

Stories in a Snapshot: FLN Moudjahidates

*Images and stories
of women in the
National
Liberation Front
(FLN) during the
Algerian War of
Independence
(1954 - 62)*

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© Massimo Guessoum

The year is 1955. The spring season that often begins around March in this coastal Mediterranean region of the Kasbah قصبة, the original name for the city of Algiers, welcomes a pleasant breeze that travels past a stranger in a French military uniform toward the familiar fabric of a woman's veil, and reaches the tail of a smart blazer grazing the shoulders of a young woman, no older than 28 years, named Nassima Hablal. The direction of her eyes follows the path the breeze takes, as if responding to the vibrant energy of the woman it envelops, billowing up the right side of the jacket and subtly pulling the curled ends of her hair away from her face. Algiers was the second-largest city in France at the time, fitted with Haussmann-like architecture and 330,000 pied-noirs, or Algerians of European descent – a dramatic expansion from the smaller population of 40,000 before its colonial restructuring. Upon reaching Independence in 1962, the FLN attempted to revert the urban environment of Algiers by renaming streets and squares that reflect former resistance fighters of its anti-colonial struggle. As Nassima observes her surroundings and reaches an intersection in the French quarters of the Kasbah, she looks to the distance, just high enough to imagine Rue des Colons [Street of Settlers] become Rue des Libérés [Street of the Liberated], and grins.

Image caption: Nassima Hablal, approximately 1955. Photograph featured in film *10949 Women* (2014) dir. by Nassima Guessoum.



*Algerian sister! Algerian woman!
From the mountains, the valleys and the rivers,
your sisters in the maquis demand your attention.
Algerian woman, listen,
don't you hear the boots of the French occupier stamping on our pavements?
They are fleeing faced with the armed mujahedeen and
violently attacking the unarmed people with their characteristic barbarianism.
Listen, from bombed and burnt villages, from concentration camps,
torture chambers and dungeons a huge cry can be heard.
Can you not hear the cries of Algerian men and women massacred and tortured?*

- Text from an FLN leaflet captured by the French Army

Source:(Service historique de la défense (French Army Archives), Vincennes, Paris, n.d.), Box 1H1644. Army Headquarters (Etat Major General), Region 2, zone 6, wilaya 4

The words above come from an FLN leaflet distributed throughout Algeria and are currently housed in the Service historique de la défense in Vincennes, Paris. Although one copy was confiscated by the French Army during the Algerian War, many others would end up in the hands of women of all ages in the maquis, or rural areas, like the FLN combatant pictured here. Many women in the maquis, also known as maquiserades, were not equipped with the proper uniform necessary for rough terrains in the mountainous region. The maquiserade in this photograph dons a uniform with rolled up sleeves - a quick alteration to an oversized men's uniform borrowed second-hand. The tight controls on trade by the French authorities often made all imports and wholesale purchases difficult, but especially for military uniforms and boots. The casual slides on her feet indicate a smaller foot size that miss the opportunity for suitable shoes, and in turn would bear the challenges of cold weather and rough terrains. If a maquiserade was fortunate enough to find a pair of combat boots in her size, she would be eligible to model for FLN photographic propaganda that countered the claims of the war as a nationalist struggle led by religious extremists that excluded liberation for women. (See the portrait of Kheira Leïla Tayeb for an example). This photograph, however, was circulated in French press and media whose intended purpose and strategy would be left up to the publisher.

FLN Combatant standing guard while holding a semi-automatic rifle behind a barbed wire fence, c. 1962, Photo Dalmas (copyright), Peter Hunter Press Archives, International Institute of Social History (Amsterdam), IISG BG B23/52, purchased October 2020.



As opposed to the small number of often staged portrayals of heroic FLN moudjahidates taken by the FLN's audiovisual team (Mohamed Kouaci and René Vautier, et al.), there are mass amounts of documentary photographs featuring FLN moudjahidates taken by members of the French military. The unknown FLN moudjahidate pictured here is not threatened by the presence of a French officer capturing her image with his camera. She is focused on her training and only momentarily glances back at the camera, unfazed. Her cable knit sweater, scarf, and beret, though visually appealing, are not worn for a photoshoot event, but daily rifle practice.

