Henri Alleg’s Book Is Record Of Horrors

By BILL McGRATH

The brutality and callousness of “Godless” Communism is one of the favorite subjects of current journalistic exploitation. We are given lurid descriptions of the slave labor camps and prisons of Russia and we constantly hear of the flight of refugees to the haven of the democratic West. Some of these people tell stories of sadistic torture, of brainwashing, and of treatment so inhuman as to scarcely be believed. After being properly thrilled and horrified, we have a sigh of relief and give thanks that democracy could never be guilty of such monstrous crimes.

Inhuman Torture

Those who do have such faith would profit greatly from a reading of “The Question” by Henri Alleg. This, too, is a story of inhuman torture, but the nation responsible in this instance was not the atheistic Soviet Union, but rather our thoroughly Christian ally, France.

“Interrogation”

M. Alleg was the editor of the Alger Républicain, a paper which, as the name suggests, favored Algeria’s independence. This paper was banned and in June of 1957, Alleg was arrested by the Tenth Parachute Division and taken to the “Centre de Trí,” where the events described in this book took place. The “interrogation” of Alleg was also under the direction of the “Para” (parachutists) who were primarily interested in obtaining a list of names of people associated with the Algerian rebellion. So far as the actual methods of “interrogation” are concerned, it suffices to say that they were as brutal and perverted as any attributed to tyrannies of the past or present.

General Massu?

There is an interesting significance in this book from the political viewpoint in that the Tenth Parachute Division was the unit which spearheaded the revolt which brought De Gaulle to power. Also, it is the opinion of this writer that the General M— referred to in the book is General Massu, one of the most prominent leaders of this revolt and now a political figure of some significance. The assurances of the present French government that all torturing has been stopped are somewhat sullied by the continuance in high positions of authority of the persons responsible for these actions.

Sartre’s Introduction

The principal significance of this story, however, lies on a rather different level (and here the introduction by Jean-Paul Sartre is quite valuable) for it is a record of the heights and depths which human beings can attain. As Alleg says, “This ‘Centre de Trí’ was not only a place of torture for Algerians, but also a school of perversion for young Frenchmen.”

Acceptance of Horrors

He describes how these young men gradually become used to the horrors around them and then at last come to accept them as natural. “I looked at this youth with the sympathetic face who could talk of the sessions of torture I had undergone as if it were a football match that he remembered and could congratulate me without 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.”

“Proud and Happy”

Contrast this with the reaction of Alleg himself: “I suddenly felt proud and happy. I hadn’t given in. I was now sure I could stand up to it if they started again, that I could hold out to the end . . .” Also there is tremendous power in the words with which he ends this book. “All this I have had to say for those Frenchmen who will read me. I want them to know that the Algerians do not confuse their torturers with the great people of France, from whom they have learned so much, and whose friendship is so dear to them. But they must know what is done IN THEIR NAME.”

Let us not make the mistake of thinking that this can only happen in other countries. For there are eras in our past when our record in this matter is not completely clean. Let us not let out patriotism destroy our humanity.