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# PACIFICATION IN ALGERIA

1956–1958

**David Galula**

New Foreword by Bruce Hoffman



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## Summary

In this Memorandum, the author has reconstructed and evaluated his unique experience as participant and eyewitness in a critical period of the Algerian war. During the two years of his service in that theater, the Algerian rebels, having come within sight of victory, saw their hopes thwarted by a sudden increase in the French military effort, and both sides fought intensively for the allegiance and support of the population. The emphasis on “pacification,” rather than military operations, in the present study reflects the writer’s special concern with that aspect of counterinsurgent warfare.

The author’s field experience was confined to two military sectors of Kabylia, the rugged, densely populated mountain region east of Algiers. From August 1956 until April 1958, the then Captain Galula commanded the 3d Company of the 45th Colonial Infantry Battalion in the Tizirt sector; in the four months following his promotion to major, he served as deputy battalion commander in Bordj Menaiel.

### I.

In the section entitled “The Stage,” the author analyzes the main political, psychological, and military factors that were operative at the outset of the war, and goes on to describe the situation at the various levels of the French command at the time of his arrival in Algeria.

When the Algerian insurgents launched their rebellion in November 1954, the political and military situation augured well for their success. A succession of weak governments in Metropolitan France had failed to cope with the rise of nationalism in the French empire. Indochina had been lost after a long and costly war. Tunisia and Morocco were close to gaining independence after a show of terrorism and guerrilla warfare. Most of the French Army was in the process of being shipped home from Indochina or was tied down in Tunisia and Morocco. The French public was tired of colonial wars. Both Arab and communist countries actively favored rebellion in Algeria. The rest of the world was not unsympathetic to the nationalist strivings of colonial

countries. Among the nine million Muslims of Algeria, living side by side with one million Europeans who dominated the political and economic life, a large majority could be expected to join a war of independence. Even those satisfied with French rule (and their number was not small) had lost confidence in the effectiveness of the French authorities. The French administration in Algeria was inadequate; it was virtually nonexistent at the grassroots. Police strength was under fifty thousand, and military forces even fewer, in a large and difficult territory with a widely dispersed, predominately rural population.

The insurgents' strategy was to begin with a wave of "blind terrorism," designed to attract publicity for the movement and to spread fear and insecurity, and to go on to a campaign of "selective terrorism" through which to acquire control of the population in a very short time. Once the rebels had secured the willing or forced complicity of the people (a goal they achieved early in the Algerian war), they were ready to launch guerrilla warfare. From there, they were prepared to go on to larger-scale engagements if necessary.

French reaction to the rapidly expanding insurgency was slowed and haphazard. As successive cabinets tossed ideas, money, and men piecemeal into the fray, hoping to reach an acceptable settlement with the rebels, they came close to losing the war in its initial phase.

Early in 1956, however, the rioting in Algiers of European settlers who had considerable support in France forced a change in governmental policy. That spring, newly drafted soldiers and reservists recalled to active duty poured into Algeria, allowing the French to pass from a desultory defensive to the offensive, and to launch full-scale military operations against insurgent bands that had grown rapidly in size as the rebellion seemed to be gaining ground.

The French forces—infantry, with a minimum of support and service units—were divided into static and mobile units. The former (the "grid") were spread throughout the territory, each responsible for pacifying its own area; the mobile units acted as a striking force whenever needed, and fought any large-scale infiltrations from across the borders. At the same time, the French began their costly but highly successful effort to seal off the Tunisian and Moroccan borders so as to prevent such massive infiltrations.

As a result of this heavy French investment of men, money, and matériel, the insurgents were unable to develop an effective military apparatus and to acquire bases within Algeria. As time went on, they had increasingly to content themselves with harassing action and minor guerrilla forays. However, although militarily their situation was deteriorating, the rebels were counting on the fatigue and disenchantment of the French to help turn the tide if the war lasted long enough. They recognized that their chief problem in the meantime was to solidify their hold over the Algerian populace—their main source of strength—and to that end they resorted once again to the terrorist tactics of the earlier period.

The French for their part realized that military action by itself could not put a permanent end to the insurgency. If a rebel band was destroyed, the rebels' political organization, strongly entrenched in the masses of the people, would create another. Ultimate victory, therefore, depended on the ability of the French to win over the population. But, while the central authorities acknowledged the principle of a systematic pacification effort and instructed their officers in the field accordingly, they lacked agreement on method. Despite their experience in Indochina and other insurgent theaters, they had yet to formulate a concrete counterinsurgent doctrine applicable to the realities of the Algerian situation. The order to "pacify," therefore, was variously interpreted by the officers in the field, among whom the company commanders, in particular, bore the burden of its execution. There were the "warriors," who believed in the efficacy of military conquest and intimidation, and the "psychologists," who put their faith in persuasion and other psychological means without show of force. But the large majority of commanders were not committed to either extreme; they were faced with a multitude of concrete problems to which each improvised his own answers. The broad high-level directives, sound though they were, failed to meet the urgent need for precise instructions at the bottom.

