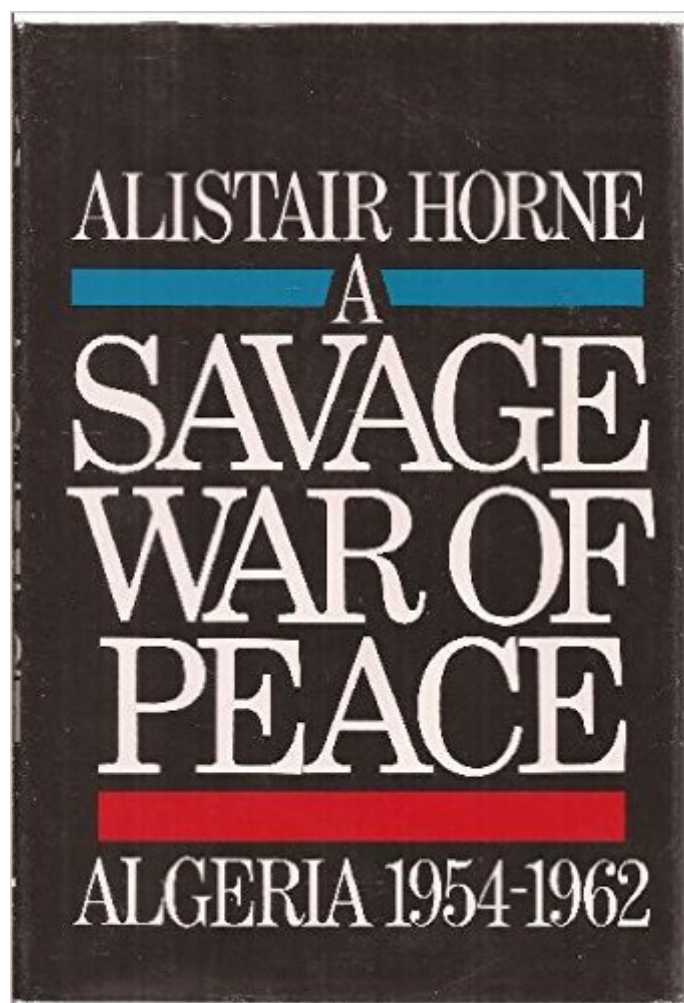


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A Savage War Of Peace: Algeria 1954-1962



Synopsis

The Algerian War lasted from 1954 to 1962. It caused the fall of six French governments, led to the collapse of the Fourth Republic, and came close to provoking a civil war on French soil. More than a million Muslim Algerians died in the conflict and as many European settlers were driven into exile. Above all, the war was marked by an unholy marriage of revolutionary terror and state torture. At the time, this brutal and intractable conflict seemed like a French affair. But from the perspective of half a century, it looks less like the last colonial war than the first postmodern one: a full-dress rehearsal for the sort of amorphous struggle that convulsed the Balkans in the 1990s and that now ravages the Middle East--struggles in which religion, nationalism, imperialism, and terrorism assume previously unimagined degrees of intensity.

Book Information

Hardcover: 604 pages

Publisher: Viking Adult; First Edition edition (March 27, 1978)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0670619647

ISBN-13: 978-0670619641

Product Dimensions: 20 x 20 x 20 inches

Shipping Weight: 2.2 pounds

Average Customer Review: 4.6 out of 5 stars Â Â See all reviews Â (102 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #904,686 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #44 in Â Books > History > Africa > Algeria

Customer Reviews

Alistair Horne's "A Savage War of Peace" -- a narrative of the Algerian death struggle with France in the 1950s and early 1960s -- is history at its finest. Clearly written, passionate and authoritative, this book is a shining example that objective and powerful history can be written on "current events" (the book was first published barely a decade after the French pulled out of Algeria). As the US-led coalition in Iraq struggles to impose order, comparisons with France's ultimately unsuccessful attempt at holding on to Algeria in the face of Islamic insurgents have become fashionable. Such analogies, however, should be used cautiously. There are a number of salient differences in the two cases. None looms larger than the relatively large and vocal pied noir community in Algeria that Paris had to contend with, first politically and then militarily. In some Algerian cities in the 1950s, such as Constantine, a majority of the residents were of European extraction (although not

necessarily French). These pied noirs had roots in Algeria for generations and had a powerful lobby in Paris. A simple political withdrawal from Algeria in 1955 was thus (in my opinion) a political impossibility. The ugly war that erupted was, in the end, tragically unavoidable. Horne would certainly disagree with this assessment. Myopic intransigence by the French and pied noir leaders is a leitmotif of the narrative. Yet, the author just as consistently praises the FLN leadership for laying out their aims at the 1956 Soumman Conferences and never wavering from them. Algerian inflexibility, it seems, was a virtue; for the French/pied noir community it was a sin.

One of the things that perplexed and, frankly, disgusted me, throughout this book was the posturing of many key figures on the French side about "honour" and "grandeur". In pursuit of their honour, many of these people behaved in the most disgraceful and dishonourable manner. They preened themselves on their honour and spoke volubly about "restoring the glory of France", but when the going got difficult, they mostly resigned their positions or simply abandoned their responsibilities - often to return later to repeat the whole disreputable process - or intrigue among themselves. Perhaps a psychologist could shed more light on this cesspit of misplaced values than an historian. But what of the other side - the Algerian independence movement? The alphabet soup of factions (FLN, CRUA, MTLA, UDMA etc etc) was liberally peopled by thugs, assassins, torturers and thieves. They squabbled among themselves, intrigued for office, occasionally betrayed each other, and terrorised their own people - all in the cause of Algerian independence. Even after independence, members of the ruling clique continued to wage war upon each other and upon the Algerian people. The struggle continues to this day. Ordinary Algerians on both sides were the victims of the war - as is ever the case. At its end, within months, almost all the "pied noir" population had fled the country in one of the great mass migrations of the post war era. Muslims who had worked and fought for the French and who were unable (or chose not) to flee were mercilessly hunted down. I finished the book with a sense of disgust, of having been soiled by the mostly contemptible people shaping events on both sides.

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