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The Executioner's Office in Algeria and Tunisia (1842–1962)

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As a legacy of the French Revolution, the guillotine was widely used in Algeria (to a lesser extent in Tunisia) not only to execute the so-called common criminals but also to curb the rise of nationalists. Although often relegated to the sidelines, the executioner held a central position in these highly ritualised performances.

- We focus on the fact that the use of the guillotine in the colonies was a showcase for the rule of law, masking a discriminatory reality. In this context, the figure of the executioner embodies colonial violence in a legally codified but deeply irrational form.
- It will be shown how the executioner's profession in the colonial context was not within everyone's reach. Although feared and controversial, performing this job required specific skills. The documentation kept at the National Archives of France sheds light on this subject.
- We demonstrate how these executing agents, acting in the name of the "great feats" of justice, found themselves directly involved in the repressive dynamics of the anti-colonial struggle.

CONTEXT

Nowadays, the profession of executioner is still relevant. The death penalty is still widely carried out in some countries. Concerning Algeria and Tunisia, once they gained independence the new rulers kept their own executioners on duty. They simply replaced French executioners with "local" ones. Today, executions in both countries rarely occur, but the abolition of the death penalty is not in prospect.



THE GUILLOTINE IN ALGIERS: SYMBOL “OF A PERFECT CIVILIZATION”

Having been a French colony since 1830, Algeria received its first guillotine in 1842. According to one contemporary eyewitness, there had been an incident on 3 May of the same year during the execution of a prisoner sentenced to death, serving as the catalyst for this “reform.” The decapitation had been carried out with a special sword called “yatagan,” but the victim only expired after several blows. The crowd nearly lynched the executioner (Quétin 1848: 93–94).

In response, the Minister of War advocated the use of the guillotine. The colonialist discourse of the time claimed that “the colony had seemed ripe for this emblem and product of a perfect civilization” (Morand 1856: 102). On 20 October 1842, the “Widow” – a nickname commonly assigned to the guillotine – landed in Algiers. In *Things Seen*, Victor Hugo – an inveterate supporter of the abolition of the death penalty – describes the scene in a wealth of detail. At the end of his account, he remarks ironically: “[...] it was civilization arriving in Algiers in the shape of a guillotine” (Hugo 1971: 198).

In Bab El Oued, a highly symbolic place in the colonial imagination, the guillotine would be operated in the capital for the first time on 16 February 1843 (Quétin 1848: 93–94). Some 40 years later, the same ideology that was presumed to bring the symbols of a superior European civilisation introduced this killing machine to Tunisia. The country had been rebranded a French “protectorate” in May 1881. On the dawn of 27 April 1889, Tunisians discovered a new execution method that differed from the one they were previously accustomed to (*Le Petit Tunisien*, 28 April 1889).

Unlike the executioners of metropolitan France, some of whom had acquired a certain popularity, those who operated the guillotine in the colonies were almost unheard of until the publication of *Words of an Executioner. Unique Testimony of a Penal Executioner*. The author was none other than a highly-skilled expert who had worked in Algeria and Tunisia. Fernand Meyssonnier, who died on 8 August 2008, had devoted the last years of his life to testifying “for history,” as he himself put it. By comparing this autobiography, admittedly questionable, with archival documents, we can attempt to retrace the trajectories of these uncommon representatives of justice.

THE APPEAL OF THE EXECUTIONER’S OFFICE

In France, the decree of 6 October 1791 had advocated decapitation as a method of execution without appointing the employees who would operate the fatal machine. Two years later, a first decree appointed one executioner per département. Over time, the abolition of certain crimes incurring the death penalty contributed to an accompanying decline in the number of executions. It was therefore unnecessary to maintain all the guillotine operators in France (decree of 25 November 1870). Henceforth, a single executioner would be appointed for the entire French territory (Art. 2). As a French colony, Algeria would meanwhile retain its team of executioners (Art. 7). The law of 27 March 1883, the founding text of French justice in Tunisia, stipulated that the existing legislation in Algeria was equally enforceable in Tunisian courts as well. This implied that the same executioner who was already established in the neighboring colony would have to travel, with the guillotine, to carry out capital punishment in Tunisia. By way of allusion to “Monsieur de Paris” (“Mister (of) Paris”), his Algiers counterpart was attributed the title of “Monsieur d’Alger” (“Mister (of) Algiers”). Official documents evoked an even more courteous appellation: “Executor of the great feats of justice.”

