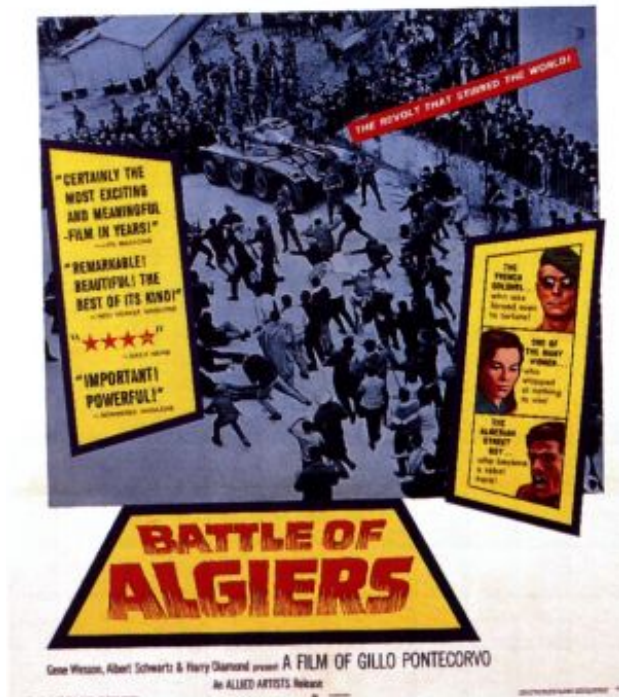


**“A MOST
EXTRAORDINARY
FILM!”**

—NEW YORK TIMES



The Battle of Algiers

(Italian: *La battaglia di Algeri*) is a war film released in 1966. It is based on occurrences during the Algerian War (1954–62) against French colonial rule in North Africa. It was directed by Gillo Pontecorvo.

Directed by Gillo Pontecorvo
Produced by Antonio Musu, Saadi Yacef
Written by Gillo Pontecorvo, Franco Solinas
Starring Brahim Hagiag, Jean Martin, Saadi Yacef
Music by Ennio Morricone, Gillo Pontecorvo
Cinematography Marcello Gatti
Editing by Mario Morra, Mario Serandrei
Distributed by Rizzoli
Release date(s) September 20, 1967 (U.S.)
Running time 125 min.
Country Algeria, Italy
Language French, Arabic

Subject matter

The Battle of Algiers depicts an episode of the war, occurred in Algiers, capital city of French

Algeria, that reconstructs events occurred in the city between November 1954 and December 1960, during the Algerian War of Independence.

The narrative begins with the organization of revolutionary cells in the Casbah. Then civil war between native Algerians and European settlers (pied-noirs) in which the sides exchange acts of increasing violence, leading to the introduction of French army paratroopers to hunt the National Liberation Front (FLN). The paratroopers are depicted as winning the battle by neutralizing the whole of the FLN leadership either through assassination or through capture, however, the film ends with a coda depicting demonstrations and rioting for independence by native Algerians, suggesting that in France having won the Battle of Algiers, She has lost the Algerian War.

The ruthless tactics of the FLN guerrilla insurgency and the French counter insurgency, and the uglier incidents of the war, are shown. Colonizer and colonized commit atrocities against civilians. The FLN commandeered the Casbah via summary execution of native Algerian criminals and other (considered) traitors, and applied terrorism to harass the civilian French colonials. The French colonialists resort to lynch mobs and indiscriminate, racist violence against the natives to hand. Paratroops routinely torture, intimidate, and murder in combating the FLN insurgents.

Pontecorvo and Solinas have several protagonists, based on historical war figures. The story begins and ends from the perspective of Ali la Pointe (Brahim Hagiag), a petty criminal who is politically radicalized while in prison, and is then recruited to the FLN, by the (fictional) military commander El-hadi Jafar, (Saadi Yacef), also corresponding to the eponymous historic personage.

