

France's Crimes on 8 May 1945: A Statistical Study Based on Historical Sources

Dr. Ali Ziani

University of Abou Bekr Belkaïd, Tlemcen

Ali.ziani@univ-tlemcen.dz

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Abstract:

The massacres of 8 May 1945 are among the important issues in the history of contemporary Algeria during the period of French occupation — issues that have remained lodged in the national memory and bound up with colonial France's tragic past. Historical sources have addressed them, and they continue to attract the interest of researchers and those concerned with the file of national memory, given their importance, their far-reaching repercussions, and the disagreements surrounding the final toll of victims.

The French military and civilian authorities put forward divergent statistics through which they sought to minimize the scale of the extermination, whereas the Algerian estimates were closer to the truth of the colonial repression, while foreign figures (British, American, and even Arab) presented a more neutral toll that highlighted the atrocity of what the French committed against an unarmed people who had come out in peaceful demonstrations calling for the application of the principle of peoples' right to self-determination.

Keywords:

Contemporary history of Algeria, the massacres of 8 May 1945, colonial repression, French statistics, Algerian and foreign estimates.

Introduction

French colonialism committed a great war of extermination against the Algerian people from the beginning of the occupation until independence. For this reason, numerous files and issues have continued to provoke wide controversy in academic and official circles alike, in both Algeria and France. Among the most prominent crimes that left wounds yet to heal, that have caused rivers of ink to flow, and that revealed the brutality and horror of the French, are the massacres of 8 May 1945.

What happened on 8 May was not an isolated act, but rather a fully-fledged crime of state. For this reason, the French authorities sought to evade their responsibilities and resorted to a policy of misinformation and concealment regarding the true statistics of the number of victims, relying in this on the reports of the security and military authorities, and also drawing on the writings of the pioneers of the colonial historical school in falsifying the events. Consequently, the figures in

circulation remained approximate and imprecise, and very far from the scale of the collective bloody repression perpetrated by the colonial regime. Nevertheless, living historical testimonies and national — and even foreign — pens emerged that attempted to present figures closer to the truth.

On this basis, we pose the following problematic: to what extent can historical sources be relied upon to produce an accurate statistical study of the number of victims of the massacres of 8 May 1945, and what are the backgrounds and premises governing the figures put forward?

Through this study, we seek to analyze and compare the estimates and statistics provided by historical sources concerning the number of victims of the massacres of 8 May 1945, as well as to uncover the reasons for the discrepancy in the number of victims arising from the barbaric violence practiced by the colonial power. As for the method followed in this study, we have relied on the historical method to study the context of the events and historical facts, and we have also made use of analysis in order to critique the various estimates, in addition to statistical comparison between the figures in order to arrive at an approximate number.

1. The General Political Situation in Algeria on the Eve of the Massacres of 8 May 1945

The national movement had reached a high degree of national awakening since the founding of the Friends of the Manifesto and Liberty movement (*Amis du Manifeste et de la Liberté*), as the idea of independence spread — thanks to the propaganda of the Algerian People's Party — among the representatives of the movement, as well as among the popular circles, which had come to await a favorable opportunity to rise up.¹ According to what Mohamed Harbi reports, Messali Hadj agreed, at the beginning of April 1945, to a plan for an uprising put forward by Amin Debaghine and Hocine Asselah, involving a plan to smuggle him out and then announce the formation of an Algerian government, which would have its headquarters on a farm in the vicinity of Sétif. To put this into effect, Messali left Ksar Chellala on 19 April, heading toward a place fixed in advance,² but found no one there, and had to return once more to the town, which the French army had by then encircled because of the events³ that militants of the People's Party had stirred up during a

¹Mahfoud Kaddache and Djillali Sari, *Algeria in History: Political Resistance (1900–1954): Socio-Economic Transformations*, National Book Publishing Company, Algiers, Algeria, 1989, p. 85.

²Mohamed Harbi, *The National Liberation Front: Myth and Reality*, trans. Camille Kaïser Daghor, 1st ed., Muassasat al-Abhath al-Arabiyya, Beirut, 1983, p. 36.