But how does one become an executioner? Can the French National Archives, which keep the letters of application for the position of executioner in Algeria (BB/18/6585, d.71 BL), shed some light on this question? At first glance, it is clear that the office would be in high demand: the number of applicants was very high and the same candidate sometimes

submitted several applications at once. Since “heads [were] not within every hand’s reach” (Monestier 1994: 330), the candidates cited the moral and physical criteria they deemed essential.

First of all, an executioner had to be young, so the average age of applicants was between 30 and 40. As the job also required a certain physical rigor, applicants felt that they, in some cases, held jobs that prepared them to become executioners: “a butcher’s boy,” accustomed to the sight of blood (letter G. Vincent, 1898); a “hairstylist/barber,” who could proceed with the condemned man’s grooming (anonymous letter, 1898); a “police inspector,” who had rubbed shoulders with “outlaws” (letter from E., 1907); or even a “mechanic,” capable of handling the decapitation machine (letter from H. Desfourneaux, 1908). Having a good reputation also lent more credibility; the judicial authorities were thus rigorous in this regard: “Executing well means, first and foremost, behaving well” (Derasse 2004: 182). Some went as far as to support their applications with documents attesting to good conduct.

In short, being an executioner requires a specific set of criteria, including robust physical build, comparatively young age, sound health, and impeccable morals. But there were other criteria that reinforced the idea that this was a job unlike any other. Above all, an executioner had to be endowed with composure and “courage.” Those who had completed their military service felt hardened by the spectacle of war and therefore presented themselves as potential candidates for the overwhelming task of killing fellow human beings. Evidently, one cannot become an executioner without having already seen mutilated bodies before (letter from M. A. Peillon Marius, 1923).

Despite these letters of application putting forward nuanced arguments, they remained systematically unanswered. As the office did not require any national examination or recruitment notice, it was the executioner’s son who was trained on all the “subtleties” of the trade. As soon as a position became vacant, whether as a result of death, dismissal, or resignation, the chief executioner would put his son forward for the job. If he had no male offspring, he would ensure that the duties were passed on to another member of his family. Throughout the colonial period, eight chief executioners were officially appointed, almost all of whom belonged to prominent lineages regarding these professionals.

Due to their special status, they did not receive a salary but rather “wages” paid by the Ministry of Justice. In 1926, Minister of Algiers’ annual wages were estimated at 10,000 francs. The executioner in metropolitan France, meanwhile, was slightly better paid: in 1924, he earned 11,600 francs per year (ANF, 19890100 1). In addition to his wages, he was entitled to additional remuneration known as “subscription”: this was an annual sum allocated to the purchase of all necessary equipment for the maintenance of the guillotine as well as any extra expenses, including the burial costs of the executed person in the event of the family’s absence (ANT, E, 544, d.58).

It should also be noted that being an executioner was a side job, or an “off-the-books” activity (Delarue 1979: 382). Sometimes those in question were paid for only a few hours of work per year. In Algiers, most of them had other trades and owned restaurants and bars; an executioner was therefore generally a good businessman who earned money “while having fun.” Further to its material advantages, this role offered the opportunity to rub shoulders with influential figures within the politico-judicial milieu (deputies, magistrates, police commissioners, and similar). With no university education or degrees, the executioner thus acquired a privileged social status (Meyssonnier 2002: 43–63).