## II.

"The Struggle for Control of the Population" is the author's detailed account of his theory and practice in what he regards as the mandatory

first phase of any counterinsurgent effort. His company's *sous-quartier* in the rebel-infested Aissa Mimoun range of Kabylia proved to be a perfect testing ground for the ideas on counterinsurgency and pacification that he had developed through experience and observation in China and Greece.

He started from the premise that support from the population—the main objective of both insurgent and counterinsurgent—meant more than sympathy or idle approval; it required the people's active participation in the struggle. Such support, however, would not be spontaneous, especially after the rebels had effectively terrorized the population into silence, nor could it be forced. The author believed that it could come about only through an organization developed within the population. As a starting point, therefore, he sought to identify those Moslems, however few they might be, who were pro-French. They, in turn, would not only furnish valuable intelligence but could be relied on gradually to influence and rally the neutral Moslems, until eventually a majority of the population could be enlisted in the elimination of the rebels and their militant supporters.

The author's first act was to break up his company, which had been stationed as one unit in an isolated farm, and to distribute its elements near the two villages and several hamlets of his territory; one platoon was actually installed in the main village. Then, while actively tracking the armed rebels and setting large numbers of ambushes to prevent their ruling the area by night, he began working on the population.

His initial contact with the Algerian villagers of his area demonstrated to the author their reluctance to co-operate with the French authorities, for they feared the punishments of the French far less than the reprisals of the rebels, whose cells were keeping them under constant surveillance. Not until these cells were destroyed, therefore, could the French hope to break through that barrier of silence.

As a first step in the process of imposing control on a village and physically isolating its inhabitants from the armed rebels outside, the author conducted a thorough census and instituted a system by which all movement of persons in and out of the village was rigidly checked. Simultaneously, he committed villagers to the French struggle by requisitioning their labor and paying them for their work. And even in



this early phase of pacification, he embarked on the kind of civic action he believed to be the most persuasive in the long run. He established a medical dispensary, opened a school, and initiated a program of information.

Aided by a fortuitous circumstance that provided him with a list of the rebel cell members and their most active supporters, the author successfully “purged” the first of a series of villages, developing there the virtually foolproof method he was to use again and again as the area of his *sous-quartier* was enlarged. He proceeded from the knowledge that, willing or not, every villager participated in the rebellion at least to the extent of making his monthly contribution of money, and was therefore bound to know the identity of some or all of the local cell members. To persuade them to part with this knowledge, the author would arrest villagers for relatively minor offenses in groups of no fewer than four and interrogate them singly for several days. In almost every case, one or more of the men, protected by the fact that any one of them might have been the informer, would divulge the names of rebel cell members in the village, thereby permitting a chain of arrests that would eventually, and sometimes very quickly, lead to the destruction of the entire cell.

These purge tactics became the more effective as the author demonstrated his policy toward the arrested cell members: those who proved their repentance by fully disclosing their past activities and links to the top were instantly released; those who did not were turned over to the legal authorities.

To prevent the armed bands outside from creating new political cells, as they invariably tried to do, the author stationed a small detachment of fifteen to twenty soldiers in every village that had been purged, and the method proved successful in nearly every case. As a result, his company was ultimately dispersed over a number of posts that covered the entire southern slope of the Aissa Mimoun range as well as a large area in the valley. Higher command objected on military grounds to this fragmentation of forces, but the author was able to prove that the risks of such dispersal were smaller than the dangers of losing political control of the population; so successful were the purge of his area and

his methods of safeguarding its results that the rebels' higher echelons abandoned the Aissa Mimoun range as a lost cause.

### III.

“The Struggle for the Support of the Population” concerns the next step in the process of regaining the initiative and solidifying counter-insurgent control. Here again, the 3d Company's *sous-quartier* supplies the case history of a workable pragmatic approach to the problem.

After a village had been cleaned and the French forces were visibly in control, the author observed a dramatic change in the villagers' behavior; once eager to avoid all contact with the French, they now became openly friendly toward them and showed their lessened fear of the rebels by defiance of the insurgents' rule of conduct. This was the moment for the French to lay the groundwork for a trustworthy local self-government and to launch an intensive program of social and economic improvement.

