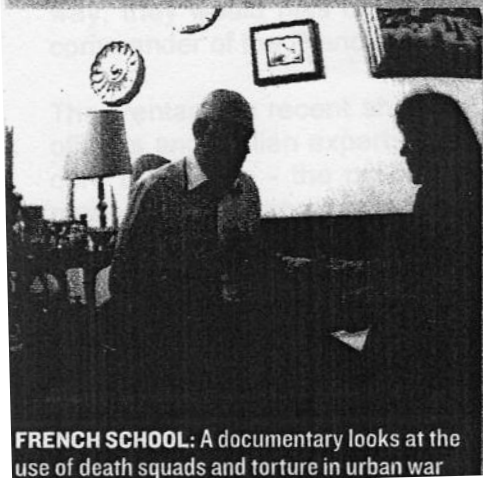


MOVIES Learning Deadly Lessons



FRENCH SCHOOL: A documentary looks at the use of death squads and torture in urban war

Counterinsurgency is almost always the dirtiest kind of war. And it's often the hardest to win. In a powerful new documentary, "Death Squads: The French School," filmmaker Marie-Monique Robin dips into this dark, timely subject, and explores the lessons learned by the French while battling anticolonial movements.

The film starts with the independence struggle in Algeria. The French Army devised tactics specifically for urban warfare to snuff out the Algerian insurgency, relying largely on commando patrols, torture and death squads. Carefully reconstructing events through chilling accounts from veterans, Robin deftly weaves in footage from the 1966 drama "The Battle of Algiers" to convey the

horror and to make up for a lack of archival reel.

The use of the drama in Robin's documentary should not be sneered at. "The Battle of Algiers" itself was more than a movie; it was an instructional video. South American military academies lapped it up in the 1970s, using it to educate new recruits. Robin traces how the so-called French doctrine was praised and followed by an entire generation of U.S. and Latin American military officers in the early 1960s. Her film, which also features hidden-camera footage of Latin American generals issuing French-style training instructions, may follow a similar path; it has already caught the eye of Argentine justice officials, who are considering using it to investigate past war crimes.

—MARIE VALLA