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The Battle of Algiers Summary

The Battle of Algiers is an incredibly interesting movie. It is used to educate military and insurgent forces about urban guerrilla warfare. It is critically acclaimed and takes 48th place on the “Critics’ Top 250 Films”. It’s a film which isn’t just regarded for its story and plot, but also for its cinematography. The film was shot in such a way to make it look like a newsreel or documentary film, and was so convincing that American releases had to disclaim that “not one foot” of newsreel was used.

The film begins where most films end: at the end. The director, Pontecorvo did this to allow the rest of the movie to feel like a flashback or documentary. Along with cinematographer Marcello Gatti, the film style supported this key plot point. The film opens on a recently tortured Algerian. While never showing the actual torture, it is obvious from the man’s condition that he has been tortured. From there, French armed forces raid a building. They find a bathroom where some tile has just been replaced, and call for a man named “Ali La Pointe” to come out with weapons left behind, and to think of the children.

At this point, the film goes into a close-up of Ali, and gradually looses focus. Then, the film cuts to a shot of Algiers, and is dated 1954, three years before the opening of the film. This first engrains the feeling of a documentary in the viewer. We see Ali La Pointe as a street gambler, playing card game tricks on passersby to make money. After a few seconds, the police is called over, and Ali runs. Ali runs into a group of French youths, one of which trips him. Ali punches the man and is promptly beaten and taken into police custody. During a tracking shot while Ali is taken away by police, we are informed of Ali’s past transgressions with the law.

Ali is taken to jail. This scene is very important to Ali’s development as a revolutionary. The first thing we see Ali doing is witnessing the execution through the guillotine, a symbol of the French oppressive system. During Ali’s time in jail, which the viewer can estimate at about five months due to the next scene’s “5 months later” timestamp, Ali first met the National Liberation Front, or FLN. He met the leader in jail and was trained by him.

When Ali is released, the FLN contact him, and we first find out the Ali can’t read. Ali is asked to murder a policeman who picks up information from an informant. A gun given to Ali was not loaded, and Ali beats the policeman senseless. This was a test to prove he isn’t a spy. Immediately after, he meets the boss of the FLN, Jaffar, who explains the FLN’s cause and plans.

The revolution has begun, and now it’s 1956. The FLN is setting up regulations to clean up the Algerian people. The first the viewer sees is during a segment of narration that helps make the documentary style more real. The scene takes place around a drunkard. The FLN has abolished alcohol and drug consumption, and strongly urges social shaming and punishment of anyone found still consuming, carrying, or under the influence of alcohol or drugs. Further, all prostitution is banned. This is in an effort to support the Algerian population morally and physically. Repeat offenders will be put do death, a very stark and strong position. As we see the drunkard staggering through the city streets, a group of children form, loudly screaming “wino”. They harass the man, and the group of children gets bigger and bigger. The children take away the man’s wine and brutally beat the man. Furthermore during the phase, Ali searches for a man called ”Hassan El-Blidi”. Ali warns the man once, as the man is a pimp. The man refuses to join the FLN, so Ali shoots him.

Continuing on revolutionary paths, the FLN secretly marry a young couple. This is to reject the French colonial system. At this time it is important to concentrate on the young, as the old have been living in submission for much too long. The viewer will recognize this pair of newlyweds as two of the three people hidden with Ali at the very beginning.

Now, the revolution turns into high gear. Acts of terrorism against begin to occur. The viewer sees an Algerian man kill a French policeman in cold blood. Next, a group of Algerians make their way into a French police domicile under false terms and kill the Captain and multiple others. Then, the viewer sees a drive-by shooting of more French forces. Further, the viewer sees a full-fledged shootout on the streets with multiple dead bodies on the ground. The French begin to crack down. The French invoke something like marshall law to stop the terror, but it only escalates into hidden attacks on French forces.

Now the French really attack. They set off a bomb in the Muslim quarter of Algiers in the night which kills many Algerians. The goal, obviously, was not to stop the revolution, but to provoke a response. From there, the French forces in Algiers can warrant full intervention and call to backup. At this point, the FLN must intervene because the Algerians march towards the French quarter. If they were to make it, they could have been slaughtered. For this purpose, they use children to change Ali’s mind, who is marching at the front. The FLN retaliates by sending women with bombs into the French quarter. The French don’t even seem to be aware of any uprising in the Muslim quarter, they just go on with their lives.

Because of the FLN’s bombing, the French call in a new set of armed forces, paratroopers, led by Lt. Col. Mathieu. He begins planning a systematic analysis of the FLN’s tactics, the FLN’s structure, and members. He plans to use torture and other interrogation techniques to root out the FLN’s command structure and find the people at the top. While Mathieu has now become the face of the oppressive French colonial powers, he is portrayed not as evil, but as a noble soldier. This form of un-bias narration further aids the documentary-style feeling of this film.

With an Algerian work strike happening, the French now take the offensive. They force Algerians to work in an effort to subdue the FLN efforts. They raid buildings and flush out people. They load men and women onto trucks and bring them to the major factories to force the city back to work. Mathieu is interviewed about the strike. Mathieu is very educated, and realizes the strike is an effort to gain the United Nations’ attention. He knows the political power is important.

During the strike, many Algerians are rounded up in a plaza so that the French can convince them that the FLN is not worthy of the strike. During a pause, a child manages to get the microphone and causes a massive outcry against the French during the strike. The French continues their anti-strike actions. During all this, we see the FLN’s command structure drawn on the Lt. Col. Mathieu’s office wall begin to fill in.

Now the FLN looks like it is crumbling; the French are winning. Jaffar meets with Ali and other FLN leaders to discuss options and movement to different safe-houses as well as rebuilding the FLN structure. A few minutes later, we see an FLN leader, Ben M’Hidi, in custody. The FLN continues to crumble at the hands of Mathieu. Mathieu knows exactly what it will cost the French to stay in Algierian.

At this point, the viewer is exposed to scenes of brutal torture. In contrast, the French quarter seems peaceful, until a group of FLN revolutionaries drive through town, shooting at civilians. They finally die in an act of murder-suicide. Right after these brutal scenes, we see the FLN’s command structure collapsing. Jaffar is nearly killed, and is captured. Then, Ali La Pointe’s residence is raided.

Now the film has returned to where it was at the beginning. Bombs have been planted on the wall outside of Ali’s hideout, and Mathieu pleads with him one more time to come out. The Viewers see shots of Algerians praying as Ali and the three in the hideout are blown up. The French and Mathieu have successfully decapitated the FLN’s resistance in Algiers.

The last few scenes of the film are just as important as the first. While the FLN has been stopped, their principles are engrained in the Muslim’s minds. Scenes of full-scale protests and revolutions are shown in the ever-present documentary style. Algerians are throwing stones and whatever they can at French forces trying to get them to back off. Further demonstrations continue. The Algerians want their freedom. It’s not just the men of the FLN who are demonstrating. Women and children are a big part of the resistance of the Algerians throughout the entire resistance efforts, but truly come to the forefront about halfway through the film, and by the end, they make up a majority of protestors.

The Battle of Algiers wasn’t so much a full-scale battle as it was a guerilla insurrection. There were deaths like in many battles, but the battle was fought in streets and in the people’s minds. The actions of the FLN live on in the people, especially the young, who will continue to live and fight against the French.