Lieutenant-Colonel Mathieu, the paratroop commander, is the principal French character. Other characters are the boy Petit Omar, a street urchin who is an FLN messenger; Larbi Ben M'hidi, a top FLN leader, is the film's political rationale for the insurgency; Djamilia, Zohra, and Hassiba, three FLN women urban guerrillas who effect a revenge-attack. Moreover, The Battle of Algiers features thousands of Algerian extras; director Pontecorvo's intended effect was the "Casbah-as-chorus", communicating with chanting, wailing, and physical effect.

Production and style

Screenplay

The Battle of Algiers was inspired by *Souvenirs de la Bataille d'Alger*, by Saadi Yacef, the campaign account of an FLN military commander. The book, written by Yacef, while a prisoner of the French, was FLN morale-boosting propaganda for militants. After independence, Yacef was released and became part of the new government. The Algerian government backed a film of Yacef's memoir; exiled FLN man Salash Baazi approached the Italian director Gillo Pontecorvo and screenwriter Franco Solinas with the project.

Solinas's first draft screenplay, titled *Parà*, is the story told from the perspective of a disenchanted French paratrooper, Paul Newman, he and Pontecorvo hoped. Baazi rejected that idea, because it relegates Algerian suffering to the backdrop. Moreover, Yacef wrote his own

screenplay, which the Italian producers rejected as too-biased towards the Algerians. Although sympathetic to Algerian nationalism, the Italian businessmen insisted on dealing with events from a neutral perspective. The final screenplay of *Battle of Algiers* has an Algerian protagonist, and depicts the cruelty and suffering of French and Algerian. Apocryphally, Solinas began the script with jotted-down “flashes of ideas” on a blackboard, which became scenes, thus, the episodic feel. Despite its base in true events, *The Battle of Algiers* uses composite characters, and changes the names of certain persons, e.g. “Colonel Mathieu” is a composite of several French counterinsurgency officers, especially Jacques Massu. Accused of portraying him too-elegant and -noble, screenplay writer Solinas denied it is intentional; the Colonel is “elegant and cultured, because Western civilization is neither inelegant nor uncultured”.

Visual style

The film has been hailed for its stunning realism, especially in its scenes of Algerian city life and large-scale public protest and rioting.[citation needed] The handling of the crowd scenes is masterly, capturing the raw passion of the actual events. This reflects the influence of newsreel footage upon Pontecorvo's style, already evident in his Academy Award-nominated film *Kapò* (1959) which established his reputation. For *Battle of Algiers*, Pontecorvo and cinematographer Marcello Gatti filmed in black and white and experimented with various techniques to give the film the look of newsreel and documentary film. The effect was convincing enough that American reels carried a disclaimer that "not one foot" of newsreel was used.

Aiding the sense of realism, Pontecorvo and Solinas spent two years in Algiers scouting locations, especially those areas where the events to be depicted in the film took place. With Saadi Yacef as a guide, he learned about the culture and customs of the residents. Pontecorvo chose to cast from the non-professional Algerian Arabs or Kabyles he met, picking them mainly on appearance and emotional effect (as a consequence, many of their lines were dubbed). The sole professional actor in the film was Jean Martin who played Col. Mathieu; Martin was a French actor who had worked primarily in theatre. Ironically, Martin subsequently lost several jobs because he condemned his government's actions in Algeria. Martin had also served in a paratroop regiment during the Indochina War as well as the French Resistance, thus giving his character an autobiographical element.

Sound and music

Sound — both music and effects — performs important functions in the film. Pontecorvo stated in several interviews that he spent much of his time during editing thinking of leitmotifs for the score.[citation needed] These motifs were eventually incorporated into the orchestral score by Ennio Morricone to heighten the emotional impact — and to evoke parallels between events: scenes of French and Algerians civilians being slaughtered are both underscored by the same deeply elegiac music. Indigenous Algerian drumming, rather than dialogue, is heard during a scene in which female FLN militants prepare for a bombing. In addition, Pontecorvo used the sounds of gunfire, helicopters and truck engines to symbolize the French approach to the battle, while bomb blasts, ululation, wailing and chanting symbolize the Algerian approach.