IN THE SHADOW OF THE GUILLOTINE

As any death sentence meant potential work, news items were among the executioners’ favourite means of entertainment – even though the term “execution” was not part of their lexicon, as discretion rather demanded the term “trip” be used. During these journeys

within Algeria (or to Tunisia), they refrained from revealing the nature of their work; restraint was one of the most prized qualities in executioners. Moreover, a personalised memo reported how one of the assistant executioners “lacked discretion”: since taking office, “[he] had always allowed himself to be led to reveal to his family and friends the date and place of the capital executions for which he was commissioned.” This imprudence earned him the disfavour of his superior (ANF, BB/18 6585, d. 71 BL).

Whether in Algeria or Tunisia, capital executions were generally carried out in accordance with the stipulations of French criminal law. Before the enactment of the French law of 24 June 1939 they had taken place in public squares, as the locations were jointly decreed by the municipality (city council) and the judicial authorities. The work began with the setting up of the guillotine; the chief executioner did not take part in this operation, however, because he was the leader, carrying out instead the most meticulous checks and putting the finishing touches to each new adjustment.

As soon as the guillotine had been transported, carefully installed, and tested, the repressive machinery was set in motion. According to custom, the chief prosecutor – sometimes assisted by a court interpreter – would go to the condemned person’s cell, wake him up, and recite the ritual statement meaning that his petition for clemency had been rejected and that justice must take its course. Every person sentenced to death has the right to confess or express a final wish, also receiving a person of religion (clergyman) at their request. They are then handed over to the executioners, who have hitherto stayed at bay.

“Very quickly,” as the expression goes, the final ministration is performed: their arms and legs are bound and their head shaved. Furthermore, the chief executioner has almost no physical contact with the condemned person, his task consisting mainly of triggering the blade of the “Widow.” The first assistant generally acts as a “photographer”: he fixes the head of the condemned person in the frame as if for “a last-minute adjustment,” finding the right “pose” and calling out to the condemned person: “Don’t move!” (Monestier 1994: 302). Better positioned than the chief executioner, it is thus the “photographer” who signals to him to drop the blade.

Once the execution was over, the guillotine was cleaned, dismantled, and packed away. Mister of Algiers and his assistants then returned to being ordinary citizens once more. Following the law of 24 June 1939, they only performed their duties in secret – inside the very prisons where the convicts were incarcerated.

AMID THE TURMOIL OF THE ALGERIAN WAR

By the summer of 1954, Tunisia had secured internal autonomy and began the long process of establishing its own courts. On 14 June 1955, the guillotine made its last trip to Tunisia, but the executioners’ mission was not yet over. During the same period, the Algerian War was in full swing, a conflict that marks an exceptional episode in the history of French justice. Never before had the judicial system been so involved in political affairs as it was during this war – a justice, indeed, “rendered under the bombs” (Royer and Renard 2005: 232). Like the rest of the judicial staff, the executioners had, willy-nilly, become involved in upholding the colonial project of maintaining a French Algeria. They were confronted with a peculiar situation here: guillotining nationalist activists who had been arbitrarily punished. Due to the “sensitivity” of such a mission, one undertaken in the context of war, the public prosecutor granted them “head bonuses” per execution (ANF, 19890100 1), as well as a “hazard allowance” (ANF, 19990005 1, d. 71 BL50). The latter was, according to Fernand Meyssonier, “more than justified” because the executioners risked their lives by executing Algerian nationalists.

Despite these “privileges,” the Algerian War had created an atmosphere of instability and tension within the team of executioners over time. On 6 September 1956, in the

thick of war, chief executioner André Berger died after falling from the fourth floor. The circumstances surrounding his death remain unclear: Was it “murder” (Obrecht 1989: 235) or “accidental death” (Meyssonnier 2002: 39)? The answer is yet to be determined. Some assistant executioners lost their lives in circumstances equally mysterious: Bernard Fortin “committed suicide” (ANF, 19990005 1, d. 71 BL50), Justin Daudet was shot dead “by a burst of machine-gun fire,” while Marcel Carrier was “killed in a car accident” (Meyssonnier 2002: 175–76).

