The army faced a particularly daunting task in its ambition to create a strategy of contact, which would enable it to penetrate into the lives of the great mass of Algerian women that inhabited the interior. Here, as chapter 6 has shown, conditions were particularly adverse to such a project due to a combination of poverty, illiteracy and isolation, combined with forms of military action that alienated rural communities. The key instrument of contact that was developed during Operation Pilot and then extended to the rest of Algeria from late 1957 onwards was the mobile socio-medical teams (EMSI).1 It was widely recognised that any strategy of contact, in order to breach the traditional protective carapace of gender segregation, would have to be carried out by women agents and an examination of the organisation of these teams, their methods and experience in the bled, is revealing of the relative success and failure of the army in achieving one of its key goals.

The new organisation was established in late 1957 under the direction of Mme Maugé, a formidable character, who had had a long experience as a military nurse during the campaign to repress the revolt in Madagascar (1947), and was then promoted major for her leadership skills in the crash-training of some 900 young women for service with the army in Indochina.2 The initial backbone of the EMSI was constituted by some forty-five volunteers from the army ranks (PFAT), many of whom had considerable experience during operations in Indochina and elsewhere and were habituated to military life. But the majority were young civilian women recruited by a radio and press campaign in France and Algeria, and who came from a diversity of backgrounds. While some women brought to the task a prior experience of nursing, first-aid or welfare work, this was not a requirement, and the regulations for the new ASSRA, as each individual in the teams was known, simply required applicants to be aged eighteen to thirty-five years, physically fit, educated up to school leaving certificate level (CEP) and of good morals.3 Many of these women appear to have been highly idealistic,
inspired by an ambition to undertake some form of humanitarian work, or by the opportunity to exchange the tedium of secretarial life for one of adventure. But most were ill-prepared for the Spartan existence, hardship, danger and daunting medical and welfare work which they faced in the bled.4

The new recruits, on arrival in Algiers, were passed at breakneck speed through a month-long training programme which included elements of basic nursing and midwifery, child-care, Arab language, the history and sociology of Muslim society, the role of the EMSI in relation to the ‘evolution of the Muslim woman’, the rudiments of Muslim law and how to settle local disputes (chicayas).5 This first course, like others that followed later, was not simply pragmatic but included a heavily ideological component: for example, the introduction to psychological warfare was taught by Commander Cogniet, an officer who held the most extreme far-right Catholic and ultra-nationalist vision of a global crusade against communism.6 The European trainees were then allocated to an army sector that had achieved a degree of ‘pacification’ and relative security against FLN attacks. Often after a long journey by train and jeep they were abruptly pitched into the intensely all-male universe of the military post where they came under the orders of the commander and the officer of the Fifth Bureau.

The general function of the ASSRA was to support the mobile army doctors (AMG) as they travelled through outlying villages to provide emergency aid to the isolated peasant population, particularly during mass campaigns against trachoma. But in particular, each newly arriving ASSRA was allocated – usually on the advice of the Fifth Bureau – three or four outlying villages or douars on which the assistant was expected to concentrate her effort over a period of several months, building a relationship of trust with the local women through the provision of baby-care, lessons in hygiene, medical aid (baby milk, antibiotics, bandages), and women’s circles (ouvroirs) that through knitting, sewing and entertainment, such as radio and cinema, aided weekly contact and social relations. The key idea underlying the intervention was that each European ASSRA would be expected to win over the local women, and be able to locate and recruit one or two young Muslim women of sufficient skill and potential to train ‘on the job’ as ASSRA. Each EMSI, generally a mixed team of one European and one or two Algerians, was thus formed over a period of time in each locality, and once it had achieved a solid basis of support through ‘in depth work’, the EMSI leader was supposed to move on and restart the process in another group of douars so that the process of emancipation could spread gradually throughout a sector.
Thérèse Vieillefon, posted to a resettlement camp, almost certainly Mesdour or Bordj Okhriss, described in a letter the typical conditions faced by a young ASSRA on first arrival:

I am quite alone, but I think that soon I will find an assistant from among the population. The inhabitants are very poor and hungry. Since the departure of the rebels they can move about freely and come to the weekly market every Tuesday. The women are very fearful as well as the children that I find difficult to get near. But one has to proceed cautiously and I am certain that when they understand why I want to see them, I will win their trust.7

Marie-Clothilde Robilliard, in a similar vein, reported:

I started to work as of yesterday. And I am quite disconcerted. It’s so different from working in a hospital where you have to run about all day long, that I don’t know how to adapt to the work of making relations, chatting with the women, laughing and dawdling. And I think I need some time to adapt to this way of life. However, I already have a lot of sympathy and friendship towards these women in their lost and dusty villages. But I am truly very concerned not to be able to speak their language yet.

But she was thankful not to be housed, like some ASSRA, in a tent.8

How successful the new ASSRA was in establishing links to the local population and in creating an EMSI team depended partly on her personal qualities and organisational skills in overcoming numerous problems, including shortage of buildings, basic materials and money, and partly on the degree of active support received from the sector commander who controlled the key resources, including allocation of transport, accommodation and support personnel. Although sector commanders received orders from Algiers to provide full assistance to the EMSI, clearly some senior officers regarded the presence of young women as a tiresome diversion from their role of combating the FLN,9 although others were enthusiastic and called for an increase in their numbers.10

The formation of the EMSI was relatively slow at first, but then accelerated rapidly after the events of 13 May 1958 when Salan gave the teams a key role in orchestrating ‘fraternisation’ campaigns in the bled.11 By August 1960 there were 171 EMSI units, sixty-three in Oranie, sixty in the Algerois, and forty-eight in the Constantinois regions. These were made up from 315 ASSRA, of whom eighty were Europeans from metropolitan France, ninety-four pieds-noirs, and 141 Muslim women, reinforced by forty army personnel (PFAT).12 Ryme Seferdjié notes a further increase in the number of teams to a peak of 223 in February 1961,13 but the number of qualified ASSRA remained static at 315, and
any growth was achieved through the accelerated recruitment of some 230 *harkettes*, young assistants lacking in even the rudimentary training of the ASSRA and who received lower levels of pay.¹⁴ This ‘watering down’ of the composition of the EMSI reflected, as will be seen, a deepening crisis of recruitment in the final stages of the war.

In the assessment of the work of the EMSI it is necessary to make a distinction between the glowing image presented by the French media and official army propaganda, and the underlying reality. Dealing with the first of these, the presentation of the ASSRA as ‘blue-eyed’ and flaxen-haired angels, self-sacrificing Florence Nightingale figures who brought succour to the oppressed Algerian people, is in itself of more than passing interest: the publicity surrounding the EMSI was of almost as much importance to the Fifth Bureau as their welfare achievements. As has been seen (chapter 4), the SCA played a key role in the promotion of the EMSI, and had already produced the documentary film, *Nurses of the Bled* as early as July 1957 during Operation Pilot. The Fifth Bureau also orchestrated the collective visits of the national and international press in minute detail and among the favoured scenes that journalists were whisked away by car and helicopter into the *bled* to witness were teams of white-coated EMSI weighing and bathing infants (see illustration 1, p. 96).

