

Colonial Violence in French-Algeria and Leopold's Congo in Edmund Dene Morel's *King Leopold's Rule in Africa* (1904) and Henri Alleg's *La question* (1958)

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Abstract- Relying on Frantz Fanon's[3] notion of colonial violence and Hannah Arendt's[2] theory of violence and its relation with power, this paper argued that Edmund Dene Morel's *King Leopold's Rule in Africa* (1904)[7] and Henri Alleg's *La question* (1958)[1] hold similar views on European aggression in Africa. The two texts emphasise physical and psychological violence caused by Europeans on Algerians and Congolese. Physical violence takes the forms of torture, mutilation and the beating of "natives" by colonial agents or their mercenaries. Psychological one is embodied in terror and humiliation exercised on "natives." Besides, the authors sustain that violence and torture cause the death of "natives," either because of premeditated murder/ slaughter or due to their degraded physical condition after being tortured. Because this violence was premeditated, the authors contributed to raising it as an issue, or 'une question' in French, that needed the attention of metropolitan public opinion. Their efforts to denounce violence and aggression show that colonial power lies on false grounds.

Key words- Algeria, Congo, Alleg, Morel, colonial violence, inhumanity, torture.

1. INTRODUCTION

When they were subject to European aggression, Algeria and the Congo constituted an important ground for early "human rights activism." Because French and Belgian agents were committing inhuman acts on Algerians and Congolese, journalists, travellers and missionaries felt compelled to report them to the Western public opinion. Among others, the British and French were particularly active in raising the issue of colonial violence in the colonial Congo and revolutionary Algeria. Henri Alleg (1921-2013)[1] and Edmund Dene Morel (1873-1924) [7] were among the voices that rose against French bloody crimes in revolutionary Algeria and Leopold's inhumanity in the Congo, respectively. Morel[7] investigated the "crime[s] of the Congo"¹ and published his findings in *King Leopold's Rule in Africa* (1904). Years later when Alleg was put in prison and tortured for his support of Algerians, he published *La question* (1958) as a purgatory of his personal experience of torture in prison in 1957 and a testimony to its infliction on Algerians.

Scholars have already studied the subject of colonial crimes in Africa by drawing on the works of several Western intellectuals. In "At the Heart of Darkness: Crimes against Humanity and the Banality of Evil", Brigit

and Daniel Maier-Katkin [6] focus on the commitment of "crimes against humanity" in King Leopold's Congo. The authors claim that these crimes were reproved by some Western intellectuals like Morel[7], whom they regard as "the founder of the Congo Reform Association" (591). They argue that such crimes as murder and mutilation showed the extent to which "evil" was banal practice for Europeans in Africa. The same "evil" spread in French-Algeria, where other inhumanities were perpetrated. Torture was one of those crimes that attracted the attention of French intellectuals, advocates of the Algerian cause, like Alleg. From an existentialist perspective, Marnia Lazreg[5] argues that torture in Algeria was condemned by French intellectuals like Alleg and Jean-Paul Sartre, among others. Alleg's[1] experience of torture in prison put him on the same footing as Algerians, "as if he were a native" (Lazreg 214). Besides, every tortured Algerian stood on behalf of other Algerians and humanity at large (214). It follows that scholars have concentrated their attention on the condemnation of colonial crimes in Africa. The appellations vary, but they all agree that French power and Leopold's regime in Africa went wrong, not to say evil, and turned out to be cultivators of colonial violence and an aggression against the humanity of the colonised.

This paper proposes to study Morel's and Alleg's[1][7] denunciation of colonial violence perpetrated under European auspices in the Congo and Algeria. In their writings, they address European public opinion to raise awareness of this bloody violence. They focus on physical

¹"Crime of the Congo" was coined by Arthur Conan Doyle in his pamphlet of the same title published in 1909 to contribute to the campaign led by Morel and Roger Casement against slavery and the other atrocities of the Congo.

and psychological violence. The physical is related to torture, mutilation and the beating of “natives” by colonial agents or their mercenaries. The psychological pertains to terror and humiliation exercised on “natives.” Besides, they argue that violence and torture cause colonised people’s death, either because of premeditated murder or due to their degraded physical condition after being tortured. Because this violence was deliberate, it had to be raised as an *issue*, or *une question* in French, that needed the attention of metropolitan public opinion. Morel and Alleg[1][7] offered a tribune where concerned people could get a true account of what happened and forge their opinions without being influenced by French and Leopoldian propaganda.