Though it would have been tempting simply to appoint as village leaders those who already had proved their loyalty to the French, the author preferred to run the risks inherent in holding local elections. Almost invariably, he found, the populace elected the kind of men he himself would have put forward.

Once these new local leaders were in office, their reliability and efficiency were tested by the willingness and success with which they met two basic tasks: the management of village affairs, and the enlistment of the populace in an active counterinsurgent effort. In most instances, the elected officials took the desired initiative in the social and economic betterment of the village, and in recruiting volunteers and organizing them into an auxiliary defense force.

With peace restored to a village, the author's plans for much-needed civic improvements met with enthusiastic response and support from the population. The greatest effort was directed toward the children, as the key to the country's future. The 3d Company's *sous-quartier* ultimately operated six schools, in which French soldiers taught about 1,400 children, including girls, which was a radical innovation. Village dispensaries and the battalion doctor's weekly visit provided medical care. Villagers received government funds with which to build

roads, schools, wells, and reservoirs. They were persuaded to clean and whitewash their houses. The writer even went so far as to initiate the emancipation of the Moslem women, who theretofore had been kept in semislavery, and he was struck by the readiness of their response.

As they recognized the difference between their prospering environment and those surrounding areas still in the grip of hostilities, villagers were easily convinced of the need to preserve their peace by helping to prevent rebel infiltration. They co-operated in the thorough checking of visitors from the outside and in the general policing of their area. They were aware, on the other hand, that their co-operation with the French authorities rendered them conspicuous, and that their future security hinged on the continued presence and firmness of the French. Hence, every cabinet crisis in Paris that put the Algerian policy in question had an adverse psychological effect on them, just as it gave heart to the insurgents even in the face of many setbacks. This continual uncertainty of the Moslems set definite limits to what a local pacification effort could achieve.

The author's methods soon became standard procedure throughout his battalion, and their results received much publicity and favorable comment at high levels of command. Yet not until 1959 did the theater command, in the well-known "Plan Challe," issue an overall blueprint for pacification incorporating the ideas and methods that had proved so strikingly successful wherever they were tried. Until then, Algeria remained a checkerboard of areas in various states of pacification, depending on the initiative and conviction of individual commanders.

The author never had the opportunity to realize the final step in his program, which was to organize active supporters, once they had been so identified and tested, in a large political party capable of effective resistance to the Algeria-wide political front of the insurgents. Having failed to convince the top civilian echelons in Algeria of the wisdom of such a policy, he had to limit the effort to his own small area of jurisdiction. He had just begun to put the idea into practice by grouping local Kabyles into a small political machine, when he was promoted and reassigned.

## IV.

In the section “War and the Bordj Menaïel Sector,” the author describes the situation he faced in his next command post, which was radically different from the “island of peace” of Aïssa Mimoun, despite the fact that terrain and populace were much the same in both areas. In Bordj Menaïel he found a full-scale war; an increasingly hostile population; rebel bands operating at company strength undeterred by enormous losses; and French units ineffectually stationed in “commanding” positions on mountain ridges. He attributes this disastrous situation and the rebels’ irreversible gains to the previous commanders’ distrust of pacification and their failure—for different reasons—to seek the support of the population. One of his two predecessors had believed that vigorous military operations alone could break the back of the insurgency; the other had refrained from pacification efforts out of concern for the people, because he was convinced that the French government would ultimately abandon the country and with it any Algerians who had demonstrated their loyalty to France. Both attitudes were common among French officers and helped explain the variations in approach from one command to another.

Even in this heavily rebel-infested sector, however, Moslems voted overwhelmingly in favor of the French constitution in September 1958, a reflection, the author believes, of the change in atmosphere brought on by the May revolution in Algiers. As he sees it, that even had persuaded Moslems throughout Algeria that the French Army was in control and French policy toward the rebellion therefore would thenceforth be firm and consistent, and this assurance had emboldened them to declare their loyalty without fear of recrimination from the rebels.

## V.

In his “Conclusions,” the author has singled out as most important and generally valid five principles of counterinsurgent warfare that he found confirmed in his Algerian experience. (1) The objective is the population. (2) The support of the population is not spontaneous; it must be acquired and organized. It is obtained, essentially, through the efforts of the minority that actively favors the counterinsurgent. (3) This minority will emerge, and will be followed by the majority, only if

the counterinsurgent is recognized as the ultimate victor. (4) The counterinsurgent, unlike the insurgent, needs much to achieve little, and he therefore must concentrate his efforts on one area at a time. (5) In time, the issue of war and peace becomes the central one in any insurgency, making the relative merit and popularity of the contending causes a matter of secondary moment.

# The French Organization in Algeria and the Location of Greater Kabylia