Typical of the numerous reports in women’s and Catholic journals, was one in *Elle* magazine of a visit in October 1958 to a commune in the Sud-Oranais where Thérèse Durand, with her assistant Guermina, were photographed bathing thirty Algerian babies; a report followed by an appeal for readers to send in baby clothes and toys.¹⁵ But the doyenne of the propagandists was the popular Catholic journalist and writer, Christiane Fournier, who had already written on the heroic exploits of the French army in Indo-China. Mme Maugé, who knew Fournier, encouraged her to write a book on the EMSI and also persuaded her superior Colonel Gardes, head of the Fifth Bureau, to organise her visit to Algeria and to provide eight photographs for the publication.¹⁶ *Les EMSI, des filles comme çà!*, with a Preface by General Challe who was currently directing the brutal Operation Jumelles, is suffused in a religious bathos, in which the EMSI were likened to the twelve disciples who, ‘regenerated the world because they believed that love is stronger than hatred’. The self-sacrificing EMSI were presented as the finest flower of idealistic French youth, by contrast with the decadent beat generation of Paris, ‘the cheats, always on the pull, all those stars of the dissolute life’.¹⁷ Maugé, no doubt with the full backing of Colonel Gardes, was tireless in her attempts to promote the book during trips to Paris in September 1959, as well as through book fairs, press conferences, and radio and
television interviews with Fournier. The media impacts were taken sufficiently seriously by the FLN to inspire it to attack Fournier on the *Voix des Arabes* of Radio Cairo in December 1959: ‘your dirty book on the EMSI can only contain lies, racist talk, nasty quarrels, propaganda and services on behalf of French psychological actions in Algeria’.18

**Political and propaganda functions**

How correct was the FLN in its assertion that the EMSI constituted a key part of the psychological warfare strategy? Firstly, the EMSI were directly controlled by the Fifth Bureau, and its successor from early 1960 the Third Bureau, and Mme Maugé, from her office within the General Government, liaised constantly with her superior Colonel Gardes who was located in the same building. The EMSI teams in the *bled* were also answerable to the parallel hierarchy of the Fifth Bureau and its officers who were attached to commanders at the local sector level. In general it is possible to recognise a division of labour between Maugé and her assistants, who were given some independence of action in the day-to-day running of the organisation, and the Fifth Bureau, which occasionally interceded via classified directives to define key lines of action and political objectives. At the local level the Fifth Bureau officer kept an eye on the EMSI in relation to the political impacts of their work, required that EMSI action plans be submitted to him,19 and guided strategic decisions, such as which particular *douars* offered the best political and social conditions to be selected as a target for ‘in-depth work’.20

The single most important directive which defined the purpose of the EMSI, *Action sur les milieux féminins en Algérie*, was issued by the État-major, signed by the Commander in Chief General Challe, on 27 March 1960.21 Directive 257, offered a detailed reflection on the work of the EMSI, ‘the fruit of three years experience throughout Algeria’. The key role of the teams was to make contact with ‘the feminine milieu’, and to demonstrate ‘in a concrete way the modern future that France holds out to them . . . Our mission is to transform Algeria to enable her population, in particular the population of Muslim women, to make the easy transition to the formation of a modern civilisation’. The fundamental, long-term objective of the EMSI was seen as essentially transformative, and in the widest sense educative, a process by which Algerian women could be gradually liberated from the constraints of conservative religious and customary practices that gave ‘to Muslim society its immobility and sclerotic character’. But the directive was at pains to note that women, far from being the powerless, oppressed creatures as was widely believed, in reality were not
submissive within the privacy of the household circle but held very real power and respect, and it was by building on this base that women needed to expand their influence into the public social and political sphere as full citizens and voters. It was recognised that such a transformation of deeply engrained attitudes would require a long timescale, even several generations, and this acknowledgement confirmed a deeper shift in the army command away from the naive ‘revolutionary’ agenda of 1958 that had believed in a dramatic utopian conversion of Muslim women to modernity.

Directive 257 showed an unmistakable prioritisation of intelligence and repressive goals over those of welfare reform; reflecting on three years of EMSI activity, it warned: ‘The principal pit-fall to be avoided is to allow the EMSI to become absorbed by its medico-social work without moving on to its true task’. The welfare and medical support provided by the teams was primarily a means not an end. It was through this initial aid, such as baby-care, that the EMSI could persuade Muslim women to emerge from the seclusion of the home and make contact, and which enabled the EMSI to identify potential political ‘leaders’ who could gradually be trained to run the women’s organisation enabling the European team leaders to eventually move on to other villages. To this end it was recommended that the EMSI begin to withdraw from ‘the direct practice of medical and social matters’, which could be handed over to army doctors, the SAS or other agencies, to concentrate on the formation of the women’s circle, in which a transformative model of modernisation and the ‘new woman’ could be offered. ‘It is the circle that provides the education which in the end is the true mission of the EMSI’.

The instrumental and subsidiary purposes of welfare and social work to a political agenda was made quite clear by the army command. Colonel Gardes, head of the Fifth Bureau, in a general letter to the EMSI in October 1959, beseeched them not to get too emotionally bound up with their humanitarian work: ‘I ask you to understand the importance of this and not to be dictated to only by your heart, to be drawn there where a child cries, or where a woman calls on your help; do not forget that your action goes beyond the question of medicine or hygiene and that you must win the support of the total body of women entrusted to you for the cause that we are fighting for, that of a France united across the two shores of the Mediterranean’.

Directive 257 implied that the over-emphasis on good works would simply encourage a supine dependency on hand-outs without any transformative élan, ‘her natural tendency to passivity without encouraging a sense of effort or social dynamism’.
The mobile socio-medical teams (EMSI) 251

The more overtly political agenda of the EMSI operations can be recognised in a number of areas and in the following analysis this has been divided into four aspects: the promotion of a model of western femininity and domesticity, the use of standardised propaganda directives (fiches) in the local circles, the provision of intelligence, and the campaign for the first ever vote by Algerian women in September 1958.

One of the key roles of the EMSI was to offer, both through example and lesson, a model of western modernity that Muslim women could be led to admire and emulate. As Commander Cogniet remarked in a message to the EMSI, ‘Do not forget that for “your women” you are France!’ Each individual ASSRA was expected to offer, through her everyday behaviour, comportment, language, style of dress, moral tenor, generosity of spirit, diligence and fortitude, a role model to all young Muslim women. When women were recruited as ASSRA, one of the key factors that was taken into account was the moral behaviour of the candidates and, in the Muslim case, their degree of receptivity to western styles of dress and behaviour. Mme Maugé, and the EMSI departmental leaders, exercised a constant and often draconian surveillance over the behaviour of the ASSRA, including directives that they were to act in a seemly way and, for example, not to smoke in public or wear shorts which were both seen as objectionable to Muslims.

A particularly thorny issue was presented by the fact that the ASSRA were often the only young and single European women with whom male soldiers, starved of female company, had any daily contact. Almost inevitably many relationships developed and, although these often ended in marriage, there existed numerous ‘immoral’ liaisons, including one instance of a colonel who retained an ASSRA as his mistress. Commanders were concerned that the local population might mistake the harkettes for the prostitutes of the mobile army brothels, the Bordel mobile de campagne (BCM), so that, noted one memorandum, ‘it is unthinkable that a father will open his doors or allow any contact with his daughters, or a husband with his wife. We cannot think of a worse caricature of the emancipation of the Algerian woman’. A significant number of ASSRA were regularly dismissed from the teams on the grounds of ‘indiscipline’.

