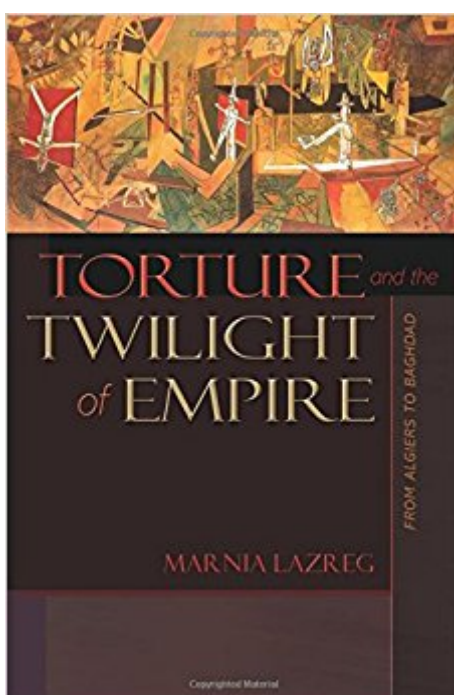


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# Torture And The Twilight Of Empire: From Algiers To Baghdad (Human Rights And Crimes Against Humanity)



## Synopsis

Torture and the Twilight of Empire looks at the intimate relationship between torture and colonial domination through a close examination of the French army's coercive tactics during the Algerian war from 1954 to 1962. By tracing the psychological, cultural, and political meanings of torture at the end of the French empire, Marnia Lazreg also sheds new light on the United States and its recourse to torture in Iraq and Afghanistan. This book is nothing less than an anatomy of torture--its methods, justifications, functions, and consequences. Drawing extensively from archives, confessions by former torturers, interviews with former soldiers, and war diaries, as well as writings by Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, and others, Lazreg argues that occupying nations justify their systematic use of torture as a regrettable but necessary means of saving Western civilization from those who challenge their rule. She shows how torture was central to *guerre révolutionnaire*, a French theory of modern warfare that called for total war against the subject population and which informed a pacification strategy founded on brutal psychological techniques borrowed from totalitarian movements. Lazreg seeks to understand torture's impact on the Algerian population--especially women--and also on the French troops who became their torturers. She explores the roles Christianity and Islam played in rationalizing these acts, and the ways in which torture became not only routine but even acceptable. Written by a preeminent historical sociologist, *Torture and the Twilight of Empire* holds particularly disturbing lessons for us today as we carry out the War on Terror.

## Book Information

Series: Human Rights and Crimes against Humanity

Paperback: 368 pages

Publisher: Princeton University Press; Reprint edition (December 13, 2016)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0691173486

ISBN-13: 978-0691173481

Product Dimensions: 6.1 x 0.8 x 9.2 inches

Shipping Weight: 1 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 5.0 out of 5 stars 4 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #798,273 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #40 in [Books > History > Africa > Algeria](#) #228 in [Books > History > Africa > North Africa](#) #372 in [Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Social Sciences > Demography](#)

## Customer Reviews

"In *Torture and the Twilight of Empire*, Marnia Lazreg draws resourcefully on military history and sociological and cultural analysis to explain how the French colonial state tried to forestall its own collapse by terrorizing the Algerian population in viciously creative ways. She provides a fascinating intellectual history of modern torture; an unflinching empirical account, or 'ethnography of torture.'"--Priya Satia, *Times Literary Supplement*

"Nothing short of a thorough anatomy of torture and cruelty, their methods, justifications, functions and consequences both on the victims as well as the perpetrators. . . . The author effectively argues that the occupying Western powers have not only justified their systematic use of torture and cruelty as a regrettable but necessary means of protecting and saving Western civilization from those 'who hate our way of life' but they have also used this argument as a pretext for invading and colonizing those nations that dare to challenge Western politico-economic hegemony. . . . Recommended reading."--Muhammad Khan, *Muslim News*

"In this brilliant and disturbing book [Marnia Lazreg] looks at the intimate relationship between torture and colonial domination through a rigorous examination of French tactics during the Algerian war from 1954-62."--Will Podmore, *Tribune*

"The philosophical analyses can be challenging to grasp, but for those looking to better understand the way torture figures into a military occupation, Lazreg's book provides an insightful and detailed account of the Algerian model."--Hannah Fleury, *International Socialist Review*

"As a highly original, yet solid, analysis of the political sociology, psychology, and anthropology of torture, Lazreg's research establishes critical connections between Algeria and the Shock and Awe Campaign of the Second Gulf War with the Bush White House years marked by state terror abroad and at home. . . . This book is required reading for all."--Julia Clancy-Smith, *Review of Middle Eastern Studies*