³On the occasion of the El Achaba meeting held at Ksar Chellala, attended by notables of the district including caïds and bachaghas, at which the Friends of the Manifesto and Liberty cell sought to present a list of demands personally to Louis Périllier, prefect of Algiers. The latter, however, used the occasion to undermine the activity of its members, and the colonial authorities arrested the leaders of the movement in the town on 18 April 1945, which caused violent incidents to break out between the inhabitants of Ksar Chellala and the French forces, as citizens threw stones at the French forces and at a gendarmerie truck. Amid these conditions, the French authorities' response was forceful: they called in paratrooper units and Senegalese soldiers and launched a wave of arrests (around 40 detainees) affecting those implicated in these events. For more on these events, see: Ferhat Abbas, *Colonial Night*, ANEP Editions, Algiers, 2009, p. 157; Mohammed Abbas, *Pioneers of Nationalism: Testimonies of 28 National Figures*, Dar Houma, Algiers,

visit by Louis Périllier, prefect of the Department of Algiers. The police arrested him and interrogated him about what he had done, and it was then decided to transfer him to El Ménéa and from there to Brazzaville, on 23 April 1945.⁴

Following these events, the militants of the Algerian People's Party expressed their indignation and resentment at these arbitrary colonial measures. They carried out an important propaganda campaign by distributing leaflets in mailboxes in the major Algerian cities, informing the people that the French authorities had transferred Messali Hadj to an unknown location, and considered this a crime committed by the colonial administration.⁵

Rather than take serious steps to respond to the demands of the national movement, the French authorities continued their policy of pressing ahead regardless, and remained determined to preserve the old order and to maintain the colonial presence in Algeria by every means available — especially given the charged atmosphere that prevailed in Algeria between 1944 and 1945, following the colonial authorities' introduction of the integrationist ordinance of 7 March 1944, which had major repercussions on the course of the national movement. The movement escalated its activity through the founding of a political alliance embodied in the Friends of the Manifesto and Liberty movement, and through the presentation of radical demands that expressed Algerian aspirations, particularly after the March 1945 congress. This aroused the concern of the colonial administration, which took arbitrary measures to restrict and monitor the activities of the movement's members.⁶

In order to weaken it, the administration resorted to a policy of divide-and-rule, attempting to break the movement's unity among its leaders — a step taken by the new Secretary General of the Government-General in Algiers, Pierre Gazagne, who tried to influence Ferhat Abbas on 12 April 1945 by pointing out to him that the militants of the Algerian People's Party had come to hold influence and control over the movement. He also reminded him, on the other hand, that the colonial administration was aware of the contacts he had been making with the Allies, and asked him to reassert control over the movement's committees, while at the same time attempting to entice and win him over with a program of important reforms that France would offer the Algerians. In the end, he warned him that he would be in danger if he did not offer them assistance.⁷

Despite this clear threat, Ferhat Abbas did not abandon his project and continued his unifying activity within the Friends of the Manifesto and Liberty movement. On this basis, Pierre Gazagne

2004, p. 178; Ahmed Ben Salem, "The Events of 18 April 1945 in Ksar Chellala," *Afaq for Sciences Journal*, No. 8, vol. 2, University of Djelfa, June 2017, p. 379.

⁴Benjamin Stora, Messali Hadj (1898–1974): Pioneer of Algerian Nationalism, L'Harmattan Editions, Paris, 1982, p. 194.

⁵Annie Rey-Goldzieguer, *Origins of the Algerian War, 1940–1945*, Casbah Editions, Algiers, 2003, p. 247.

⁶Abdelkader Djilali Blouafa, *The Independence Movement during the Second World War in the Department of Oran*, 1st ed., Dar El Aalmiya, Constantine, 2011, p. 125.

⁷Annie Rey-Goldzieguer, *op. cit.*, p. 242.

proposed to the Governor-General, Yves Chataigneau, that Ferhat Abbas be arrested along with Messali, but the Governor-General refused, so as not to further inflame the situation.⁸

The growing activity of the Friends of the Manifesto and Liberty movement, and its demands for independence, became a source of unease for the settlers, who were seized with fear of the end of their presence in Algeria. They showed their indignation and hostility toward the movement and exerted pressure to have the national demands nullified, secretly using intrigue and conspiracy to provoke the Algerians in order to bring about the movement's destruction.⁹

On this basis, representatives of the settlers took action on 24 April 1945, when six delegates-general sent a letter to the prefect of the Department of Constantine, asking him to intervene and adopt a precautionary, pre-emptive plan to prevent any national uprising that had begun to loom on the horizon, after they had observed the radicalization of Algerian demands and their desire for liberation. Among what that letter stated was: "The mentality of the population has changed... they proclaim to whoever wishes to hear it that they are determined to remain, alone, on the land of their ancestors, and that they will recover their full independence."¹⁰

In addition, Lestrade Carbonel, prefect of the Department of Constantine, told Dr. Saadane, on 26 April 1945, that serious incidents were going to occur, following which a major party would be dissolved (meaning here the Friends of the Manifesto and Liberty movement). Aboo had likewise warned the occupying authorities several times that an uprising was imminent.¹¹