In *The Wretched of the Earth* [3], Frantz Fanon argued that colonialism involved a history of violence, violence that was first enacted by the coloniser against the colonised, followed inevitably by that of the colonised against the coloniser. He writes: “colonialism is not a thinking machine, nor a body endowed with reasoning faculties. It is violence in its natural state, and it will only yield when confronted with greater violence” (61). The violence of colonialism is perpetrated by military and paramilitary forces that often had no mercy on the oppressed, and their sole role was to enforce on the colonised population their own mode of existence, to maintain colonial dominance and to exploit the human and natural resources of the colonies. In *On Violence* [2], Hannah Arendt argued that “Power and violence, though they are distinct phenomena, usually appear together. Wherever they are combined, power ... is the primary and predominant factor” (Arendt 52)[2]. As a matter of fact, the Europeans established colonies and maintained power structures that used violence to cope with “native” resistance. King Leopold II was attributed the rule of the Congo by Western powers and created what the “natives” called “Bula Matadi.”² French-Algeria was created as an extension of France in Algeria to rule over Algerians and exploit their resources. To maintain and protect their power, the French ruler and King Leopold resorted to violence against the “natives.”

2. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Leopoldian and French violence in the Congo and Algeria was characterised by inhumanity, and Morel and Alleg[1][7] denounce it in their texts. Morel asserts that King Leopold’s agents in the Congo orchestrated acts of barbarism against the Congolese and promoted a “system of so-called ‘taxation’ on human beings, in rubber, and in ivory” (24). Leopold defended the creation of the Congo as a pretended free state³, but it turned out to be “synonymous

with grinding oppression, outrage, rapine and massacre [...and] the callous indifference to human life” (27). All that mattered to him was profit. Therefore, he ordered his agents to engage in a systematic and large-scale plunder of the natural resources of the Congo. Besides, the “natives” were being exploited in the framework of a slave system that constituted another aggression against their human dignity because they were deprived of their fundamental right to freedom. When the people resisted to submit to this system and to accept the exploitation of their country, the Belgian agents and their mercenaries resorted to inhuman acts.

In Algeria, too, French agents orchestrated acts of inhumanity and barbarism on Algerians and European friends of Algerians.⁴ In addition to the atrocities they committed on the battlefield⁵ during the Algerian revolution (1954-1962), the police put in jail members of the FLN (Front de Libération Nationale)⁶, other Algerians suspected of providing material or moral support to FLN members, and foreign advocates of the Algerian cause. Alleg was arrested for his sympathy with the Algerians. In prison, he experienced torture and witnessed its infliction on Algerians. In *La question*, he describes the kinds of inhuman treatment he was inflicted by the French torturers, but he also insists that the prison was populated by Algerians that had to undergo torture for days and nights. He writes:

“Des nuits entières, durant un mois, j’ai entendu hurler des homes que l’on torturait, et leurs cris résonnent pour toujours dans ma mémoire. J’ai vu des prisonniers jetés à coup de matraque d’un étage à l’autre et qui, hébétés par la torture et les coups, ne savaient plus que murmurer en arabe les premières paroles d’une ancienne prière” (18), “During a month, every night I heard men crying because they were being tortured; their cry still resonates in my mind. I saw prisoners thrown from one floor to another. Overwhelmed by torture and the beating, they could only murmur in Arabic the first words of an ancient prayer.” (Translation, mine)

state was not appropriate because King Leopold turned it into a slave colony.

⁴ In his book, Alleg names many French sympathisers with Algerians; they were put in prison because of their ‘anti-French’ behaviour. One was his friend Maurice Audin, who was arrested two days before him.

⁵ The French army had, for instance, used gas to put fire on entire villages and their harvest. This created famine among the population, and it did not spare women, children and seniors. Likewise, Belgian agents burned villages and confiscated people’s harvest to cause their starvation.