Contradictory as it may seem given the enemy relationship, the French military captured a huge volume of images of FLN moudjahidates with the intent of being purely informational and unbiased. These photos would then be passed into the world media and published in various publications during wartime. In the years following the war, a former officer might give his collection of originals to a French archive, such as Établissement de Communication et de Production Audiovisuelle de la Défense (ECPAD), as is the case with this photograph. Thus, the officer's job here is not to intimidate, but rather to document an FLN moudjahidate as she prepares for the day her nation wins the war.



The week known as *La Semaine des Barricades*, or week of the barricades, designates a far-right paramilitary insurrection in the Kasbah, also known as the city of Algiers. This photograph captures a glimpse from the last day of the rioting on February 1st, 1960 of three FLN comrades demonstrating against the pro-French Algeria militants in the middle of a crowded street. The FLN counter-protesters watch in distress as their not-yet-a-nation's capital is destroyed. The main instigator of the uprising is Pierre Lagaillard, founder of the OAS (Organisation armée secrète), a far-right French paramilitary group that he creates a year after *La Semaine des Barricades*. The two moudjahidates wearing military fatigues are a visual contrast to the images found in issues of LIFE magazine from the time that show Pierre's wife, Madame Lagaillard, fresh faced with a handbag in tow as she cheers in support of French Algeria. Police passively observe as Lagaillard and his fellow *pieds-noirs* make barricades of wood, barbed wire, metal, and other heavy materials. Similarly, the government leaders stand idly as their administrative buildings and Algerian establishments are destroyed. It is not until the (this) final day that General de Gaulle musters a call to the end of the insurrection and a trial for the main instigators, including Pierre Lagaillard, is set in motion.

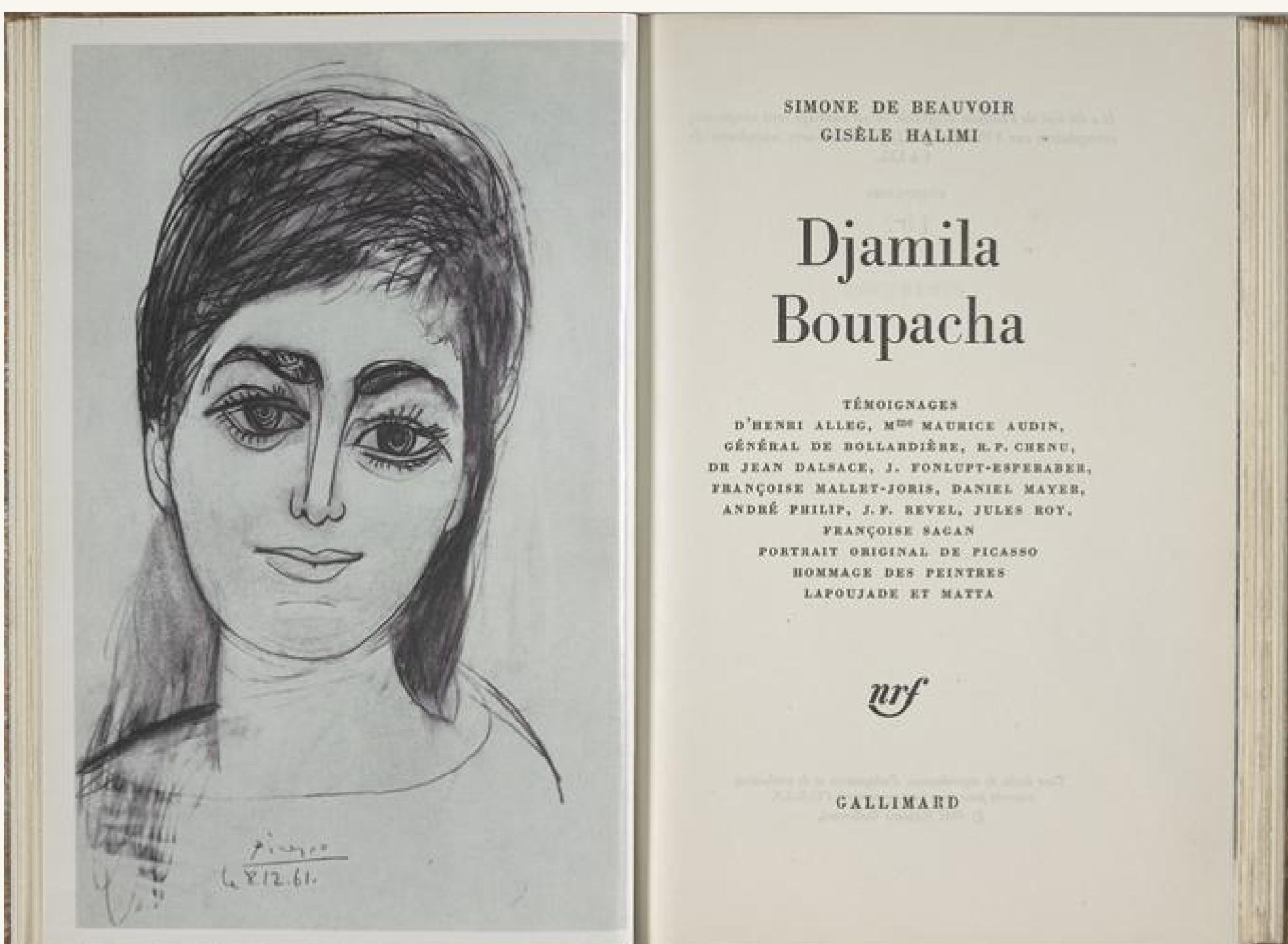
FLN moudjahidate at a demonstration for Algeria's Independence, February 1960, International Magazine Service, Stockholm, and Agence Dalmas, Paris. Digital copy sold to IMS Vintage. Permission by owner Maura McCreight.