As for General Henri Martin, he declared during the month of April 1945 that he had learned, from various sources reaching him from Sétif, of the Algerian People's Party's intention to organize a general revolt,¹² while Pierre Gazagne, Secretary General of the Government-General, prepared, on 25 April 1945, a detailed report to the higher authorities in Paris, based on information reaching him from his various sources, indicating that a general operation was being prepared for after the end of the war. On this basis, he affirmed the need to take the necessary measures to confront this movement, and named the sensitive areas expected to see unrest, including: Sétif, Tébessa, Biskra, the Aurès, Algiers, Tlemcen, Oran, and Mascara.¹³

From the foregoing, we may say that all the indications suggested that serious disturbances were about to occur, as the atmosphere had become charged and tense. If the national movement was putting pressure on the French authorities and considered this the right moment to achieve its demands and find a solution to the Algerian question, and had begun to contemplate an armed uprising, then, for its part, the colonial regime persisted in its old positions and habitual measures,

⁸Ibid.

⁹Ferhat Abbas, *Colonial Night*, op. cit., p. 117.

¹⁰Mohamed El-Arbi Zoubiri, *History of Contemporary Algeria*, vol. 1, Arab Writers Union Publications, Syria, 1999, p. 64.

¹¹Charles-Henri Favrod, *The Algerian Revolution*, Dahlab Editions, Algiers, 2008, p. 121.

¹²Ahmed Toufik El-Madani, *A Life of Struggle*, vol. 2, Dar El-Basaïr, Algiers, 2009, p. 530.

¹³Mahfoud Kaddache, *History of Algerian Nationalism...*, vol. 2, op. cit., p. 698.

continuing to monitor the situation and remaining ready for any emergency, under pressure from the settlers, who opposed any reformist policy that France might offer the Algerians. The colonial front — administration and settlers alike — was thus lying in wait and colluding to stifle the rising national tide and destroy the dream of the Algerian people, who aspired to independence and freedom.

2. The Course of Colonial Repression on 8 May 1945

On the occasion of Labor Day, corresponding to 1 May 1945, the Algerian People's Party instructed its militants to demonstrate and to chant several political slogans during their marches, such as: the denunciation of colonialism and calls for its abolition, the release of political prisoners headed by Messali Hadj, and the independence of Algeria.¹⁴ The Party was keen for these demonstrations to be organized and peaceful, and tens of thousands of Algerians took part in them in many Algerian cities: Algiers, Oran, Béjaïa, Tlemcen, Constantine, Mostaganem, Sidi Bel Abbès, Souk Ahras, Cherchell, Miliana, Skikda, Saïda, Annaba, and Tébessa. It is clear, from the slogans raised by the demonstrators, that the Party wanted to give the demonstrations a national character in order to influence the masses, to serve as proof of popular support for it, and likewise to exploit them to pressure the occupying authorities in order to achieve the national demands.¹⁵

Despite the peaceful character of these demonstrations, the colonial authorities resorted to a policy of repression, which led to clashes between demonstrators and the security forces in a number of cities, particularly in the city of Algiers, where violent clashes broke out,¹⁶ during which police officers opened fire on the demonstrators, resulting in four deaths and thirteen wounded.¹⁷ In the city of Béjaïa, two people were wounded, while in Oran the clashes led to one death and fifteen wounded.¹⁸ The demonstrations in the other cities were less violent. Numerous demonstrators were also arrested and imprisoned in various cities, most of whom were, without

¹⁴El-Chadli El-Mekki, "The Events of 8 May 1945: Facts, Causes, and Consequences," Proceedings of the Fourth Symposium on Islamic Thought, Ministry of Religious Affairs and Original Education, Constantine, 1970, pp. 99–100.

¹⁵Radouane Aïnad Tabet, 8 May 1945 in Algeria, OPU, Algiers, 1985, p. 33.

¹⁶The demonstrations in Algiers on 1 May 1945 were the most violent nationwide, and the clashes between demonstrators and police forces led to a state of widespread chaos. For more, see: Mohamed Yousfi, Algeria under the Militant March of the Special Organization, trans. Mohamed Cherif Ben Dali Hocine, 4th ed., Editions Thala, Algiers, 2014, pp. 66–68.

¹⁷Charles-Robert Ageron, Contemporary History of Algeria..., trans. Mohammed Hamdaoui and Ibrahim Sahraoui, vol. 2, Dar El Oumma, Algiers, 2013, p. 910.