The young Muslim women who were cultivated by the EMSI for potential recruitment as ASSRA were keenly watched and assessed for the extent to which they conformed to a western model of femininity. Afsaneh Najmabadi has shown, in the case of Iran at the beginning of the twentieth century, how complex was the transition from marriage as a procreative contract, in which the wife was selected neither for love nor sexual passion but for the begetting of offspring, to a romantic
contract in which women were now required to invest affection in the husband. However, far from representing an unambiguous emancipation from segregation and oppression, the change towards unveiling, and the life of the companionate couple, required a re-education and disciplining of the body, including how to comport oneself so as to remain chaste in public spaces. If women were now to take on the duty of educating the future nation, then they in turn had to undergo an education that would make them the rational managers of the household, adept in the science of cooking, sewing and child-care, as well as acquiring a moral behaviour that was linked to a healthy body and sport. Although in the case of Algeria we are looking at changes some sixty years later and in a rather different context, the modernisation of peasant women rather than of educated elites, Najmabadi’s insights help to understand the enormity of the transformational process underlying the EMSI emancipation programme.

An EMSI circular noted that young Muslim trainees should for several months undergo a ‘kind of “detribalisation”’ by which they would be enabled to sever their ties to the bed-rock of local custom and family tradition through the milieu of the EMSI acting as a surrogate ‘family’. At Kerrata, for example, five women groomed for the EMSI were expected to abandon the veil and to live ‘totally as Europeans’. Among a series of evaluation reports on whether trainees should be accepted as ASSRA or not, was one for Fatima Be.*, who had worked for several years with a doctor in Oran and spoke French: ‘Has learned excellent habits of cleanliness and hygiene. A convinced partisan of the evolution of the Muslim woman: takes particular care of her appearance and dresses with taste... serves as an example for the women and young girls of the village’. Likewise Fatima H.* and Zohra K.* both spoke French, were ‘convinced partisans of the evolution of women’, understood ‘the modern principles of cleanliness and hygiene’ and showed no hesitation in abandoning the haïk for a track suit when teaching physical education to Muslim girls. By contrast Fatma Bo.* was to be rejected, since she ‘provided a bad example through her undisciplined character, her frivolous conduct, and morality which leaves much to be desired’.

Although, as has been seen, the ‘revolution’ of May 1958 espoused a political model of ‘integration’, of full equality between Europeans and Algerians while claiming to respect the religious and cultural identity of the latter, underlying EMSI practice was a powerful Eurocentric and assimilationist agenda. The EMSI habitus operated through a disciplining process, involving for example advice on the modest use of make-up, a ‘correct’ dress sense, and a certain bodily comportment and language, as well as of deference and politeness to superiors, a model
The mobile socio-medical teams (EMSI) that essentially derived from the conservative and largely catholic petit-bourgeois values of the EMSI hierarchy.\(^\text{33}\) The esprit de corps cultivated by the organisation, especially evident during training programmes, was like that of an English girls’ boarding school, bound together by a chaste self-discipline and healthy sporting enthusiasm.

The EMSI ranks, perhaps hardly surprising for so many young and single European women, was also suffused with a highly romantic atmosphere, in which the aspiration was to find a prince charming, most often in the ranks of the army, to marry, quit work and settle down to raise children. Implicit in this aspiration was a model of the couple and nuclear family based on sentiment that was placed in sharp contrast to the supposed loveless world of the Muslim arranged marriage. Ginette Thévenot, like many ASSRA, encouraged her women’s circle to create panels of selected photographs on particular themes of modernity: one of these panels titled ‘\textit{La Femme dans le monde}’, consisted of various pictures of famous women which Thévenot carefully selected and cut from magazines, making sure they were suitably modest, ‘worthy of example’, and not from among ‘the proliferation of little stars who give rise to scandal’. Held up here as the ideal model was the recent marriage of the Shah of Persia with Farah Diba, everyone being aware of ‘this marvellous fairy story . . . that races the imagination into a world of dreams’.\(^\text{34}\) Sometimes the young Muslim ASSRA missed the nuance: Ourida Rahmani wrote to the EMSI magazine \textit{Toubiba}, ‘I will continue with my efforts to turn my women into “B.B’s” [Brigitte Bardot’s], which received the acid comment from Maugé, ‘NO! Let B.B. take care of being an international French star: as for you be – and make of your women – an ordinary little French lady’.\(^\text{35}\) The women’s magazine \textit{Femmes nouvelles}, which was circulated through the MSF-EMSI network, carried serialised romances adapted to a Muslim readership: thus in one typical story the heroine, Zina, after much inner turmoil rejects an arranged marriage and finally falls into the arms of her true love, Mahmoud.\(^\text{36}\) Following on from the reform of the personal status law in February 1959 (see chapter 8), local EMSI correspondence constantly referred with great enthusiasm to the instances of Muslim couples now getting married by free choice, in civil ceremonies before French officials, and in a European dress style.

The second political aspect of EMSI work to be considered related to the use of what today would be termed ‘teaching packs’, standardised recommended programmes (\textit{fiches}) that were produced by the Fifth Bureau on the basis of the experience of ASSRA during Operation Pilot.\(^\text{37}\) These were identical in many ways to the step-by-step procedures recommended by the MSF in making initial contact and stabilising
relations with Algerian women in the *douar*, primarily through lessons on hygiene and child-care, but were far more overtly political in context. Each separate lesson, following the practical introduction (*prise de contact*) to groups of Muslim women, had a section on ‘Propaganda’ which related specifically to the FLN as an enemy that harmed the interests of women and their children.

The ‘rebels’ were presented in the *fiche* as a blood-thirsty and destructive force that abducted their men-folk or savagely cut their throats, leaving women to carry the burden of supporting the household on their own. The FLN seized their money, depriving their children of food, to buy arms that were turned against the people. They also destroyed schools, leaving their children un-educated, whereas France was the builder of schools, lycées, houses, dams and factories.

In short, ‘We know, like you, that the bandits have brought nothing but suffering. Such demons, beings who are against God, against religion, can bring no good . . . it is in the end you who suffer most from the rebellion’. The underlying objective of the *fiches* was to encourage women to
The mobile socio-medical teams (EMSI) 255

‘rally’ to France, by encouraging them to denounce any FLN activists in their midst, or by bringing their influence to bear on men in the village; ‘If among you there are wives, mothers or sisters whose husbands, sons or brothers have gone into the maquis, you can tell them to return home. France is generous and knows how to pardon those who have not spilt blood or committed crimes, but have simply been led astray by false shepherds. Here are the authorisations: get these to them’.

It is not clear to what extent EMSI teams utilised such fiches or assumed an overtly political function in practice. Accounts by ASSRA, predominantly European women, of their activities reveals a quite extraordinary ability to blank out, or a failure to recognise, any form of involvement in counter-insurgency or repressive operations that carried negative implications for the Algerian people and for women in particular. For example, Reine Bellin provided an account of her direct observer participation, along with other ASSRA volunteers, in Operation Jumelles in the Kabyles mountains, one of the most brutal and massive ‘steam-roller’ army operations of the entire war. For Bellin, this adventure assumed the proportions of an exhilarating camping trip, ‘the tins of rations shared with the soldiers; the evening, chatting in the dark on our air-beds . . . bursts of laughter . . . We astonished the Legionnaires by climbing at mid-day at the same speed as them’.38

Typical is the almost total absence of any self-reflection on the ultimate purposes of such action, apart from the throwaway line of arriving by goat tracks in villages, ‘to find a happy and trusting population since freed from terror’.39 The EMSI maintained a highly gendered self-image in which their own function was purely one of humanitarian aid and nurturing (hence the predominance of images of Algerian babies and small children being washed, clothed and fed) while ‘politics’ belonged to the male sphere of military superiors and was accepted without question or was not ‘our concern’.

