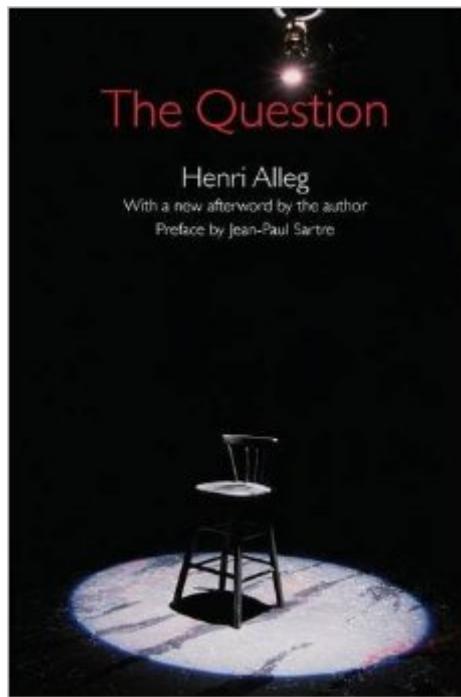


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The Question



Synopsis

Originally published in 1958, *The Question* is the book that opened the torture debate in France during Algeria's war of independence and was the first book since the eighteenth century to be banned by the French government for political reasons. At the time of his arrest by French paratroopers during the Battle of Algiers in June of 1957, Henri Alleg was a French journalist who supported Algerian independence. He was interrogated for one month. During this imprisonment, Alleg was questioned under torture, with unbelievable brutality and sadism. *The Question* is Alleg's profoundly moving account of that month and of his triumph over his torturers. Jean-Paul Sartre's preface remains a relevant commentary on the moral and political effects of torture on both the victim and perpetrator. This Bison Books edition marks the first time since 1958 that *The Question* has been published in the United States. For this edition Ellen Ray provides a foreword. James D. Le Sueur offers an introduction.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Henri Alleg (who has also collaborated in a 3 vol history of the Algerian War) is a hero. Unlike most French and Algerian Communists he supported the FLN without reservations and was willing to suffer the consequences usually reserved for the Arab militants--consequences which had their origins in Nazi concentration camps but were refined by the likes of Salan, Challe, Massu and others. The Gen-gene and other methods of persuasion (which I suspect are still used by our current rulers and I mean Obama not simply Bush) makes waterboarding look like watersurfing. Read Alleg's book! Watch his interview in the splendid new Criterion 3 DVD set of "The Battle of Algiers"

Listen to his interviews which are online. Would that Alleg's complete history of the war were translated into English. Alastair Horne --an honorable man of the moderate right (I think he would agree with that description) has written a detailed history of the war--by far the best book about the war in English. A final and personal note: My father--a man of no politics was stationed in Algeria during WWII. He was there before the massacre at Setif and watched some of it in horror. The French racist brutality toward the Algerian people so branded him that he never set foot in France and discouraged others from going. Alleg's description of his own experiences really is a shorthand for the ratissages and rattonades that our current regime now indulges in. Horne's book begins with a preface denouncing torture--I wish that his book had gone into more of its horror; nevertheless I salute him. Read Horne and read Henri Alleg I beg you.

The Question is, without doubt, the single best argument against torture under any circumstances. It is a brutally true and personal account of a man caught up under the circumstances beyond his control during the Algerian War of Independence. It was a time when the French, desperate to maintain control over Algeria, had allowed its army to use torture in order to obtain information about its main insurgent enemy, the FLN (Front Liberation Nationale). The author literally puts the reader into his shoes, and one can literally feel the pain of electric shock, the suffocating hell of water boarding, or the miserable mind warping experience of truth drugs. In wars such as the current GWOT (Global War on Terror) as well as in Algeria, there is always the temptation by politicians to use acts like torture in order to gain an advantage over an insurgent enemy. However, make no mistake. Just as the revelations of torture had undermined the perceived legitimacy of the French cause in Algeria, the same danger also exist in today's struggle in the GWOT. Regardless of one's opinion on the matter, one must read this simple book in order to gain an understanding of what a torture victim goes through. The book is beautifully written as well as brutally honest. One can easily read it in a day. Finally, it is important to keep in mind that there is no politics in this book. It is just an account of the hard reality of man's inhumanity against man.

If you are interested in what exactly waterboarding is, and the physical and moral impact on victim and torturer, you need to read this book.

The importance of this book cannot be understated. From a counterinsurgency perspective, it addresses the very large part of the war effort, which is the extraction of information from suspected and confirmed insurgents through interrogation. All counterinsurgency efforts are confronted with

such an endeavor. Often, the government fighting the guerrillas resorts to the use of physical torture to acquire critical information about their enemy. This work is a graphic description of why such widespread employment of torture in fact has the opposite effect. Physical torture undermines the legitimacy of those employing it and is the fodder for further resistance and recruitment of new fighters. Although this work addresses the French effort to maintain their colonial conquest of Algeria in the 1950's and 60's, the lessons here echo across history and to modern times. Bottom line, those who employ physical torture of their captives are most likely doomed to fail in their counterinsurgency efforts and will be treated accordingly when they are captured, thus intensifying the wheel of violence and inhumanity. Overall, this is a superb book and required for anyone interested in the topic of counterinsurgency and counterterrorism, either in reference to Algeria or the post- 9/11 conflicts.

I have used this book in courses on political violence and torture for years. It pairs quite well, naturally, with discussions about the Battle of Algiers. For straight-up courses on torture, it can be used with Timmerman's book or Dawes' "Evil Men" without too much overlap. Students like the short length of the book.

A short narration by the author Henri Alleg and his experience with torture. The descriptions are graphic and definitely not for those of faint heart or vivid imaginations. Shows that those of strong will can withstand torture, regardless of the new methods developed.

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