed action or participated in it directly at the scene of the action. Weapons transport, unless carried out at the scene of the attack, was not a *fidayeen* action. The *fidai* were inexperienced, poorly armed civilians fighting against a powerful occupying army. Few in number compared to other militants, *fidayeen* are those who performed the hardest tasks and take the greatest risks. But while their courage was always recognized, *fidayeen* were often disparaged for the type of actions they perform. *Fidayate* generally belonged to very modest families. For these women activists, the *fidai*a action seemed to represent the total commitment to which they aspire.

They defied all the stereotypes associated with Muslim women as cloistered and supine, lacking in agency and autonomy. Also, they broke conventions of respectability and honorable behavior by dressing like a westerner (short skirts and

make-up) to pass through check-points, moving about unescorted in urban space, and making contact alone with men<sup>[d]</sup>.

They gradually assumed a de facto role in the conflict, playing a major part in urban networks and the *maquis* as gun and bomb carriers, messengers, fund collectors, nurses, look-outs, cooks and doctors.

Most of all, they totally assumed the risks and the violence associated with the war. Their determination was certain. For example, this is what tells Djamila Bouhired in one the missions she conducted:

"Zo and I got on at the Galland Park stop, we were to leave the bomb and get off further on. I immediately saw my father sitting at the front of the streetcar. Zo wanted us to get off with the bomb immediately. I motioned to her that I was following her. She believed me. I was glad she'd come down - she'd been saved. I stayed, determined to go all the way, right up to the explosion... The bomb was defective and didn't explode"<sup>4</sup>

The war overturned traditional attitudes and thrust Algerian women to the forefront of political life. Their presence on all the battlefields (*maquis*, urban guerrilla warfare, camps and prisons), which in the heat of battle symbolized a people in struggle, was and still is, entirely overshadowed.

Yet women's militancy is a fundamental reality of the Algerian war. Women were involved from the very first months, fighting

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<sup>3</sup> From the algerian word *Fidayeen*, or urban guerrillas. The term *fidai* literally means "one who has decided to give his life". The most spectacular action carried out by *fidayate* was dropping bombs. The bombs were home-made, and the first ones are very large and noisy. They

often failed to explode or, worse still, explode at the wrong time, a risk of which the *fidayine* were perfectly aware.

<sup>4</sup> [Les femmes algériennes dans la guerre \(Algerian women during the war, Amrane Djamila\)](#)

in every combat zone. Sharing the same tasks and running the same risks as men, they paid a heavy price for the liberation of their country.

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## References

- [History of Algerian Independence](#)
- FLN [proclamation](#) to the Algerian people, November 1954
- *El Moudjahid* — undercover revolutionary journal
- [Rapport sur les questions mémorielles portant sur la colonisation \(Report on memorial questions related to colonisation, Stora B.\)](#)
- [Les femmes algériennes dans la guerre \(Algerian women during the war, Amrane Djamila\)](#)
- France and the colonial question in Algeria – the positions of political parties on the left at this time?

## Other interesting references

- <https://www.histoire-en-questions.fr/querre%20algerie/alger-attentats-otomatic.html> (events story of September, 30th of 1957 - Otomatic, Cafeteria, and Coq-Hardy bombing)
- The cover picture is an adaptation of an initial picture of Djamila Bouazza, carrying her bomb, during the reenactment of the terrorist attack at the Alger bar.