⁶ The “Front de Libération Nationale” was the Algerian national organisation that planned and executed the revolution against France in 1954. It had twenty two leaders, and they were joined by many men and women who fought against French soldiers and/ or provided support for the fighters.

² Morel defines “Bula Matadi” as the word “natives” used to refer to the rule established by King Leopold in the Congo and to distinguish it from the missionary work of the first Europeans to penetrate their country (36-37).

³ In the *Berlin Conference* of 1884-1885, King Leopold managed to convince the Western powers to grant him the Congo basin as a personal territory to create the Congo Free State. However, the name given to the

The purpose of putting Algerians in prison for their revolutionary activities was to weaken the force of the revolution and to maintain the colonial system in place. The French understood that their rule was really threatened, but they were unwilling to renounce to their privileges as colonisers. Thus, they felt the need to act in every inhuman way to put an end to that threat.

Both Morel and Alleg[1][7] agree that the first perpetrators of these acts were Europeans that were attributed the task of torturing Africans. Morel[7] writes that these inhumanities “must be assigned to the direct instigation of State officials and agents of Trusts appointed to terrorise the rubber districts” (119). These were supported by the work of some “natives” mounted against their brethren. In Algeria, too, French agents were behind the systematic torture of prisoners and other Algerians outside of jail. Right as Alleg arrived in prison and saw prisoners he wondered about how long they had been there, whether they had been tortured, and whether they were arrested by the paramilitary agents or the police. He writes:

“Aux ‘entrants’ à qui l’on peut adresser la parole, les questions que l’on pose sont, dans l’ordre: ‘Arrêté depuis longtemps? Torturé? Paras ou policiers?’” (18), “At the entry, I wondered whether I could talk with some of the prisoners and ask them such questions as ‘Arrested for a long time?’, ‘Tortured?’, ‘Paramilitary or police?’” (Translation, mine)

He also claims that Algeria became a kind of training ground where young French soldiers were taught sadism and perversity directed against innocent Algerians. He states that the French created “un lieu de torture pour les Algériens [et] une école de perversion pour les jeunes Français” (78-9), “a place of torture for Algerians and a school of perversity for young French” agents (Translation, mine). Alleg implies that torture and perversity were in Algeria to stay because French soldiers were schooled for that purpose. Therefore, unless public opinion started to condemn these acts and to bring their perpetrators to courts of justice, the plea of Algerians would continue.

The two authors agree that colonial violence in Africa is painted in red with the blood of Algerians and Congolese, beaten, sometimes to death, deliberately massacred and tortured. Thus, they account for the rise of death toll in Africa because of colonial violence. Death in the Congo ranges from “systemic” (Sliwinski 334)[9] killing of Africans and their death as a result of their injuries or starvation. These make up “genocide.” The author writes: “the soldiers, let loose throughout the country with the object of reducing, by perpetual and repeated slaughter, the people of a specific district” (Morel 119)[7]. He affirms that “tens of thousands of natives have been killed, that emigration on a huge scale has taken place, and that the natives that remain have been reduced to the condition of miserable slaves, poverty-stricken and helpless, a prey to

sickness and despair” (Morel 43)[7]. Massacring thousands of Congolese was not enough for Leopold and his agents. Those who remained had to undergo all kinds of suffering and were stripped off their human dignity.

In Algeria, the war was causing thousands of deaths on civil and military lines. But Alleg focuses on the rise of death toll inside the prisons which makes the French crimes more hideous. In other words, since the prisoners were disarmed and not likely to cause harm on French side, their death was premeditated and had to be condemned. He writes:

“Il y a quelques jours à peine, le sang de trois jeunes Algériens a recouvert dans la cour de la prison, celui de l’Algérien Fernand Yveton” (94-5), “Three days ago, the blood of three young Algerians has covered in the prison’s yard that of the Algerian Fernand Yveton.” (Translation, mine)

The expression “le sang de trois jeunes Algériens”, or the blood of three young Algerians, is used to show that blood had been flowing in prison as illustrated by the killing of three Algerians and one French-Algerian. Alleg also refers to the number of other Algerian prisoners who wait for their death without fear in the name of their freedom and their country’s independence (20).