¹⁸Jean-Louis Planche, Sétif 1945..., trans. Abdel Salam Azizi et al., Casbah Editions, Algiers, 2007, pp. 190–191.

doubt, members of the Algerian People's Party — foremost among them two members of the Party's leadership, Ahmed Mezerna¹⁹ and Hocine Mokrani.²⁰

Following these events, the Central Committee of the Friends of the Manifesto and Liberty movement held a meeting on 4 May 1945, in which it denounced the arrest of Messali Hadj and his exile to Brazzaville, and also condemned the colonial measures taken on 1 May against the Algerian demonstrators. The meeting concluded with the drafting of a statement to the Algerian people, calling on them to take part in the celebrations marking the Allied victory over the Axis powers, and to demonstrate peacefully, with discipline and order, while chanting the following slogans:

- Long live the victory of democracy over fascism, colonialism, and imperialism.
- General amnesty for the benefit of all detainees and Algerian political prisoners.

It called for avoiding carrying any banners bearing other slogans, apart from these, whether in Arabic or French.²¹

At the same time, the Algerian People's Party was seeking to organize marches larger than those which had taken place on 1 May, by involving the Algerian masses in the victory celebrations, and using this to clearly demonstrate to the Allies and to France the extent of the Algerian people's attachment to independence.²² On this basis, the Algerian People's Party gave orders to its local officials and disciplined militants to make use of Armistice Day as an occasion to organize national political marches in the various Algerian cities, asking them to raise the national flag while maintaining complete secrecy regarding the raising of the flag.²³

The Party also distributed a leaflet on 6 May 1945 in the city of Algiers and in most of the major cities, asking demonstrators to raise the following slogans: "Release the detainees," "Long live a free and independent Algeria," "Down with colonialism." It is apparent that these slogans were more violent and revolutionary compared with those recommended by the Friends of the Manifesto and Liberty movement, though the Party likewise took care that the demonstrations remain peaceful.²⁴

¹⁹Ahmed Mezerna: born in 1907 in Blida, a militant in the Star of North Africa (Étoile Nord-Africaine) and the Algerian People's Party. He was arrested several times, the first in 1938 and again in 1943, and after his release he resumed activity on the Party's steering committee. He was among the organizers of the demonstrations of 1 and 8 May 1945, and was arrested on 10 May, remaining in detention until the general amnesty law was issued. He was elected deputy to the French Parliament in 1948, and stood by Messali Hadj during the crisis, representing the Messalist movement abroad. He died in 1982. See: Achour Cheurfi, *The Algerian Political Class from 1900 to the Present Day*, Casbah Editions, Algiers, 2001, pp. 273–275.

²⁰Benyoucef Ben Khedda, *The Origins of 1 November 1954*, Dahlab Editions, Algiers, 1989, p. 100.

²¹Mahfoud Kaddache, *Histoire du nationalisme algérien...*, vol. 2, op. cit., p. 702.

²²*Ibid.*, p. 703.

²³Radouane Aïnad Tabet, op. cit., pp. 97–98.

²⁴Mahfoud Kaddache, *History of Algerian Nationalism...*, vol. 2, op. cit., p. 703.

Be that as it may, on 8 May 1945 the Algerians came out in peaceful demonstrations in many Algerian cities, like the rest of the world's peoples, to celebrate the Allied victory over the Axis.²⁵ In Sétif,²⁶ the demonstrators set off from in front of the mosque near the railway station, heading toward the town center. During the march, demonstrators raised banners bearing several slogans calling for freedom, Algerian independence, and the release of Messali Hadj, and they also raised the national flag alongside the flags of the Allied powers.²⁷ The procession of demonstrators advanced about 2,000 meters carrying the national flag, but when it drew near one of the cafés in the town center, the police commissioner Olivieri appeared and ordered that the national flag be taken from the hand of one of the demonstrators. When the Algerian demonstrator Bouzid Saâl refused, the police opened fire, killing him and wounding a number of demonstrators, which set off the flames of unrest that followed.²⁸

The martyrdom of Bouzid Saâl turned the peaceful demonstrations into bloody confrontations, and in this regard Ferhat Abbas describes this scene, saying: "The policemen opened fire, and soldiers intervened to reinforce them; a great many of our brothers were martyred and many others wounded, and news of these events spread far and wide... it swept through the countryside and villages of the Department of Constantine... resulting in the killing of tens of thousands of our brothers... the settlers gave free rein to their savagery, brutality, and ferocity, sparing no one they saw, killing the unarmed and finishing off the wounded... all this in the name of civilization and progress."²⁹

It is known that the demonstrations and acts of repression affected numerous Algerian cities, such as Jijel, Annaba, Constantine, Algiers, and Oran,³⁰ as well as Tizi Ouzou, Bou Saâda, Mostaganem, Tlemcen, Sidi Bel Abbès, Khenchela, Batna, Biskra, and other cities, but the violence and repression were greatest in Sétif, Kherrata, and Guelma.³¹

²⁵Amar Rekhila, 8 May 1945: The Decisive Turning Point in the Course of the National Movement, University Publications Office, Algiers, n.d., p. 60.