"This book interprets torture not as an incidental if frequent characteristic of neocolonial conflict, but as one of its major elements. Using the Algerian war as a case study, Lazreg argues that to the French forces the psychological and political significance of their policy of torture was far greater than its operational significance. Her work is certainly pertinent to the present."--Peter Paret, *Institute for Advanced Study*

--This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Require book for International Law class. Easy to read and gives good detailed information on the subject matter

The withdrawal from Algeria by the French in 1962 marked the end of their overseas empire. Algeria

had been the last bastion of French colonial power and was home to over a million French citizens who considered it as much a part of the motherland as the Left Bank. In this book Marina Lazreg studies the close, contingent and even necessary relationship between colonial domination in crisis and torture, paying particular attention to the rationalizations used military commanders and theorists to not only justify but also dignify the physical and psychological torture they inflicted on Algerian insurgents, their supporters and families and thousands of otherwise uninvolved but suspect citizens. The Algerian war was a crucible for many of the counterinsurgent techniques used in later years by the United States in Vietnam and by Central American and South American governments against their own citizens. It was unlike any war the French had fought in the past and was based on a theory of warfare that included pacification--complete control of the subject population. Part of the insanity of fighting against the entire indigenous people of a country/colony was shown by the difficulty that some French field and general grade officers had in carrying out operations against the Algerians since they were some of the same things they had the officers had suffered at the hands of Nazi torturers when prisoners during World War II. The very language had to be twisted and perverted--no mention of "concentration camps" (or its French equivalent) was allowed for example. The memory of the horrors of German camps was too strong throughout Europe. In order to distance themselves from the actual purposeful infliction of pain and suffering on men and women French coined the term "humane torture" and one theorist distinguished between "vindictive" or punishment torture and "medicinal" or investigative torture. In order to deal with the horror of their daily practice they practiced every form of moral ambiguity the human mind could devise. By such linguistic anomalies and outright lies are inhuman acts in the service of a political goal made possible and even respectable. Once the intellectual/moral/emotional framework of justification was in place anything could be done with no sensitivity to moral or physical suffering, going so far, in one case, as comparing oneself to a surgeon doing an amputation. Their cause was just, torture was indispensable and the end justified the means. Wiring batteries to genitals, pouring cleaning solution into open wounds, forced swallowing of water through a hose (now famous as "waterboarding") were just a day's work. Lazreg is a historical sociologist. Her work is dispassionate, measured, and, to the extent possible, scientific. Most of her sources--archives, interviews, military texts--are in French and she clearly has both deep and broad knowledge of the Algerian war. "Torture and the Twilight of Empire" is a book written by a specialist. Those already experts in the field will gain the most from it but it is also an amazing introduction into the mind of those who wield the instruments of torture. She spends little time on the obvious--that torture isn't effective as a military or civil society tool, for example.

Marnia Lazreg is a Professor in the Sociology Department at Hunter College, the City University of New York. In this brilliant and disturbing book, she studies France's war against Algeria (1954-62). She shows how a militarised colonial state used torture and terror to forestall the collapse of its empire in the age of decolonisation. The political economy of colonial rule required violence, including torture. Once torture was permitted, it became routine. Euphemised as 'screening' and 'pacification', its purpose was to enforce obedience. It continued right to the end of the war. The only way to stop it was to end the war. Torture routinely practised was routinely denied. Politicians tried to excuse it as coming from 'a few rotten apples', as 'occasional excesses' and 'regrettable incidents', and blamed the victims, claiming that Algerians 'only understood force'. Novelist Albert Camus condemned the violence by both sides, yet defended France's claim to Algeria, which could only be upheld by violence. He supported the settlers against the colonised, using the same arguments as the colonial state, calling for peace and coexistence within colonial rule. Today, apologists for torture like Alan Dershowitz, Michael Walzer, Jean Elshtain and Michael Ignatieff assist politicians who destroy civil liberties at home and cause chaos abroad. Blair seeks solace in confession and God's forgiveness, preferring these to democratic accountability. Lazreg shows that despite the cultural differences, French, British and American war practices and rhetorics are similar. Their wars of occupation disguise material and strategic interests as civilising or democracy-building. The French, like the US and British occupiers today, used the rhetoric of women's emancipation, claiming that they were 'protecting' women from Islam. And torture of prisoners was part of every French colonial war, part of every British colonial war, from Malaya in the 1940s to Kenya in the 1950s, Oman in the 1960s and Northern Ireland in the 1970s, and part of the current wars against Afghanistan and Iraq. Finally, Lazreg argues that acts of terror, like any other crimes, do not threaten democracy. They do not even affect democracy - unless states respond by violating democratic rights, as the French state did and as the British and US states are doing. As she concludes, "The 'war on terror' has become a war of terror."

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