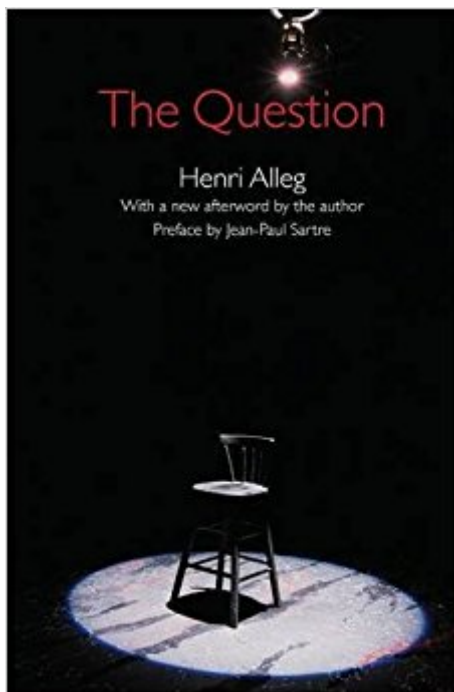


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# The Question



## 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

"[A] noble and in a sense ennobling book, the dominant impression it leaves is one of a progressive and finally an almost total degradation, a degradation both of persons—except for the tortured, the outlawed—and of social institutions. *The Question* is far more than an account of atrocities, however spectacular."—*The Nation* (The Nation) "Even more extraordinary is the manner in which [Alleg] tells his story: in its studied calm, its refusal to give expression to hatred, it nearly reaches a level of serenity and thus increases its effectiveness. This book not only might have shocked the conscience of France . . . it should disturb the conscience of all

men." •French Review (French Review) "I read The Question in one quick sitting, riveted. It packs a tremendous punch today. It ought be required reading in all the military academies and issued to all DOD employees GS-11 and above. •David Levering Lewis (David Levering Lewis)The Question by Henri AllegWithin months of the invasion of Iraq, the Pentagon held a special screening of the film Battle of Algiers, supposedly to show how and why France failed in its struggle against Algerian urban guerilla warfare and terrorism. Later, others wondered about the film's depiction of torture and its impact on American policy in light of Abu Ghraib and the practice of "rendition." Now comes a written work that made the French aware of what was happening in Algeria. Sadly, the book may remain all too relevant today. • The Question, released for the first time in the U.S. in nearly 50 years, details the arrest and torture by the French military of Henri Alleg, a French journalist living in Algiers. Alleg, a Communist who supported Algerian independence, shocked the French nation. The slim volume was written in 1957 in an Algiers prison four months after the torture ended, smuggled out of prison and published in France the next year. It was the first book to be banned in France for political reasons in two centuries. It retains its power today. • This new release contains the original text and the original preface by Jean-Paul Sartre. It adds not only a foreword and introduction by Americans who have written on U.S. policies and Guantanamo Bay, but also a new afterword by Alleg. • The methods used on Alleg were brutal. In his first session alone, Alleg is electrically shocked on various parts of his body, including his genitals; waterboarded; beaten; and various parts of his body, including his groin, are burned. When he is finally taken to a cell, he is thrown into it with his hands handcuffed behind his back. • • • • • On my knees, I moved towards a mattress against the wall. I tried to lie on it on my stomach but • • • • • it was stuffed inside with barbed wire. I heard a laugh behind the door: "I put some • • • • • barbed wire inside the mattress." • With passages like these, Alleg portrays how, whether by mindset or acclimation, those conducting the torture seemed to become immune to it. Thus, when Alleg later is tortured some three floors underground, one of his main persecutors wants him gagged. But it's not because Alleg's screams might be heard. Rather, Alleg is gagged because his torturer finds the screaming of his victims "disagreeable." Similarly, when Alleg is later taken to the infirmary, the doctor does not tend to his wounds but, rather, supervises the administration of "truth serum." • Yet Alleg also shows how effects spread further than the victim or interrogator. He writes of a young paratrooper who came into his cell and praised those in the French Resistance who died from torture rather than reveal information. • • • • • I looked at this youth with his sympathetic face, who could talk of sessions of torture I had • • • • • undergone as if they were a football match