²⁶The eighth of May fell on a Tuesday, the weekly market day in Sétif, when farmers and residents of neighboring towns such as Béjaïa, Bordj Bou Arréridj, and M'Sila converged on the city, making it a hub for selling and trading. This allowed the elements of the People's Party to gather as large a number of participants as possible for the march, estimated at around 7,000 people. See: Kamal Khalil, "The Tragedy of 8 May 1945 and Its Repercussions on Sétif Society through the French Archives," Third National Historical Symposium: The Massacres of 8 May 1945 in Algeria — Reports, Testimonies, Figures, 1st ed., Editions of the El Nibras Cultural Association, Sétif, 2023, pp. 123–124.

²⁷Mahfoud Kaddache, 8 May 1945, ANEP Editions, Algiers, 2006, pp. 30–31.

²⁸Ferhat Abbas, Colonial Night, op. cit., p. 118.

²⁹Ibid., pp. 118–119.

³⁰Radouane Aïnad Tabet, op. cit., pp. 49–59.

³¹Amar Rekhila, op. cit., p. 80.

After the events experienced by the Constantine region, the French authorities declared a state of emergency and transferred broad powers to General Raymond Duval,³² military governor of the Department of Constantine. A special guard (militia) was formed, all freedoms were suspended, exceptional laws and martial law were promulgated, and the settlers were armed.³³ The French army mobilized all three of its branches — infantry, navy, and air force — in addition to the gendarmerie and police.³⁴ On 12 May 1945, de Gaulle, President of the Provisional Government of the French Republic, issued an order to the Governor-General in Algiers, confirming to him the need to take all measures to suppress any rebellion by troublemakers that threatened the French presence in Algeria.³⁵

French repression was savage; terrible massacres were committed against the Algerians. On this subject, Charles-André Julien states: "The repression was fierce and merciless, in truth devoid of all humanity... they looted, burned, violated sanctities, and killed without mercy."³⁶ Annie Rey-Goldzieguer describes the process of extermination: "On 18 May 1945 the militia led twenty Algerians outside the town of Guelma, where they were killed and buried on the spot; days later they were exhumed and burned in an oven... we are speaking of mass graves, for they are numerous along the roadsides."³⁷ The French army also resorted to sweeping operations, ransacking and searching homes, while air forces intervened to bomb Algerian civilians, destroying entire villages and hamlets, and naval forces were likewise used to shell coastal towns.³⁸

The criminal acts continued for about three weeks and resulted in thousands of victims; we shall now attempt to address this in some detail:

³²Raymond Duval (born 1894) took part in the First World War with the rank of second lieutenant. He was subsequently promoted to captain and then major, holding several military posts abroad. On 1 July 1940, he was appointed Director of Studies at the Saint-Cyr Military Academy. After escaping from France, he was assigned to the office of the French Resident-General in Morocco before serving in several military positions in Algeria, most notably as Military Commander of Constantine from March 1945. He was responsible for declaring the state of emergency and implementing the repressive measures during the massacres of 8 May 1945. See: Roger Vétillard, *Sétif, May 1945: Massacres in Algeria*, Paris Editions, France, 2008, pp. 508–510.

³³Abderrahmane Ibrahim Ibn El-Aakoun, *The National Political Struggle through the Memoirs of a Contemporary*, vol. 2, National Book Publishing Company, Algiers, 1984, p. 337.

³⁴Abou El Kacem Saâdallah, *The Algerian National Movement*, vol. 3, Alem El Maarifa, Algiers, 2011, p. 237.

³⁵Henri Alleg, *Algerian Memoirs: Memories of Struggle and Hope*, trans. Djenane Messaoud and Abdesslam Aziz, Editions Barzakh (Casbah), Algiers, 2007, p. 141.

³⁶Charles-André Julien, *North Africa on the March: Muslim Nationalisms and French Sovereignty*, trans. El-Mounji Slim et al., Tunisian Publishing House, Tunis, 1976, p. 336.

³⁷Annie Rey-Goldzieguer, *op. cit.*, pp. 305–306.

³⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 300–301.