However, the Fifth Bureau and army commanders frequently expressed high hopes that the EMSI, through their ability to reach over to peasant women and penetrate the previously impermeable fortress of the Muslim family, would provide important intelligence. But undoubtedly many ASSRA were plunged into a daily round of welfare in which they could readily neglect the more ‘political’ aspects of their role, to the annoyance of the Fifth Bureau.40 Colonel Gardes noted that commanders needed to be reminded that the EMSI was created, ‘solely within the framework of the riposte to revolutionary warfare with the mission of taking in hand the population of Muslim women’, and to detect, and keep the army authorities informed, of ‘the currents of opinion among women’.41 Undoubtedly some EMSI were able to provide commanders and intelligence officers
with a check on the degree of collaboration or resistance which they faced in the *douars* that they visited regularly, and in some instances where hostility was particularly entrenched this information could lead to the forced removal of particular families or entire villages into resettlement camps.\(^{42}\) However, overall the key political function of the EMSI was achieved indirectly, through the attempted conversion of Algerian women to a model of westernised emancipation that would lead them to aspire to enter the portals of modernity that, it was claimed, could only be guaranteed by their support for de Gaulle and *Algérie française*.

Finally, the more overtly political function of the EMSI can be illustrated in their central role in preparing Algerian women to exercise the vote for the first time during the referendum of 28 September 1958. This subject, along with the reform of the personal status law, will be examined in the following chapter, but the particular role of the EMSI is considered here in what was one of their most significant political interventions during their first year of existence. The referendum was a major test for the Gaullist government to demonstrate to international opinion that it carried the support of Algerian women, but in order to achieve this ambition it needed to persuade the mass of illiterate women, who were lacking in any form of political education or experience of voting, first to enrol on the electoral register, then to turn out en masse on the day, and finally to exercise their vote ‘correctly’. In the interior of Algeria the EMSI teams, with their Arab and Berber speaking ASSRA and assistant *harkettes*, provided a crucial instrument in this task. Many men, bound by traditional codes of honour and strict female segregation, were deeply hostile to their wives and daughters voting since they feared, often as a result of FLN counter-propaganda, that they would be forced to unveil or be exposed to the prying eye of strangers. In July 1958 Salan’s cabinet sent out orders for the preparation of ‘special bureaux staffed by female personnel’ so that women could be registered ‘without any reluctance’ and likewise for segregated polling stations on the day, ‘protected from public gaze’.\(^{43}\)

The MSF, through its circles in the urban centres and an intense radio campaign,\(^{44}\) as well as the EMSI set out to engage in a crash civic education of Algerian women.\(^{45}\) An example of this is provided by the MSF of Palissy when its president, Mme Husson, addressed a special meeting of 150 Algerian women. To illustrate the choice between a ‘Yes’ and ‘No’ vote she held up, ‘a magnificent piece of nylon lace and said, “you can see it’s very beautiful and you would love to have some on a skirt”’ (the audience replies ‘Yes’). She then compared it to a ‘torn and ragged cloth’, asking which would they prefer? ‘Yes, the pretty lace, that is FRANCE, in all its richness and opulence’. But to choose the rag was to stay in...
poverty, renounce emancipation, reject the opportunity to become like European women and, ‘was to agree with the bandits and with foreign powers’. A week later the Pallisy MSF, three days before the referendum, held a further mass meeting of 200 Algerian women at which an EMSI team demonstrated voting procedure, the use of voting slips (white for ‘Yes’ and purple for ‘No’), and an Algerian ASSRA harangued the crowd in Arabic as to why they should vote ‘Yes’: ‘God created men and women, without any distinction of race or religion’. What is striking about this is not only the condescending and infantile treatment of Algerian women, but also the extent to which the military authorities interfered directly in the electoral procedure to ensure a ‘Yes’ vote. On the day of the election MSF and EMSI personnel not only assisted Algerian women at the voting stations, but helped them in selecting the ‘Yes’ voting slips.

The EMSI and Algerian resistance

From the external official and media accounts of the EMSI, highly publicised in films, photographs, radio broadcasts and newspapers, one would gain the impression of an efficient, trouble-free organisation, impressive in its humanity and scope. But the reality was somewhat different, and this concluding section examines first the inherent weakness and incapacity of the organisation, and secondly the extent to which the propaganda drive met resistance from the Algerian peasantry.

Firstly the EMSI organisation was severely hampered by a lack of funding and access to adequate material resources (vehicles, accommodation, medical supplies). A series of quarterly reports from the Army Corps in Oran complained constantly about the fundamental lack of budgetary and material allocations to enable commanders to assist the EMSI within their sectors, complaints that appear to have gone largely unheeded. On occasions the work of EMSI teams threatened to grind to a halt. A regional organiser, Mme Fourcade, reported that they were expected to ‘do everything with nothing’, while the ASSRA were demanding payment of the danger bonus they had been promised. The EMSI of the Constantine region, who were on the payroll of the civil administration and not the army, were so frustrated by the long delays in back pay that they invaded the cabinet of the Prefect to confront him in person. The EMSI, along with the SAS, spent much of their time begging or trying to lay their hands on materials controlled by various military organisations, from bricks and cement to clothing, milk and paper. It is difficult to know if this penury represented a basic strain in the overall military budget, which by 1959 was absorbing 20 per cent of the total state budget, and/or the reflection of a fundamental lack...
of commitment within the echelons of the military-governmental apparatus to treating action sociale as a priority. Certainly there were many reports that commented on the failure of sector commanders to provide adequate support to the small EMSI teams that found themselves abandoned and left to their own devices without proper hierarchical supervision.

A second, pragmatic weakness of the EMSI was that their overall number was far too low to make a significant impact on the huge number of Algerian peasantry. The main target of EMSI action was young women in the age group fifteen to thirty-five, because they were viewed as most susceptible to modernisation, while older women (adjouzat) were much disliked by the Fifth Bureau since they were stout defenders of religious custom, carried much power within the household, and were less open to French influence. The authorities calculated that two million women aged fifteen to thirty-five were served by some 300 ASSRA, an average of 6,000–7,000 women per assistant. But in reality when EMSI teams arrived to give medical aid in isolated villages, in which the population was normally devoid of access to any kind of modern medical help, they were swamped by huge crowds, not only of women, but also babies, children and elderly men. In the Oranie, where the number of EMSI was ‘insufficient for the area and size of population’, the command was seeking in 1960 to double the 110 ASSRA.