In addition to these losses, there were a significant number of resignations – ones that do not, however, appear to have been motivated by ethical considerations. The conduct of the Algerian War, indeed, did not seem to raise any moral dilemmas among judicial personnel; quite the contrary as, in line with the “logic” of the time, everything seemed legitimate (Thénault 2001: 493). “You can’t get a bomber to confess by offering him a cup of coffee” was how one former executioner justified the use of torture during said war (Meyssonnier 2002: 186–187).

In 1957, in order to cope with the increase in capital executions, another guillotine was sent to Constantine. The chief executioner was even forced to call on those who had no prior experience with the profession: whether a football player or a family friend, improvisation was necessary. The last executioners to operate the “Widow” prior to Algerian independence were Maurice and Fernand Meyssonnier, Henri Baro, Georges Celce, and Joseph Vaussenat. Appointed at short notice, the last three had never seen a guillotine before in their lives (ANF, 19990005 1, d. 71 BL50). Between 1954 and 1962, Algiers’ executioners allegedly carried out dozens of beheadings (exact numbers cannot be confirmed). Fernand Meyssonnier (2002: 169) suggests a total of 141 executions were carried out between 19 June 1956 and 25 August 1958. François Malye and Benjamin Stora (2010: 10), meanwhile, put the total number of convicts guillotined during the entire war at 222.

On 5 July 1962, Algerian independence would be proclaimed. About two weeks later, Maurice Meyssonnier sent a note to the public prosecutor asking “What should we do?” With the guillotine having become widely instrumentalised over the course of the war, the country’s new rulers now had scores to settle with the representatives of French justice and the executors of criminal verdicts were on the front line. On 27 November, Maurice Meyssonnier and his assistants were arrested, before being transferred into the custody of the French authorities. They left the country on 6 December “[in] the evening, wearing pyjamas, a pair of socks, a pair of shoes [...]” (Meyssonnier 2002: 211). The two guillotines that had been used during those grim years were presumably stored in Barberousse prison, Algiers, and in Constantine, respectively (ANF, 19890100 2).

What fate awaited the Mistfers of Algiers after their repatriation? The question was whether they should be reinstated to the metropolitan team. Another difficulty that arose concerned the nature of the remuneration to be granted. The negotiations that took place, the dozens of letters exchanged, as well as the numerous formalities undertaken with the judicial authorities resulted in the decision to allocate a sum of 2,000 francs, in the form of a (living) allowance, to all of Algeria’s former executioners. Maurice Meyssonnier died in February of the following year, and so it was his widow who received this allowance (decree of 4 July 1963).

THE POSTCOLONIAL ERA

In France, the adoption of the guillotine as a means of carrying out capital punishment “whitewashed” the image of the executioner (Bessette 1982: 50). Thereafter, we witness a kind of professionalisation or institutionalisation of the job: the executioner becomes a “civil servant” like any other such individual. With the guillotine having been widely employed to maintain colonial order, however, the situation was different here. Those in

question were not only responsible for executing people violating so-called common law but also nationalist activists who would later be honored as “Martyrs of the Nation.” These executioners thus found themselves in an ambiguous position, serving both the imperatives of criminal justice and the interests of a colonial state. Algiers’ final ones talked about “events in Algeria,” a euphemistic expression that reflects the will to deny a country under colonial rule any legitimacy as regards prospective autonomy. After independence, the last of these individuals to leave the territory had to bear the twin burden of their office: namely, existing not as only exceptional agents of criminal justice but also instruments of a colonial past “that cannot be overcome.” Even after independence, Algeria and Tunisia have kept their executioners in the service of new authoritarian powers. In this regard, the trial of the Youssefists in Tunisia in 1963 is a striking example of political violence in a postcolonial context.

France finally abolished the death penalty in 1981. Indicative of a very complex sociopolitical and migratory context, the last person executed in the name of the French people was a Tunisian, Hamida Djandoubi, guillotined on 10 September 1977 at Baumettes prison in Marseille. It is thus ironic that the last head to fall into the French executioner’s basket was that of a former colonised.

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