3. The Various Figures for the Number of Victims of the Massacres

3.1. Colonial Statistics

The French military authorities put forward divergent figures and estimates: General Henri Martin estimated the number of Algerian victims at 550 killed, while General Duval, commander of the Constantine sector, put the number at between 500 and 600 killed. General Pierre Weiss gave a preliminary toll of victims of the aerial bombardment alone at more than 2,000,³⁹ while Colonel Chochon and Vaudessire spoke of 6,000 killed. Alongside this, the prefect of the Department of Algiers, Périllier, along with Pierre Fayet and Chaulet, a member of the Economic Council, put the figure at between 15,000 and 30,000,⁴⁰ and the military authorities estimated the number of victims at between 6,000 and 8,000.⁴¹

As for the civilian authorities, based on the report of Adrien Tixier, the French Minister of the Interior, the number of settler dead was put at 80 Europeans killed, while the number of Algerian victims was set at 1,200,⁴² though Ferhat Abbas states that the number of European dead reached 120,⁴³ while the Governor-General officially announced that the number of Algerian victims reached 1,340 killed.⁴⁴

3.2. Algerian Estimates

Algerian estimates put the toll of victims resulting from the massacres of 8 May 1945 at around 45,000 martyrs, a figure firmly fixed in the national memory.⁴⁵ In his report to the Hornu Congress in Belgium in July 1945, Messali Hadj gave the figure of 40,000, expressing his hope that the truth of 8 May would be revealed with complete objectivity and credibility.⁴⁶ El-Chadli El-Mekki, one of the prominent figures of the People's Party during that period, estimated the number of victims at more than 35,000 martyrs,⁴⁷ while the Association of Algerian Muslim Ulema gave the figure of 85,000 martyrs.⁴⁸ Ahmed Toufik El-Madani, in issue 48 of the newspaper Al-

³⁹Lamia Bougrioua, "The Massacres of 8 May 1945 from the Perspective of Charles-Robert Ageron," *Journal of Arts and Humanities*, No. 7, University of Batna, December 2011, p. 190.

⁴⁰Radouane Aïnad Tabet, *op. cit.*, p. 72.

⁴¹Charles-André Julien, *op. cit.*, p. 337.

⁴²Nora Benallègue-Chaouia, *Algeria: Labor Movement and the National Question, 1919–1954*, University Publications Office, Algiers, 2010, p. 262.

⁴³Ferhat Abbas, *Colonial Night*, *op. cit.*, p. 118.

⁴⁴Amar Rekhila, *op. cit.*, p. 83.

⁴⁵Radouane Aïnad Tabet, *op. cit.*, p. 71.

⁴⁶Al-Islah Newspaper, No. 48, 8 May 1947, p. 1.

⁴⁷Mohamed Chabboub, *Algeria in the Second World War, 1939–1945: A Political, Economic, and Social Study*, doctoral thesis in modern and contemporary history, Faculty of Human and Islamic Sciences, Department of History and Archaeology, University of Oran 1, 2014–2015, p. 242.

⁴⁸Boucif Mekhaled, *op. cit.*, p. 208.

Islah, put the number of Algerians killed at 80,000,⁴⁹ while the Algerian Communist Party gave, in 1946, a figure of 20,000, and in 1953 a figure of around 30,000 martyrs.⁵⁰

3.3. Foreign Estimates

Among the foreigners who addressed what happened in Algeria during the eighth of May 1945 was the United States, whether through its diplomatic representatives or through its press. The statistics given by the American ambassador Pinckney Tuck indicated 40,000 killed,⁵¹ while the newspaper *The New York Times*⁵² estimated, on 25 December 1946, the number of victims at between 7,000 and 18,000 killed.⁵³ According to the testimony of the British journalist Sir Taylor, correspondent for a British newspaper, who was present on 8 May 1945 in Sétif and in many of the areas that witnessed the massacres, he confirms the savagery with which the French treated the Algerians, and estimated the number of Algerian victims at 60,000 killed,⁵⁴ while Radio Cairo announced a figure of 100,000 victims, based on Algerian estimates,⁵⁵ and the League of Arab States estimated the number of victims at between 40,000 and 45,000 martyrs.⁵⁶

4. The Toll of Judicial Arrests

Repression and arbitrary measures did not stop at killing and torture alone; the occupying authorities also carried out a wide-ranging campaign of arrests across the various regions of Algeria, whose total reached 4,560 detainees at the national level by November 1945. The table below illustrates this in detail:⁵⁷

Table 1: Number of Algerians Detained by Department

Department	Number of Detainees
Constantine	3,696
Algiers	359
Oran	505
Total	4,560

⁴⁹Al-Islah newspaper, cited above, p. 1.

⁵⁰Abdelhamid Zouzou, *Stations in the History of Algeria: Studies on the National Movement and the Liberation Revolution*, special ed., Alem El Maarifa, Algiers, 2011, p. 229.