The army, concerned that the EMSI would spread themselves too thinly and try to cover too large a population, recommended that no team should take on more than three centres (douars or resettlement camps) and 1,500 to 3,000 women at any one time and visit them regularly. Moreover, within each centre the women’s circle was to contain no more than thirty to fifty young women, the optimum number for getting to know, identify and train the core of volunteers to take over the future running of the group when the EMSI moved on. In reality it often proved difficult for the EMSI to make regular contact with isolated villages spread over an enormous area of difficult and dangerous terrain: Thévenin-Copin, for example, could only reach one douar at a time by travelling out with the weekly military convoy, so that it took one month to make a complete round of the sector. In general the EMSI appear to have been unable to achieve the ‘in-depth work’ expected of them and the Oran army corps reported as late as April 1961 that most ASSRA still stuck to pragmatic tasks such as knitting and, ‘neglected the question of information and moral and civic education’. Most worrying perhaps for the army was the failure of the EMSI to set in motion a multiplier effect, to train autonomous and self-governing Algerian women’s circles: it was ‘very difficult to locate in the mass of women the
leaders and organisers capable of continuing and extending the work set into motion by the teams’.

Thirdly, the army faced considerable difficulty not only in recruiting able ASSRA but also in retaining them. ASSRA were required to have a minimum educational qualification at the standard of the primary school leaving certificate (CEP), and of the 306 enrolled in November 1961, 78 per cent (238 women) had the CEP or equivalent, 17 percent (fifty-three) the higher brevet, and 5 per cent (fifteen), of which none were Algerians, the baccalaureate. Particularly important to the entire EMSI project, but rarely acknowledged, was the crucial need for each team to contain at least one Algerian ASSRA who could communicate with Arab or Berber-speaking women, act as interpreters to the European team leaders, and who were sensitive to the complex religious and cultural values of the population. The problem was that very few young Algerian women had the desired level of French and education to CEP level, and those who did came from a petit-bourgeois, urban class of shop-keepers, teachers, white collar workers and professionals that provided a natural constituency for the nationalist movement.

This may explain in part why such an extraordinarily large number of Muslim ASSRA were recruited from FLN militants who were captured and then ‘turned’. Quite typical of this process was the recommendation of Captain Ricart to employ as ASSRA two captured FLN women being held by the Détachement opérationnel de protection: one Bahia L.*, twenty-three years old, was a former secretary to the Sub-Prefect of Sebdou, and the second, Tedjania Y.*, eighteen years, was former secretary to Bouazza, political commissar of Douar Sidi-Boumédienne. Ricart said these two intelligent women, who had been educated at the college for girls in Tlemcen, were ‘full of goodwill’ and had only worked for the FLN under threat. If handed over to the courts they would be definitively lost to the army, while they could provide valuable aid as ASSRA.

There are numerous accounts of this kind in the press: an almost standard practice of the army was to introduce journalists visiting the interior to the ASSRA who, it was claimed, provided a living witness of young Muslim women who had been cruelly or treacherously recruited by the FLN through force, often used as sex objects, or who had joined the maquis in desperation to escape forced marriage. These ASSRA provided proof of the abhorrent oppression of women by the nationalists, while within the EMSI ranks they found both freedom and a fulfillment of their deepest desire to gain access to an enlightened modernity. Christiane Fournier told the story of Aziza who, after escaping to the maquis to avoid forced marriage with an old man, was captured by the
French army and offered a place with the EMSI: whisked away from the *djebel* to the capital she was entranced by visions of a future that could be hers, ‘Aziza opened her eyes full of wonder on the shop-windows of Algiers . . . The young girls, their blond hair falling on their shoulders, resting on the arms of the boys they had chosen to love’.61

Despite the highly propagandist construction of these accounts, they were not entirely fictitious, and many dozens of ex-FLN women were recruited into the EMSI. As has been seen (chapter 2) such a policy of conversion had been started by Jean Servier during Operation Pilot, and by August 1959 Colonel Gardes was planning to establish a permanent centre run by PFAT that would retrain up to thirty ex-FLN militants at a time.62 The danger of such a policy is that the army risked integrating into the EMSI women who were hostile to the logic of ‘pacification’ or were even covert agents that had penetrated into the ranks of the ASSRA under FLN orders. Many of the Muslim ASSRA, far from showing the deep bonds of ‘fraternisation’ with their European sisters depicted by Thévenin-Copin and Fournier, often revealed signs of fractious resistance: at Saint-Charles several ASSRA were asked, or forced, to resign since they objected to sharing quarters with their European comrades, and had fallen under the influence of one, Samira, ‘who by her anti-French intrigues creates much damage wherever she goes’.63 That ASSRA often felt themselves discriminated against was not surprising: one general recommended that recruitment of Jewish women as ASSRA was to be avoided, while General Bertron favoured Christian ASSRA and when EMSI teams arrived ‘he had acquired decent rooms for the Europeans while the Muslim women had to put up with makeshift accommodation’.64

By September 1958 there were already signs of disquiet that recruitment of ex-FLN women was enabling suspect elements to enter the EMSI ranks and a senior organiser, Mlle Desfretiere recommended that it was important to prevent, ‘the women who were taken during military operations, or who themselves sought safety with the soldiers, from automatically joining the EMSI’. She attached to her report an intelligence file on an ex-rebel (Aziza B.*) who had joined the EMSI at Bordj-Menaïel in March and qualified as an ASSRA in June 1958 and asked for an urgent investigation of her weekly visits to a male contact in Algiers.65 The fear that the FLN was deliberately planting its militants, or trying to win over ASSRA, was well founded. In September 1961, for example, it was reported from the Oranais that the FLN was openly soliciting ASSRA and two of them were arrested for collusion.66

Former EMSI note that the local FLN tried to make contact with Muslim ASSRA to win them over, and teams had to be vigilant that
women did not pass medicines to the maquis. One response to FLN pressure threatening to compromise individual ASSRA was to move them quickly to an entirely different sector.67

Evidence of the infiltration of an active FLN militant can be found in a report of the SAU officer for the Bas Casbah in 1959 relating to Zoubida Belkebir, aged twenty-two years, currently seeking qualification as an ASSRA or attaché féminine with the SAS. Belkebir, who had ‘strong nationalist or pro-FLN sentiments’, came from a family of dedicated militants. Four brothers and a brother-in-law were currently in the maquis, while another brother-in-law, Si Ali or Sid Ali, a landowner at Boufarik, had been a high-level FLN organiser in the Sahel, before his escape via France to Spain, Morocco and Tunisia. Zoubida had been arrested during the early stages of the Battle of Algiers in 1957 and ‘interrogated quite energetically’ (i.e. tortured) before departing for Morocco, where she worked as a nurse with the nationalist Dr Bendouali and resided with her brother-in-law, Sid Ali. During 1959 Zoubida went to the French consulate to apply for a visa, dressed for the occasion with veil and cachabia, although she normally wore European clothing, and then returned to Algiers where she presented herself as an aspirant ASSRA.68

In general it can be concluded that the 140- to 200-odd young Algerian women who, at any one moment, served as ASSRA during 1958–62, were not uniformly dedicated supporters of Algérie française, as official propaganda suggested. Some appear to have become disillusioned with the racism they faced in the ranks of the army, others became uncertain and worried about their position as French withdrawal became a possibility from late 1959 onwards, shifted from a pro-French to pro-FLN position, or were actively recruited or infiltrated into the EMSI by the FLN. These signs of disillusionment with, or hostility to, French operations is significant, since the Muslim ASSRA with their knowledge of French, Arabic and Berber dialect, of local social and cultural mores, and sensitivity to the universe of Algerian women and of family relations, offered the greatest potential to implement a strategy of contact. The type of young women from which the ASSRA were recruited, aged eighteen to about thirty, literate in French, educated to at least CEP standard, constituted a tiny urban class and a potentially invaluable but scarce political resource that both FLN and the French government competed for as potential cadres. This pivotal group, an elite of Francophone women from the urban lower middle-class or old urban families that had traditionally served the French state (cadis, bachagas, army officers), were deeply attracted to a vision of modernity that could, according to their families’ political culture, be realised either through
the promise of emancipation and integration into French civilisation (a universe portrayed by the glamour of Parisian teenage life and romantic love) or through dedication to a nationalist struggle that would liberate women, although in some often undefined way, through independence.