Djamila Boupacha, an FLN liaison agent, was only twenty-three when she was arrested by the French military for a bomb attempt in Algiers. Her story of torture and rape while in French custody is not unique in comparison with other FLN women during war. However, Djamila's testimony was made internationally known by the support work of her attorney Gisèle Halimi and philosopher Simone de Beauvoir who published a book together about her trial shortly after the Évian agreement was reached. Included in the book is a sketch of Djamila by Pablo Picasso who took an ardent interest in supporting her defense. It is unclear why Picasso decided to add this photographic print of Djamila in a Café to his personal collection since the widely circulated sketch he drew of her is likely based on another image (see next page). Additionally, the ambiguous date of the print (i.e. between 1955 and 1960) confirmed by the Musée National Picasso suggests multiple contextual interpretations. In the early years of the war (1954-55) Djamila was working as a trainee at Béni Messous but was denied certification training because of her race and religion. Later, bomb attacks were carried out by the FLN's notable trio Djamila Bouhired, Zohra Drif, and Samia Lakhdari during Battle of Algiers campaign in 1957. However, Djamila Boupacha was not arrested until 1960 and (under torture) admits to a bomb attempt in 1959. This relevant historical information plus visual context suggest a number of possible readings for the image of Djamila on the previous page.

Is the object in the foreground a stainless steel seltzer bottle or a fire extinguisher? Is the man to her right a reporter, policeman, or a manager taking inventory of the cafe? Is Djamila's hand grazing her forehead out of anguish for being questioned or pushing her hair aside before she places an order for a coffee?

Associated Press (20th century CE) Photographic portrait of Djamila Boupacha in a café, transmitted to Pablo Picasso, 1955-1960. Silver gelatin print. 24 x 18.2 cm. Pablo Picasso's personal archives. Inv no 515AP/G/2/2/4/1 Permission obtained from Claire Garnier Musée Picasso. Musée national Picasso, Paris, France © RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY



(top): Portrait of Djamila Bouacha, 1950. Silver gelatin print. 13 x 09.1 cm. Pablo Picasso's personal archives. Inv no 515AP/G/2/19
Permission obtained from Claire Garnier, Musée Picasso. Musée national Picasso, Paris, France © RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY

(bottom): Pablo Picasso, Title Page of the Book Djamila Boupacha by Gisèle Halimi and Simone de Beauvoir with a Drawing by Picasso, Published by Gallimard, 1962



The expression on Djamila's face while incarcerated at Pau prison shows a heightened awareness of both an indeterminable interior and a literal, repressive, demanding exterior of the prison fence. Her neatly pin-backed hair reveals a clear shape of her face with a stare searing past the fence that keeps her from freedom. The smell of the shampoo from her toiletry kit wafts around her for a few fleeting moments until the vapors absorb into the concrete walls behind her. The softness of her blouse, a garment she once put on with ease now requires aching movements from bruises inflicted on her body, reminding her of how she longs for a private embrace with her mother. Her mind switches to another memory of a Chief Ward interposing a hug between her and her mother in a visiting room in Lisieux. The thought triggers a movement in her chest that feels like a tree is growing inside her, and she sways slightly. The wire of the fence seen in the photograph creates a grid overlay of her face. The metal framing visually recalls the moment Djamila first saw the Eiffel Tower. Growing up as a young girl in Algeria, it had been a dream of hers to see the wrought-iron lattice architectural landmark. During her transfer flight from a prison in Algeria to a prison in France, she gleefully caught a glimpse of the tower. It was her first trip by air.