⁵¹Radouane Aïnad Tabet, op. cit., p. 72.

⁵²The New York Times: founded on 18 September 1851, it became one of the leading names in American journalism. See: Layla Titah, "8 May 1945 in Algeria through the New York Times (1945–1946)," *Revue des Sciences Humaines*, No. 26, University of Biskra, June 2012, pp. 239–240.

⁵³Layla Titah, op. cit., p. 244.

⁵⁴Abdelhamid Zouzou, op. cit., pp. 233–234.

⁵⁵Nasser Eddine Saïdouni, *Algeria: Points of Departure and Perspectives — Approaching Algerian Reality through Historical Issues and Concepts*, 1st ed., Dar El Gharb El Islami, Beirut, 2000, p. 134.

⁵⁶Mohamed Ettahar Azzaoui, "Demonstrations and Events of May 1945–December 1960," *Revue Al-Thaqafa*, No. 180, Ministry of Culture, Algiers, May–June 1995, p. 83.

⁵⁷Charles-André Julien, op. cit., p. 336.

The military courts issued harsh sentences: the total number of convictions reached 1,476, of whom 151 were sentenced to death, and the number of those on whom the sentence was actually carried out was 28,⁵⁸ with 64 sentenced to hard labor for life, and 329 to hard labor for a fixed term, while 250 people were acquitted.⁵⁹

The arrests also touched figures of the national movement, as leaders of the Friends of the Manifesto and Liberty movement were arrested, foremost among them Ferhat Abbas and Dr. Saadane, on 8 May 1945, who were at the office of the Governor-General in Algiers. Ferhat Abbas said of this: "While Dr. Saadane and I were at the Government-General to congratulate the head of the colony on France's final liberation and the Allied victory, we were arrested."⁶⁰ Likewise, Sheikh Bachir El-Ibrahimi was arrested; he describes his arrest, saying: "On the night of the 27th, my house was raided by a military force; they searched my house and took me to the military prison in the capital."⁶¹ Also arrested were Ahmed Boumendjel, Kadour Sator, and the editor-in-chief of the newspaper *El Mossawat*, Aziz Kessous, along with thousands of Algerians on mere suspicion.⁶² It is notable that the majority of the detainees were members of the Algerian People's Party, without any evidence against them.⁶³

The repercussions of the massacres of 8 May 1945 were harsh for the national movement: in addition to the brutal repression and the arrests, the French government issued a decision on 14 May 1945 dissolving the Friends of the Manifesto and Liberty movement,⁶⁴ and the newspaper *El Mossawat* was banned from publication on 15 May 1945.⁶⁵

5. General Analysis of the Figures Presented

An examination of these figures and estimates reveals significant discrepancies and contradictions. The French authorities, whether civilian or military, sought to conceal, presenting a toll far removed from reality. The colonial administration therefore sought to conceal the crimes committed by the French army, so that the atrocity and horror of the bloody tragedy of 8 May 1945 would not become apparent on the international stage.⁶⁶ The colonial authorities sought to play

⁵⁸Radouane Aïnad Tabet, op. cit., p. 59.

⁵⁹Charles-André Julien, op. cit., p. 336.

⁶⁰A.N.O.M., Box 91/1K 1148, Facing the Colonial Crime and the Misconduct of the Administration: Appeal to French and Muslim Algerian Youth by Ferhat Abbas.

⁶¹Mohamed Bachir El-Ibrahimi, *Who Am I: His Autobiography in His Own Hand*, ed. Rabah Ben Khouya, Manshourat El-Watan El-Youm, Sétif, 2018, p. 22.

⁶²Boualem Khalfa and others, *The Great Adventure of Alger Républicain*, Dar El Ijtihad Editions, Algiers, 1989, p. 38.

⁶³Radouane Aïnad Tabet, op. cit., p. 59.

⁶⁴Mahfoud Kaddache, *History of Algerian Nationalism...*, vol. 2, op. cit., p. 719.

⁶⁵Benjamin Stora and Zakya Daoud, *Ferhat Abbas: Another Algeria*, Casbah Editions, Algiers, 1995, p. 149.