Undoubtedly many ASSRA, as portrayed by propaganda and the media, in nailing their colours to the French mast, became extremely enthusiastic and militant missionaries in the task of converting their Algerian ‘sisters’ and winning them away from the stifling traditions of female oppression and segregation. But the environment of French modernity was one in which pro-nationalist women also found themselves completely at ease. The entire class of French speaking and educated young women occupied an ambiguous and even volatile position, and this explains in part the ease with which they could pass from FLN ranks to the EMSI, and back again. For the Fifth Bureau and the leaders of the EMSI this began to cast an atmosphere of doubt and insecurity over the reliability of Muslim ASSRA in their crucial task of bridging over to local Algerian women. The European ASSRA, with a few exceptions, had little if any linguistic competence in Arabic or Berber, and were hugely dependent not only on Algerian ASSRA as interpreters and intermediaries, but also on the accuracy of translation and whether nuances of meaning and tonal inflection might conceal or not messages of disapproval or resistance. Even the formidable Mme Maugé, director of the EMSI, could find herself frustrated and on uncertain ground: during a tour of inspection of two resettlement camps she was met by many poorly clothed women and dirty children, ‘The army Muslim interpreter used by me did not seem to translate faithfully the words of the population, nor my own for that matter’.69 But of course she was unable to be certain, and therein lay the deep insecurity of the whole ‘pacification’ endeavour.

This leads in to the question of the kind of reception that the EMSI teams met when they began to make contact with isolated rural populations. Thévenin-Copin claims that, after an initial timidity, she invariably received a warm and generous welcome from peasant women wherever she went.70 The archives reveal a rather different picture, and in general two separate, but often interrelated, forms of village hostility and resistance can be identified: firstly, a socio-religious and cultural opposition, and secondly, a nationalist inspired political resistance. Looking at these in turn, it can be noted that for many, if not the great majority of, women attachment to customary family and gender roles, including arranged marriage and seclusion, was a sacrosanct tradition legitimated by religion and custom, an internalised system of values rather than forms of practice simply imposed by external male authority and force. Indeed, married women, as the educators of children (in
the widest sense) and guardians of the sacred space of the household, were widely regarded as the transmitters of core identity. This is why the EMSI were keen to try and marginalise or exclude the older adjouzat from the women’s circles.

However, in most areas the core of socio-religious opposition to the EMSI came from the men who were deeply anxious about any agenda for emancipation and continued to hold the whip hand as to whether wives and daughters could leave the house to attend EMSI or MSF activities. EMSI teams working in the Kabyle mountains to the north of Bouira described their reception in some villages as warm and positive, and in others quite cold, particularly on the part of men like those of Guendoue who remained distant and were ‘somewhat fierce, spoke very little, and did not say what they thought of the situation’. Elsewhere they made some progress and after a difficult first contact, ‘the population approaches us readily’, except for Tassala, inhabited by a traditional, conservative religious elite, ‘a marabout village, where the men are all very religious and do not like their wives to leave the house, even to go to the ouvroir’.71 Directive 257 in a section ‘Action on men’ noted that past attempts to change the status of women through a radical agenda rather than by a gradual evolution had produced a justifiable and ‘perfectly understandable’ opposition among men. It recommended a sensitive management of local male feelings since it was crucial to bring on-side men who provided a ‘lever’ for change.72 But in many areas, as in Eastern Oranie in April 1960, it was reported that EMSI teams were making little impact despite frequent visits because of the sheer grinding poverty and illiteracy of the inhabitants: ‘The mentality of Muslim women remains on the whole very primitive’, and despite much work, ‘poverty, the passivity inherent in the milieu, and male dominance, impedes and even blocks this timid evolution’.73

The depth of socio-cultural resistance to the EMSI agenda was not necessarily political and was shared right across the populace, often regardless of whether they were pro-French or nationalists. This embedded nature of popular attachment to traditional familial and gender structures is illustrated by the fact that the EMSI frequently faced difficulty in persuading the wives and daughters of police or army auxiliaries, an almost natural constituency under the direct wing of the army, to attend meetings or circles. One inspector of the EMSI reported the difficulty of penetrating, ‘the female milieu of the local Muslim (FSNA) authorities, the Moghaznis and Harkis, which instead of giving an example of such evolution, are a hindrance to this action’.74 However, the FLN undoubtedly made its presence felt in organising resistance to the EMSI at village level through its clandestine political network (OPA).
The FLN at the higher level, as has been seen, organised opposition to the emancipation strategy of the army through its radio broadcasts and by orders to threaten or attack the MSF and EMSI. In some instances the FLN mounted direct attacks on ASSRA on leave, and killed them: Thévenin-Copin records the death of at least nine women by assassination. After the death of four ASSRA in an ambush in the Ghribs in January 1961 the army reported an undeniable demoralisation in the EMSI ranks. But the widest impact of FLN opposition, which varied enormously in intensity from one region or village to another, was to create a generalised boycott of the circles. In general the FLN did not discipline or threaten women who received material aid from the EMSI or SAS, a procedure which would have been highly counterproductive given the wretched conditions faced by the peasantry (lack of medical aid, food and clothing) and the fact that such French supplies were also channelled to the FLN maquis, but it did challenge those who showed too keen an attachment and association with the French. Typical of many army reports were those from Baraki, where the EMSI team faced great difficulty in establishing contact with women, ‘it seems that a clandestine OPA is the cause of this reluctance’, or in Oranie where an OPA operated at village level, ‘in which women often played an active role’. At La Baraque near Aumale, ‘where one day the women of the Circle refused care and tea on the order of the rebels – There is certainly an OPA operating here’. Quite typical here was both the uncertainty of the EMSI, as well as of the intelligence officers, to know whether the FLN was active or not in particular villages, and their powerlessness to do anything about it. As the army reported from the western Oranais, a clear stagnation or regression in the work of the EMSI in rural areas, ‘seems due to the pressure or orders of the milieu under the influence of the rebels, thus to causes that the ASSRA have a mission to neutralise but which, it has to be said, escapes their control’.