Colonial violence manifested itself through different forms; torture and mutilation were particularly hideous. In the Congo, violence was in the forms of mutilation and punishment; in Algeria it took the shapes of electric shocks and water torture. Morel[7] claims that Bula Matadi’s mercenaries in the Congo engaged in systematic hand-cutting and dismemberment to punish “natives” for their non-cooperation and to “terrorise” (119) others so as to bring them to cooperation. He writes:

“But it was only towards the end of 1901 that I ascertained, by receiving photographs and letters from the Upper Congo, that mutilations were frequently practised by the Congo soldiery upon the living, upon men, upon women, upon poor little innocent children of tender years” (113).

Morel[7] tells us that the inhumanity of Belgian soldiers and their black mercenaries was such that they did not spare women and children from their sadistic acts. Like Morel[7], Alleg argues that the French did not spare women. He mentions the devotion of a special aisle in the prison to the torture of Algerian and ‘pro-Algeria(n)’ French women. He talks about “des jeunes filles dont nul n’a parlé” like Djamilia Bouhired, Elyette Loup and Nassima Hablal (19-20), “young women about whom no one spoke” (Translation, mine). Alleg remarks that their stories were not recounted, so he wants to amend to the situation because they deserve to be told given their active role in the revolution. Fanon claims that after the FLN’s decision to integrate women into their war operations, “Every veiled woman, every Algerian woman became

suspect” (Fanon “A Dying Colonialism” 62)[4]. Thus, because of their activism in the revolution, these women were “deshabillées, frappées, insultées par des tortionnaires sadiques” (Alleg 20), “They were unclothed, beaten, insulted by their sadistic torturers” (Translation, mine).

In Algeria, it was the police and the paramilitary forces that instigated inhuman acts in the form of torture. FLN prisoners were exposed to electric shocks so as to force them to reveal the secrets of the revolution. Those who resisted electricity and water had to witness their relatives tortured with electricity and/ or water to extort information from them. He writes:

“J’ai appris plus tard qu’ils avaient même torturé Mme Touri (la femme d’un acteur bien connu de Radio-Alger) devant son mari, pour qu’il parle” (48), “I learned later on that they even tortured Mrs Touri (the wife of a well-known actor at Radio-Algiers).” (Translation, mine)

The torturers also used other sadistic techniques like burning some members of the body. Alleg gives the example of Mohamed Sefta; he told him that he had been withheld during forty three days by paramilitary agents who did not hesitate to burn his tongue: “Excuse-moi, j’ai encore du mal à parler: ils m’ont brûlé la langue” (18), “Excuse me, I can barely speak: they burnt my tongue” (Translation, mine). Mohamed underwent this kind of punishment because he resisted the other acts of torture in order not to speak a word about the revolution.

In his preface [8] to *The Wretched of the Earth*, Sartre argues that colonial violence is not only physical but also psychological. He asserts that the coloniser created “psychological services” that were devoted to stripping off the colonised people’s human dignity. He writes:

“Violence in the colonies does not only have for its aim the keeping of these enslaved men at arm’s length; it seeks to dehumanize them. Everything will be done to wipe out their traditions, to substitute our language for theirs and to destroy their culture without giving them ours. Sheer physical fatigue will stupefy them. Starved and ill, if they have any spirit left, fear will finish the job; guns are leveled at the peasant; civilians come to take over his land and force him by dint of flogging to till the land for them. If he shows fight, the soldiers fire and he’s a dead man; if he gives in, he degrades himself and he is no longer a man at all; shame and fear will split up his character and make his inmost self fall to pieces. The business is conducted with flying colors and by experts; the “psychological services” weren’t

established yesterday; nor was brainwashing” (15).

As a matter of fact, physical violence did not suffice to the coloniser that had to use other techniques involving the dehumanisation of the colonised.