that he remembers and could congratulate me without a spite as he would a champion athlete. A few days later I saw him, shriveled up and disfigured by hatred, hitting a Moslem who didn't go fast enough down the staircase. This [clearing center] was not only a place of torture for Algerians, but a school of perversion for young Frenchmen. Sartre also takes note of this. He points out that rather than wondering if they would talk if their fingernails were pulled out, the question facing the young military men became, "If my friends, fellow soldiers, and leaders tear out an enemy's fingernails, what will I do?" It is this aspect of such practices that really becomes the ultimate question and makes *The Question* more than a story about the French military in Algeria. Alleg's new afterword says French specialists in "muscular interrogation" provided training to governments around the world, including Latin America, South Africa and the United States. Likewise, a new introduction by James Le Sueur, a history professor who has written on the French-Algerian conflict, states that French officers who oversaw the use of torture and summary executions in Algeria trained U.S. military personnel on counterinsurgency theory and France "actively sent its professional torturers as official military advisors to the American military." The reports of the use of sleep deprivation and waterboarding in interrogations in Iraq and Guantanamo Bay and the Abu Ghraib photos seem familiar enough to some of the techniques Alleg describes that they may speak to an Algerian legacy. Yet it is doubtful *The Question* will stir in the U.S. what it did in France. Unquestionably, some of the book's impact came from Alleg being a French citizen being tortured by the French military. Similarly, Alleg was a journalist, not a combatant or terrorist who posed a direct threat to the French military or the public. As such, his situation is far different from that of someone who may possess knowledge of upcoming attacks, which seems to have been the focus of the U.S. debate on interrogation practices. Moreover, since Alleg's book is far from the first to detail barbaric treatment of prisoners and certainly not the last, it provides a sad commentary on mankind and human nature. Still, as Alleg points out, it is important that citizens know what is done in their names. (Tim Gebhart Blogcritics.org 2006-08-22)

Henri Alleg is a journalist living in Paris and the author of many works in French. Jean-Paul Sartre was one of the most influential writers and existentialist philosophers of the twentieth century. Ellen Ray is the coauthor, with Michael Ratner, of *Guantanamo: What the World Should Know*. James D. Le Sueur is an associate professor of history at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. He is the editor of Mouloud Feraoun's *Journal*, 1955-1962: *Reflections on the French-Algerian War* (Nebraska 2000) and the author of *Uncivil War: Intellectuals and Identity*

Politics during the Decolonization of Algeria, Second Edition (Nebraska 2005).

A brilliant explanation of why torture is so wrong in so many ways. Should be a must read for anyone interested in this area from a political or moral/ethical viewpoint... also a good discussion of what torture does to the torturer as well as the victim.

This book will shock you - I guarantee you. Based on the author's real-life torture at the hands of the French "paras," this book ultimately began the protests against French colonial rule in Algeria during the Algerian War of Independence by revealing the true terror of torture used by the French Army to succeed in the war. However, I truly believe that this book is certainly not dated - we (as in the US) still use torture to this day. From Abu Gharib to Guantanamo Bay, torture is still relevant in foreign policy and counterinsurgency tactics as it was in the Algerian War of Independence - more than about fifty years ago. Hence, I consider this an essential read to anyone who is interested in the details of counterinsurgency techniques used not just in the French Army, but in the U.S. Army and armies all over the world.

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 counterterror, either in reference to Algeria or the post- 9/11 conflicts.

The final book bought for a class on European Thought and Culture. This book was thought provoking, involving the use of torture. One of the most powerful books of the class.

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.

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.

It is a classic for a reason. Really puts a human face to enhanced interrogation and inhumanity. Well written. Shows that history repeats itself.

This book is a really good read. I had to read it for class, and I am very glad that I did. It is very deep and reminds us all to treat each other with dignity.

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