The final point to note is that the work of the EMSI, as of the MSF, became increasingly difficult as the end of the war drew in sight. Although by 1959 the FLN had significantly lost the military battle (but not the war itself), there were growing indications of a deep shift in Algerian popular opinion, a new-found self-confidence that took the form of an increasing willingness openly to defy or challenge the army and French authorities. One SAS reported in June 1961 a sudden increase in hostility towards welfare assistants who had previously been well received: ‘during the course of their visits to the douars our social teams have noticed a very clear deterioration in the ambiance and hostile comments have been made to us in certain bidonvilles, especially at Staouéli and Zéralda that have always given us an excellent reception’.
Following de Gaulle’s speech of September 1959 the Algerian nationalists were aware of the growing signs of a possible French retreat, and began to sense that the settler population was nervous and running scared. The real turning point in nationalist self-confidence (see chapter 10) was marked by the *journées* of December 1960 in Algiers, when the populace was prepared openly to chant nationalist slogans during street demonstrations.81

This deeper shift carried serious implications for the EMSI. Firstly, it became increasingly difficult for the organisation to retain or recruit both able European and Algerian women. Under ‘normal’ conditions there was already a high level of turn-over among the ASSRA, and between November 1957 and September 1960 some 43 per cent, 235 women out of 557 recruits, had left.82 Many young women failed to cope with the Spartan and demanding conditions that they faced, others were removed for various failings, while there was a considerable ‘leakage’ of those who got married, invariably to French soldiers.83 This instability of personnel meant that individual ASSRA were just building up experience of the job on the ground, when they departed to be replaced by novices who had to begin all over again.

The problem of recruitment deteriorated further as uncertainty about the outcome of the war deepened. This anxiety became particularly evident among the Algerian ASSRA, since they had far more to lose: if the war terminated in an FLN victory they risked becoming the target of nationalist vengeance. Moreover, as any sign of association with the French authorities became increasingly risky or worrying, the families and relatives of ASSRA placed pressure on the young women to cut their ties to the army since this might tarnish and endanger the family group as a whole in the eyes of the nationalists. Numerous reports during 1960–61 comment on the growing difficulty of recruiting Algerian ASSRA and of demoralisation in the EMSI ranks, ‘due in particular to the pressure of comrades and neighbours who reproach them for working “with the soldiers”’.84 In Oranie in July 1961 EMSI teams were met with a hail of stones at Saint-Denis-du-Sig, Bedeau, Oran and Ain-Témouchent.85 In this deteriorating situation the army was forced to increase dramatically the number of inexperienced *harkette* recruits and to cut back on the size of EMSI teams.86

With the dramatic radicalisation of overt popular nationalism from the end of 1960, there were growing signs of women’s resistance inside the EMSI circles. Algerian women were passing from an earlier phase (1957–59) during which they generally remained mute in the immediate presence of SAS, MSF and EMSI personnel, in a situation in which silence was the best form of defence, of not disclosing one’s true opinions
while gaining access to the material resources of the army, to a phase (1960–62) in which resistance could be expressed openly and often with impunity. In the towns, in particular Algiers, Algerian women attending the circles began to talk openly of independence ‘as if it was already an accomplished fact’, younger women aged sixteen to twenty were particularly fractious, ‘oversensitive and quarrelsome’, and they made it quite clear that they were unprepared to be subjected to any more propaganda and that their motive in attending circles was purely material and instrumental.87 ‘The Muslim female population, especially in the douars, is more interested in the small and immediate material benefits to be gained from contacts, from these meetings, than by the ideas of social emancipation that one tries to teach them’.88 As the balance of forces tipped remorselessly in favour of the nationalists, so the work of the EMSI became increasingly untenable and inspections by senior army officers reveal their own deepening demoralisation and a growing recognition that the MSF and ASSRA actions had been superficial and never achieved the effective and durable transformation of Muslim women that had been optimistically claimed in earlier years.

Notes

1 A very similar function to the EMSI was played by the SAS, either through the volunteer work of the wives of officers, or by social assistants who were attached permanently to the teams: for a detailed account see the autobiography of Monique Eoche-Duval, Madame SAS; Sambron, Femmes musulmanes, 84–92. Seferdjeli, ‘French Army’, 45–6, notes that the attachées, who numbered 561 by June 1960, were more numerous than the EMSI. Much less is known about these assistants, in part because they were not the subject of intense media attention, but their functions were very much the same as that of the EMSI.

2 Fournier, Les EMSI, 41–7, Maugé appears here under the thin disguise of ‘Pat’.

3 SHAT 1H4395/7, the order of 25 October 1957, which established the ASSRA.

4 Ginette Thévenin-Copin, in her autobiography, Plaidoyer pour la paix, provides an insight into the daily life of the ASSRA.

5 Fournier, Les EMSI, appendix, 183–7; interviews with Ginette Thévenin-Copin and Edmée Barbier, former EMSI, Montpellier, 3–4 November 2006. The foundation order (arrêté) of 25 October 1957 specified that ASSRA would later attend a four-month training programme leading to a diploma, but this requirement was never implemented and may have been designed to conceal the lack of qualifications and expertise.

6 Edmée Barbier interview, 4 November 2006; on Cogniet’s extremism see Villatoux and Villatoux, La République, 539–41. ASSRA trainees later
The mobile socio-medical teams (EMSI) reported on how Cogniet’s courses had enlightened them as to the nature of the struggle in which they were involved. ‘It was not a question of two opposed armed powers, but of two philosophies. The Marxist philosophy that considers man as a material being who must be enslaved, which is what the FLN wishes to impose: and the Occidental philosophy, which is what we represent, that recognises that man has spiritual qualities which he wishes to develop so that his country can live in liberty and self-fulfilment’, *Toubiba*, 12 (25 June 1959). *Toubiba*, an internal EMSI journal edited by Mme Maugé, private archive of Ginette Thévenin-Copin.

---

8 *Toubiba*, 16 (25 October 1960).
9 Thévenin-Copin, *Plaidoyer*, 59–60; SHAT 1H2569 records the opposition, for example, of General B. in Oranie, and of a medical officer (captain) at Telagh who was hostile to the EMSI because of ‘their incompetence in medicine’. For opposition to the early EMSI experiment during Operation Pilot, see above chapter 2.
10 SHAT 1H2461/1, General Hubert to Algiers HQ, 30 May 1958, complained that only one EMSI existed in his sector and requested three more as crucial to building contact with the population.
11 See chapter 3.
12 SHAT 1H2461/1, EMSI statistics, 29 August 1960.
14 The harkettes, who were trained ‘on the job’, were paid 20–25,000 old Francs (AFr.) per month, compared to ASSRA pay of 43,000 AFr.: see SHAT 1H2461/1.
15 SHAT 1H1147/1, press cutting from *Elle*, October 1958.
16 SHAT 1H2461/1, Maugé notes to Colonel Gardes, 15 May, 29 August 1959.
18 *Toubiba*, 3 (25 September 1959); 6 (25 December 1959); 14 (25 August 1960).
19 SHAT 1H2409, État-Major, Fifth Bureau, 24 October 1958 notes that EMSI role in ‘pacification’ will be ‘controlled by psychological officers working in close liaison with the intelligence officers’, including their submission of any modifications to the ‘work plan’.
21 SHAT 1H2088, Instruction pour la pacification en Algérie No. 4 (257/EMI/3/PH), 27 March 1960, 36 pages, hereafter referred to as Directive 257. This document was issued down to commanders at sector level, but was kept secret from the EMSI for security reasons that almost certainly derived from a justified concern that the FLN had infiltrated agents into the organisation.
24 SHAT 1H4395/7.
25 SHAT 1H4494/2, quoted by Seferdjeli, ‘French Army’, 67–8. Among the FLN and French anti-war militants there was a widespread propagandist
perception of the ASSRA as ‘prostitutes’. On the BMC and prostitution in the Maghreb see Christelle Taraud, *La Prostitution coloniale. Algérie, Tunisie, Maroc (1830–1962)* (Paris: Payot, 2003). In the ECPAD archives is a sequence of photographs, FLAM R637 to 6382, by Marc Flamand of Colonel Bigard, a sub-prefect, and senior officers during a visit to the resettlement camp of Sidi Mounoun, seated in ‘Oriental’ style on cushions while being entertained by ASSRA dancing girls: such events could be readily construed by Algerian society as immoral.