Morel[7] argues that soon after the Belgian agents arrived in the Congo, they started a campaign for the confiscation of rubber and ivory from the “natives.” This was their first act of aggression. And when the “natives” did not cooperate, other cruelties followed. Besides, psychological torture was practised. King Leopold ordered his men to terrorise them. “Terror mingled with fury reigns supreme” (37) in many villages because the Belgian agents had punished to death people in some villages and promised to do so in others. They were “demoralised, degraded, all the manhood driven out of them [...] indifference and despair eat into the heart of the people” (38). Alleg[1], on his part, insists on insult and humiliation as two other forms of psychological violence that the French practised on Algerians outside and inside prison. He writes about the prisoners:

“d’un étage à l’autre, c’était un remue-ménage incessant de paras, qui montaient ou descendaient, chassant devant eux, des Musulmans, prisonniers déguenillés, barbus de plusieurs jours, le tout dans un grand bruit de bottes, d’éclats de rires, de grossièretés et d’insultes entremêlées” (23), “From one floor to the other, paramilitary officers were going up and down, chasing bearded Muslim prisoners, followed by the sound of their boots, insult and rudeness.” (Translation, mine)

Physically abusing prisoners was not enough for the paramilitary agents; they had to insult and humiliate them to satisfy their perversity. Alleg [1] uses the word “chassant”, meaning *chasing*, to denote the extent to which the paramilitary agents were not considering Algerian prisoners as humans but as some sort of ‘cattle.’

Besides, both authors emphasise the impact enslavement and imprisonment have on the moral of Congolese and Algerians. Because the slaves and the prisoners are denied their freedom, they no longer have any human dignity in the eyes of the colonisers and become demoralised. In the preface to *King Leopold’s Rule in Africa*, Morel claims that modern slavery in the Congo “is destructive of human life and human happiness, and more demoralising in its cumulative effects” (xvii). Alleg [1] claims that Algerians were already denied their liberty because of colonisation, and their fight was to regain it; they were in this sense “en lutte pour leur liberté” (17), “fighting for their freedom” (Translation, mine). However, many of them were deprived of it twice since they were put in prison, “chevilles enchainées” (17), or chained, without knowing if they were ever to be released or were to die in prison. This sense of the uncertain becomes psychological torture to them.

Colonial violence in Algeria and the Congo as denounced by the authors invalidates the European ideological dichotomy between the “word” and the “sword.” For a long time, European powers maintained that they were taking civilisation to “non-civilised” people and fighting with their civilisation the pretended savagery of the “non-civilised.” According to Morel, King Leopold argued that his rule promoted “the advancement of communities from a state of primitive savagery and barbarism to a greater knowledge of arts and crafts” (4). This was pure propaganda since he only sought to legitimate his slave system on false pretexts. To oppose Algerianist discourse that viewed Algerians as “uncivilised,” Alleg [1] emphasises their civilised behaviour and bearing, which he illustrates by the humane consideration he receives from an Algerian prisoner:

“Il était jeune, correctement habillé: il avait les menottes aux poignets. ... Il me sentit frissonner et tira ma veste pour couvrir mes épaules glacées. Il me soutint pour que je puisse me mettre à genoux et uriner contre le mur, puis m’aida à m’étendre. « Repose-toi, mon frère, repose-toi ». (49) “He was young and correctly clothed; he was handcuffed. He felt me shivering and covered my freezing shoulders with my jacket. He helped me to put myself on my knees so that I could pee against the wall. Then he helped me to stretch my body. ‘Take rest my brother, take rest’.” (Translation, mine)

While Alleg’s [1] Algerian inmate was so humane, his fellow countrymen exposed him to all kinds of inhumane treatment as a prisoner. For him, French torturers revert into barbarism while Algerians remain fundamentally humane. Thus, it turns out that the barbarians were Europeans who were engaged in a bloody enforcement of power in the colonies.

3. CONCLUSION

As a conclusion, Morel [7] and Alleg [1] become dissident voices that call for the abolition of colonial aggression in Africa and the condemnation of its perpetrators. They manage to startle the reader by the realist descriptions they make of the scenes of horror they witnessed or heard about in the colonies. As journalists, they alerted public opinion that they wanted to mount against this kind of behaviour. In their own ways, they contributed to the changes that came afterwards in both colonies. Due to the campaign directed against Leopold’s crimes in the Congo, Leopold renounced to his shares there. In Algeria, the case was different because it involved a revolutionary war. Yet the FLN had certainly received

significant help from French dissident voices like Sartre, Alleg and others who voiced the cause of Algerians in France.

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