Djamila Boupacha, c. 1962, captioned "Djamila Boupacha in Pau prison" in Simone de Beauvoir and Gisèle Halimi's *Djamila Boupacha: The story of the torture of a young Algerian girl which shocked liberal French opinion*, published by The Macmillan Company, New York, 1962, p. 96.



10,949 fighting women joined the struggle for Independence in Algeria during the war years. To 'join' the struggle women had to be proper fighters associated with the FLN (National Liberation Front) or the ALN (National Liberation Army). However, in the maquis other women who were not part of the armed combat would look after the FLN moudjahidate and moussebilate; cooking for them, making them coffee, bringing them their letters that were sent to safehouses, and even covering their trails with dirt, sticks, and rocks. These 'other' women were central to the survival of FLN women, the latter of which the FLN/ALN factions were not initially apt to recognize. In an FLN/ALN handbook dated August 1956, "Les mouvements des femmes" was a paragraph long section that appeared at the very end and defined women's role as giving moral support, instructions and helping children of other maquisards (men militants in the maquis). However, the inclusion of women in militant leadership roles ultimately becomes the only way to win the war, and women's involvement becomes active in all fields and levels of battle.

This image of Fatiha with her husband depicts her front facing and taking up the majority of the space in the photo. Her short hair and direct gaze connote a lack of frivolity that seems to contradict her disheveled and ill fitting uniform. She leans in to her husband's side, steadyng herself while bending her left knee in a modern contrapposto stance. She is aware of her gender and its perception in war, but doesn't need to be understood to continue fighting.

A Maquisard Couple, Fatiha Hermouche and Her Husband, Arezki. Photo Taken in the Maquis in Algerois., 1957, Danièle Djamil Amrane-Minne. Published in *Les Femmes algériennes dans la guerre* by Plon in 1991.



Zohra Drif was born in 1934 in Tissemselt, a part of the Tiaret province in central Algeria made up of farming regions. In 1955, she withdraws from law school at the University of Algiers to join the FLN. To her comrades, Zohra is known as one of the fidayates, or the women who planted bombs in the main cities. The fidayate are able to clandestinely carry out such acts because of their ability to do so in 'Europeanizing' disguise. These women befuddled the minds of the French army, who refer to Zohra as an *évolué*. How could such an attractive, French-educated, and young innocent woman end up with a bomb in her purse on behalf of a terrorist organization? Although her European style dress and hair confused the French Army, since to their minds this kind of appearance made her an 'emancipated Muslim woman' (who does not wear a haik), the FLN uses this befuddlement as a militant tactic. She recalls:

"We are not killers. We are fighters for a just cause, moved by the most sacred of duties: to liberate our land and our people. It is the colonial regime that kills -torturing, oppressing, and repressing to perpetuate its system of occupation on our land and our people, trying to convince everyone that Algeria is French. That is why each of our attacks, each of our ambushes, each of our lives sacrificed must serve to unmask France before the world, to show that our people are at war against a foreign power occupying us by force."

This image shows the day after Zohra's arrest. Not pictured is her comrade Saadi Yacef who was arrested with her.

Claude Vignal/ECPAD/Défense/September 24th, 1957



I was born on a Sunday, on 28 May 1940, into a family that included two boys older than me, one 12 and one 8. Today, I am 17 and in an under-ground cell, condemned to death three days ago. I belonged to a national terrorist organisation. I set two bombs, and took part in a number of attacks. I was arrested ten months ago.