29 SHAT 1H2556/1, directive of P. Hosteing, Directeur général des affaires politiques, 3 December 1957.

30 SHAT 1H2461/1, report, 12 December 1957.

31 In line with the conditions of being given access (dérogation) to archives that are normally closed, I have respected the anonymity of some individuals: these are indicated by initials and an asterisk.

32 SHAT 1H2569*, report of Captain Bidaud, 27 August 1958. In another report of 18 September 1958 the EMSI organiser Mlle Desfretiere warned that commanders were accepting young Kabyles women into the EMSI teams, who ‘do not possess sufficient qualities to serve as an example for village women . . . women of questionable morals’.

33 This question of proper dress codes, personal hygiene and correct comportment was similar to that promulgated by the MSF circles and its publication *Femmes nouvelles*: see above chapter 5.

34 Thévenin-Copin, *Plaidoyer*, 177; a copy of this panel in Thévenin-Copin’s private archive shows a central design of a veiled Muslim woman holding hands with a European woman, and surrounding this couple, various images of dynamic women (athletes, nurses), and the ‘fairy-tale’ marriage of King Baudouin of Belgium and Fabiola in December 1960.


36 *Femmes nouvelles*, 19 (20 April 1960).

37 SHAT 1H2461/1, five fiches distributed by Fifth Bureau, 30 June 1958.

38 *Toubiba*, 3 (25 September 1959).

39 Thévenin-Copin, *Plaidoyer*, 124, justifies a captain using a human shield of local villages, including women, to walk in front of army convoys along roads that were being mined by the FLN.

40 Sambron, *Femmes musulmanes*, 80–4, notes that propaganda and intelligence was never a main concern of the EMSI; see also Launay, *Paysans algériens*, 316–17, an SAS nurse at Trois-Marabouts (Oranie), ‘The Captain had asked her to skilfully interrogate the patients and to provide him with
“intelligence”. But she did not like informing and knew that the Muslims quickly saw through such silly games if she engaged in them’.

41 SHAT 1H2661/1, dossier action EMSI, 20 May 1958–March 1962.
42 SHAT 1H4395/7, reports on EMSI for the Bouira sector.
43 CAOM 13CAB64, Salan cabinet note, 24 July 1958.
44 In addition to the MSF Magazine de la femme (see chapter 4), SHAT 1H1147/1 has transcripts of Operation Referendum, twenty-eight RTF Arab-language broadcasts on the theme, ‘Vote Yes. To Assure the Emancipation of the Muslim Woman’.
45 Seferdji, ‘French Army’, 57–60, for detail of the referendum campaign.
46 CAOM 81F74.
47 Several model directives sent out by the Fifth Bureau insisted on the ‘Yes’ vote: see SHAT 1H2461/1.
48 SHAT 1H2569: for example General Fouquault, report of 28 June 1960, ‘The activities of the teams is more and more limited by the poverty of the material and financial means already noted’.
49 SHAT 1H2569, note, 3 May 1958.
50 Thévenin-Copin, Plaidoyer, 194–7.
51 Lefeuvre, Chère Algérie, has demonstrated the extent to which the underdeveloped Algerian colony, contrary to popular perception, was dependent on budgetary transfers from metropolitan France.
53 Thévenin-Copin, Plaidoyer, 139, and photographs of huge waiting crowds.
54 SHAT 1H2569/2*, quarterly report, April 1960.
56 Thévenin-Copin, Plaidoyer, 66.
58 SHAT 1H2569/2*, quarterly report, CAO, 28 June 1960.
60 SHAT 1H2569*, note of Captain Ricard, 28 March 1958.
61 Fournier, Les EMSI, 49–56, and her account of Aïcha of Oran, kidnapped by the FLN, 73–80; see for example also, Thévenin-Copin, Plaidoyer, 104–5, the case of Fatima, captured in the maquis, who had been a brilliant school student, but escaped to the FLN to avoid an arranged marriage; Jacques Perrier in L’Aurore, 27 August 1959, on his meeting Zoubida, who had been taken by force at Mascara in 1957 along with seven other women ‘to serve as a distraction to the men of Wilaya V’.
62 SHAT 1H2461/1, Gardes to commander in chief, 24 August 1959. It is unclear whether this centre was ever established, but a similar retraining camp at Arzew did exist for captured ex-FLN male cadres.
63 SHAT 1H2569, reports from Saint Charles, March–April 1958.
64 SHAT 1H2569/2*, quarterly report, ZOC, 28 June 1960; report of Mme Maugé on inspection tour, Oranie, 26 February 1958.
65 SHAT 1H2569/2*, report of Desfretièr, 18 September 1958.
Burning the veil

66 SHAT 1H2569/2*, quarterly report, ZCO, 26 September 1961.
67 Interview of G. Thévenin-Copin and E. Barbier, 4 November 2006.
68 CAOM 2SAS56, intelligence report of SAU officer, Bas Casbah (Algiers), 22 July 1959.
69 SHAT 1H2569/2*, Maugé report, 26 February 1958.
70 Thévenin-Copin, Plaidoyer, 67, 172.
71 SHAT 1H4395/7, EMSI reports for sector of Bouira, January and April 1960.
72 SHAT 1H2088/4, directive 257, 27 March 1960.
73 SHAT 1H2569, quarterly report, ZEO, 21 April 1960.
74 SHAT 1H2569/2*, report, 15 March 1961. FSNA (Français de souche nord-africaine), was the term used currently by the government to denote Algerians.
75 SHAT 1H4395/7, report of Third Bureau, 4 March 1960.
76 Thévenin-Copin, Plaidoyer, 184–5, 214.
77 SHAT 1H2569/2*, quarterly report, Oranie, 11 May 1961.
78 SHAT 1H2569/2*, reports 1959–60.
79 SHAT 1H2569/2*, quarterly report, ZOO, 26 September 1960.
82 Seferdjeli, ‘French Army’, 63.
83 Toubiba refers to many dozens of resignation for reasons of marriage: see, for example, 4 (25 October 1959), ‘Again another who abandons us to marry a Lieutenant-Colonel’. It appears that some women volunteered for the EMSI because of the attractions of an active marriage market.
84 SHAT 1H2569/2*, quarterly report, ZNE, 12 October 1961.
85 SHAT 1H2569/2*, quarterly report, Oran, 12 July 1961.
86 The word ‘harkette’, a diminutive and feminised form of the term ‘harki’, may have been related to the fact that cash-strapped commanders funded these women from the budget allocated to military auxiliaries (harkis): interview E. Barbier, 4 November 2006; on this widespread form of ‘creative funding’ see Mathias, Les Séctions administratives, 95.