⁶⁶Djamel Kennane, *Issues and Studies in the History of Modern and Contemporary Algeria*, National Museum of the Moudjahid, Algiers, 1994, pp. 205–206.

down the massacres on the grounds that what occurred in Algeria was merely internal disturbances driven by the hunger and poverty resulting from the devastation left by the Second World War.⁶⁷

What confirms this, and raises serious doubts about the validity of the French estimates, is that the colonial authorities did not carry out any objective, comprehensive investigation into these massacres. Even the Tubert Commission,⁶⁸ established for this purpose, faced numerous obstacles and was unable to complete its work, after General de Gaulle, President of the Provisional Government of the French Republic, issued an order dissolving it about a week after its formation.⁶⁹ Nevertheless, despite this, the commission drafted a report on 24 May containing ten sub-headings, which did not attribute responsibility but instead left it to the military judiciary to determine the parties implicated in the massacres. The commission did note that Ferhat Abbas had had a clear influence on those events.⁷⁰

As for the neutral foreign estimates, they presented a relatively objective toll, closer both to reality and to the estimates advanced by Algerian sources. The Allies (Americans and British) based their statistics on the testimonies of military officers and the reports of journalists who followed the bloody French repression, which allowed them to observe the course of events closely, particularly in Sétif, Béjaïa, and Kherrata. On this basis, these estimates ought to be taken into consideration and adopted as the brutality of the French colonial authorities on 8 May 1945.⁷¹

As for the Algerian estimates, even if not precise, they are close to the truth. What is certain, based on the various Algerian testimonies, is their unanimous agreement that what happened on the eighth of May was an extermination of an unarmed people.⁷² Perhaps what Sheikh Bachir El-Ibrahimi wrote about the massacres of 8 May 1945 best describes this: " A day shrouded in injustice from every direction, its edges stained with the blood of the oppressed... O day! To God belong the innocent blood shed within you, and to God belong the pure honors violated within you."⁷³

It is difficult for Algerians to give precise figures for the number of victims, given the exceptional situation they were living under following the imposition of the state of emergency, in

⁶⁷Amar Rekhila, *op. cit.*, p. 84.

⁶⁸The Tubert Commission: established on 18 May 1945 and tasked with conducting an administrative inquiry into the events of May 1945. It was chaired by General Tubert and included Labatie, the advocate general of the Algiers Court of Appeal, and Judge Taleb Chaïb Ould Ben Aouda of Tlemcen. It began its work on 19 May, traveled to Sétif on 25 May, and was recalled by telegram on 26 May to return to Algiers. See: Mahfoud Kaddache, *History of Algerian Nationalism...*, vol. 2, *op. cit.*, p. 719.

⁶⁹Charles-André Julien, *op. cit.*, p. 336.

⁷⁰Abdelkader Djilali Blouafa, *op. cit.*, p. 129.

⁷¹Abdelhamid Zouzou, *op. cit.*, pp. 234–235.

⁷²Among the testimonies that referred to this, we may cite, by way of example and not limitation: Mohamed Yousfi, *op. cit.*, p. 81; Issa Kechida, *Engineers of the Revolution*, trans. Moussa Acharchour and Zineb Kobbi, 2nd ed., Editions Chihab, Algiers, 2011, p. 44; Ahmed Toufik El-Madani, *op. cit.*, p. 351.

⁷³Al-Bassaïr newspaper, No. 35, 10 May 1948, p. 1.

addition to the French authorities' lack of seriousness in conducting an objective investigation into these massacres, which prevented the establishment of reliable casualty figures and information. As for the archival documents, those found in Algeria were transferred to the Archives d'Outre-Mer shortly before independence⁷⁴ by the colonial authorities to the Archives d'Outre-Mer shortly before independence, while those found in France remain subject to the secrecy measures pertaining to this file.

Conclusion

Despite the peaceful character of the Algerian demonstrations in numerous cities, the French acts of repression were atrocious. Their essential aim, it appears, was to smother the idea of liberation and everything that threatened the colonial presence in Algeria. It has become clear to us that this colonial machine of savagery acted with premeditation and forethought, and is to be classified as a crime against humanity and a flagrant violation of international norms and law.

The student and researcher concerned with the toll of victims of 8 May 1945 finds himself confronted with a state of contradiction and paradox. The French statistics were far from the truth, indeed even inconsistent among themselves, relying as they did on the reports of the military and security authorities, which practiced misinformation and concealment in order to cover up the scale of the appalling crimes. The Algerian and foreign estimates, by contrast, were closer to one another and more objective, based on the brutal acts of the French army and the scale of the great devastation that Algeria experienced in May 1945. For this reason, it appears impossible to arrive at a precise, definitive toll.

This study has shown us that the discrepancy found in the figures is governed by political and ideological backgrounds that have directly affected the presentation of accurate data. The comparison between the various estimates and statistics that we have presented has also shown, given that the archival documents have not yet come to light, the difficulty of reaching a final, conclusive figure. We therefore affirm that the divergence in the figures is not a mere statistical matter, but rather reflects a struggle over memory and history between Algeria and France.

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