—Baya Hocine, first lines of her personal journal confiscated by the French Army

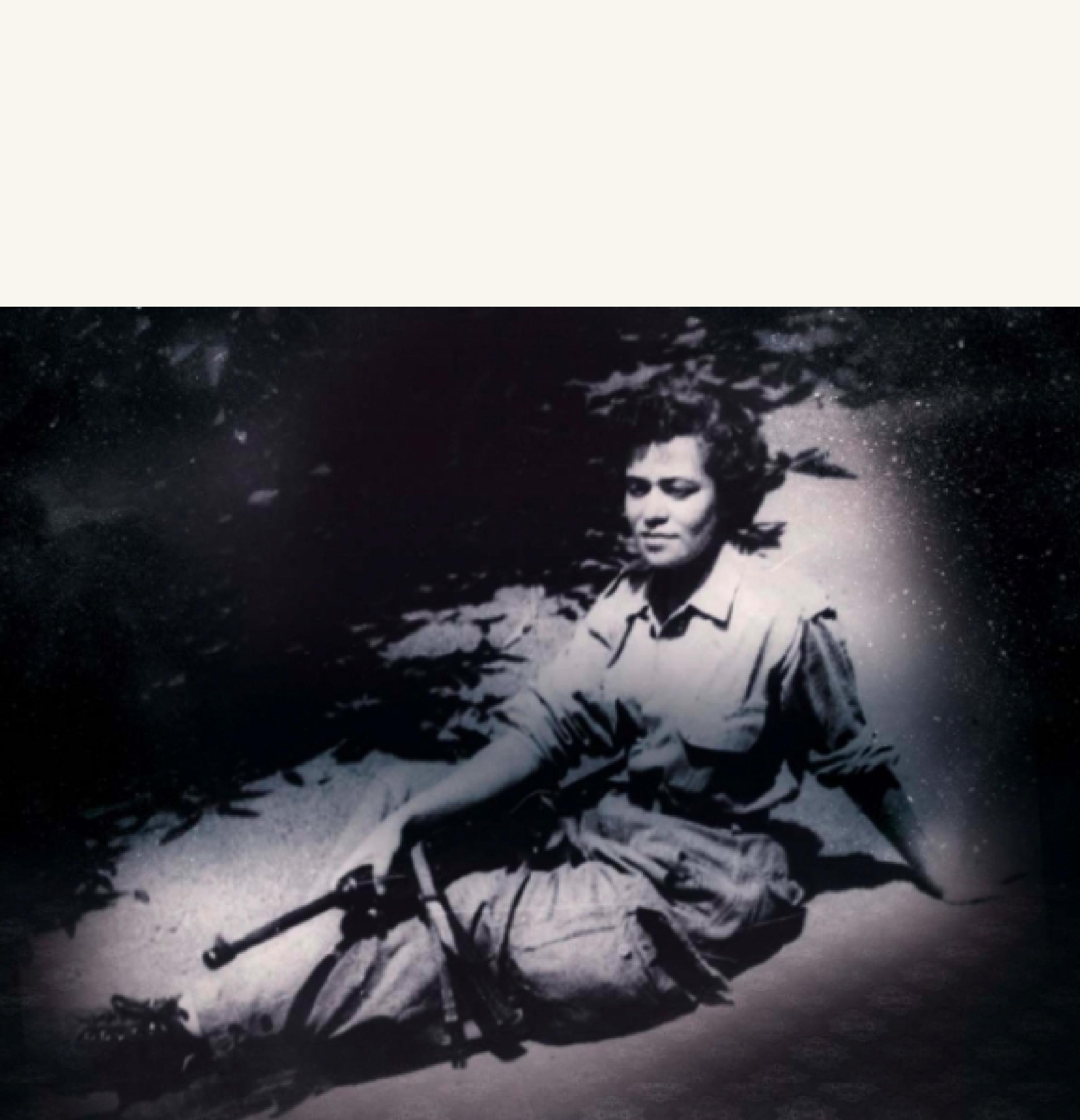
Like other Algerians called on by the FLN to set bombs in public spaces, Baya Hocine (right) and Akhror Djouher (left) were arrested for their attacks at the El Biar Stadium in Algiers on February 10th, 1957. Baya's papers, including diary entries, were besieged during a search of the Barberousse Prison where both girls were imprisoned. French officers confiscated books, diaries, drafts of letters and defenses, and compilations of grievances. Baya was only 17, but allegedly posed a clear threat to the French army. They paid time and special attention to her papers, typing up two complete copies and underlining certain words and passages such as: "I am atheist and anti-racist."

The two high school girls, snapped in a photo by a polish photographer working for the French army at the time, show intensity and seriousness in their expressions. Yet, the deeper emotional layers are more difficult to access. The shadows of their hair on the adjacent wall visually confirm an act of bravery still on their minds - an act that speaks to the aims of the FLN: liberation from the French state in Algeria.

Zygmund Michalowski/ECPAD/Défense/Arrestation des auteurs des attentats à la bombe des stades d'Alger et d'El-Biar/February 20th, 1957/ALG 57-123 R2

Baya Hocine's journal is kept at the Service Historique de La Défense (SHD) under no. 1H 1246 and at the Archives Nationales d'Outre-Mer (ANOM) under no. 1K/1203 (it can be consulted under dispensation). Credit to historian Sylvie Thénault for her incredible research on this topic.

Thénault, S. (2020). Baya Hocine's Papers, Historical Reflections/Réflexions Historiques, 46(2), 110-127. Retrieved Apr 28, 2021, from
<https://www.berghahnjournals.com/view/journals/historical-reflections/46/2/hrrh460207.xml>



This portrait of Kheira-Leïla Tayeb mysteriously made its journey from the FLN audiovisual team to the publicly accessible Commons in Algeria and the United States, creating an abundance of encounters with viewers outside of Algeria once a law with a 50-year copyright protection ended. As mentioned earlier, Algeria placed protections on national materials after Independence was reached but did not have a formal archive for over twenty years. Initially, Algeria's Ministry of Information and Culture instituted the Centre National des Archives in 1962, and after a series of state sectors regulating the archive, an official Archives Foundation was created in 1987. The prior 50-year protection term on the photograph of Kheira-Leïla kept her image within the control of the Algerian national government who, after having been robbed of other relevant cultural material when the French fled, kept a strict stronghold on their archives. Indeed, if not tied to political positions in the government, most Algerians were denied access. In turn, many Algerians alive during the war relied on their own micro-histories using photos, letters, and oral accounts to preserve cultural memory. Therefore, relying on the state, whether French or Algerian, became obsolete. By slipping into the Commons after the protection period ended, Kheira Leïla's image can be seen repeatedly by individuals online who are, as an example, researching women in the Algerian war. What does it mean for a photograph to enter the world of a Google search, or fall into the grace of the world wide web?

Kheira-Leïla Tayeb, before 1962 (most likely 1957), presently sourced by Wikipedia Commons due to the expiration of a 50-year protection enacted years after Independence by the Algerian government.

Attribution: "Kheira-Leïla Tayeb" by Unknown author, Wikipedia Commons is in the Public Domain, CCo.



Fadila helps her older sister Meriem load a gun in the autonomous zone of Constantine. They are not far from the Aurès mountains (جبال الأورس), named after the Amazigh who are indigenous to the region, where they were born. In high school, the sisters join the ranks of the Association of Muslim Student Youth Of Constantine affiliated with the Algerian People's Party (PPA). After the call for a general strike organized by the FLN, they both join their ranks and begin supplying medical and combat supplies to the maquis, a frequent role assigned to FLN women because of their ability to go unnoticed passing from urban to rural areas during the war. However, the French Army's surveillance and tracking of FLN women presents serious risks of getting caught. In November of 1956, Fadila is captured and imprisoned for a year. Known as 'the intellectual' among her comrades, she briefly returns to school to finish her studies, but upon hearing the news of Meriem's death under torture in 1958 just a year after this photo was taken, she goes back to the FLN network in Constantine. In April of 1960, she is captured by the French from her hiding quarters in the historic Wilaya II in Constantine and killed, arms in hand.

Fadila Saâdane (1938-1960) helps her sister Meriem Saâdane (1932-1958) load a gun in the maquis (rural zone), 1957



Léonec Kierzkowski/ECPAD/Autodéfense féminine de Catinat, à 12 kilomètres au sud-est d'El-Milia/March 10th, 1960/ALG 60-123 R28

Glossary

- ALN/FLN** - National Liberation Army, armed wing (Armée de libération nationale), National Liberation Front (Front de libération nationale)
- fidayate** - women urban fighters, often bombers
- évolué** - educated and 'westernized' Muslim person
- fellagha** - rebel fighter
- haik** - long over-gown of light material used to provide total body cover and veiling (often white material in Algeria)
- harki** - common name for an indigenous unit attached to the French army
- maquis** - the mainly rural or mountainous zones of combat
- moudjahidate** - women fighters attached to ALN/FLN units in the interior
- mousselbilate** - women militants, mainly peasants, engaged in domestic support for ALN/FLN units
- pieds-noirs** - common name for European settlers in Algeria, '*blackfeet*'
- wilaya** - neighborhood, administrative zones of the FLN