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The Historical Legacy of Colonialism and Revolution

In few countries of the non-Western world has the impact of the West been so great as in Algeria. For over one hundred years Algeria was considered to be a part of France, and by the last quarter of the nineteenth century nearly one-tenth of Algeria's population was of European origin. The proximity of France and Algeria made colonial ties particularly close, and eventually the flow of Europeans to Algeria was matched by a sizable migration to Europe of Algerians seeking education and jobs or doing military service in the French army. Many Algerians came to speak French fluently, to dress like Frenchmen, and even to take French wives. A few came to think of themselves as French citizens and desired nothing more than complete assimilation of Algeria into France. For some Algerians, in short, the "civilizing mission" of France was enthusiastically welcomed, and still today a legacy of affection and sympathy for France remains among large numbers of Algerians. This was one side of the enormously complex relationship called colonialism.

But colonialism in Algeria inevitably carried with it the basis for its own undoing, for if the positive aspects of Western domina-

tion were particularly strong in Algeria, so also were the negative ones. For every Algerian who profited from the benefits of French culture there were dozens who felt little more than the frustrations, the anger, and the humiliation of being placed in inferior positions by a technically superior culture. Added to this dependency relationship were the all too frequent instances of impoverishment, discrimination, and racism.

In a land long subjected to violence, one might have expected that the stark inequalities produced by French colonialism in Algeria would lead eventually to some drastic efforts by the dispossessed to alter the political structure. And yet when the tides of militant nationalism were beginning to run strong in much of the colonial world in the early twentieth century, Frenchmen could look with satisfaction at their most important colony and note the passivity of the "natives." When some political activity did begin among the Muslims, it was not those who had suffered most under the French who called for change. Rather, it was the small nucleus of French-educated Muslims who had nearly been integrated into French life who found the remaining obstacles to their participation in political and economic activities intolerable.

The tragedy of Algerian nationalism is that France remained aloof from the successive demands for reform presented by moderates seeking to work within the legal system, so that by the time France was willing to make the concessions demanded by the men of the 1930s she was faced with a new generation of nationalists who asked for more and were willing to use more radical methods than their predecessors. These demands were likewise ignored until a third generation of nationalists, this one convinced of the need for the use of violence, had seized control of the nationalist movement from the moderates and had begun a long and painful war for independence. For the Algerians, revolution did succeed in bringing independence but at a frightful cost in lives and in deepened internal conflicts and hostilities. While the human cost of the war was most immediately felt, the legacy of division and distrust left by the prolonged war for independence has had far-reaching consequences in independent Algeria and has seriously impeded the efforts needed to reconstruct the war-torn society and economy. The story of the Algerian revolution is extremely complex, involving the entire range of human relationships and evoking the strongest possible emotions in both participants and observers. While the bulk of this study will examine in detail the principal

Algerian actors in this drama, some sense of the historical developments from the early French presence in 1830 to their final departure in 1962 must be given.

Algeria came to be France's most important colony by the twentieth century, but the beginnings of France's direct involvement in Algeria were modest and even banal. At various points early in the French occupation abandonment of Algeria was considered, but this simple course was never followed, and thus the tie binding Algeria to France was broken 130 years later at the cost of hundreds of thousands of lives and extreme social disruption.¹

The French decided on the conquest of Algiers in a rather shortsighted and casual manner, and the expeditionary force sent in the summer of 1830 was surrounded by a carnival-like atmosphere, complete with elegant Parisian ladies who had rented space on pleasure boats in order to witness the naval bombardment of Algiers. In anticipation of the conquest of Algiers, a Marseilles merchant ran the following advertisement in the newspaper:

A new enterprise will be established on the occasion of the war against Algiers. A merchant from Marseilles, possessing an attractive ship, will fit it out as a hotel. Those persons wishing to witness the bombardment of Algiers and the landing of our troops will be lodged and fed for 15 francs a day. This ship, which has received legal authorization, will remain at a respectful distance to avoid enemy fire. It will, however, be armed with six cannon so as to defend itself against the corsaires in case of attack.²

Initial resistance to the French was vigorous but short-lived, and the Dey of Algiers finally capitulated on July 5, 1830. After sacking the treasury the French hardly knew what to do next, but before long the decision was made for them, as Muslim resistance in the countryside grew around the imposing figure of the Emir Abd al Qadir.³ Faced with a clear challenge to French supremacy, the French naturally decided that it was necessary to "pacify" the hostile countryside. This decision was the fatal one that drew France into its deep involvement in Algeria, for pacification was

¹ An excellent account of the French conquest of Algeria is found in Charles-André Julien, *Histoire de l'Algérie contemporaine (1827-1871)*.

² Quoted in Charles-Henri Favrod, *La Révolution algérienne*, p. 1. Originally published in *Le Sémaphore*, March 30, 1830.

³ See Paul Azan, *L'Emir Abdelkader*. The Emir Abd al Qadir (Abdelkader) is one of the few heroes in Algeria's past revered today by all groups in the society.

to last for at least seventeen years until the surrender of Abd al Qadir in 1847, and in some areas major resistance was not overcome until after 1870.

In pacifying the countryside, the French rarely spared force, and numerous instances of the worst sort of barbarity of the French troops can be cited. In the era of "colonialism with a good conscience," military officers often kept careful accounts of their victories over the "natives," and clearly the destruction of Muslim life and property was hardly considered beyond the scope of the duties of the bearers of the *mission civilisatrice*. Quotes from two French generals, Bugeaud and St. Arnaud, reflect something of the destructive nature of the "pacification" of Algeria:

"More than 50 fine villages, built of stone and roofed with tiles, were destroyed. Our soldiers made very considerable pickings there. We did not have the time, in the heat of combat, to chop down the trees. The task, in any case, would have been beyond our strength. Twenty thousand men armed with axes could not in six months cut down the olives and fig trees which cover the beautiful landscape which lay at our feet."

"There were still numerous bands of the enemy on the summits, and I was hoping for another engagement. But they refused to come down and I began to chop down the fine orchards and to set fire to the magnificent villages under the enemy's eyes" (1846).

"I left in my wake a vast conflagration. All the villages, some 200 in number, were burnt down, all the gardens destroyed, all the olive trees cut down" (1851).⁴

As the French gained control over the hostile countryside, the Muslim population was often displaced by European *colons*, many of whom came from countries other than France. With Abd al

⁴Quoted by Roger Murray and Tom Weingraf in "The Algerian Revolution," *New Left Review* (London), No. 22 (December 1963), p. 23. For a representative selection of quotations describing the French tactics used in conquering Algeria, see Yves Lacoste, André Nouschi, and André Prenant, *L'Algérie, passé et présent*, pp. 300-315.

A certain Dr. Bopichon, author of two books on Algeria in the mid-1840s, wrote: "Little does it matter that France in her political conduct goes beyond the limits of common morality at times; the essential thing is that she establish a lasting colony, and that as a consequence she will bring European civilization to these barbaric countries; when a project which is to the advantage of all humanity is to be carried out, the shortest path is the best. Now, it is certain the shortest path is terror. . . . Without violating the laws of morality, or international jurisprudence, we can fight our African enemies with powder and fire, joined by famine, internal divisions, war between Arabs and Kabyles, between the tribes of the *tell* and those of the Sahara, by brandy, corruption and disorganization. That is the easiest thing in the world to do." From Charles-Henri Favrod, *Le FLN et l'Algérie*, p. 31.

Qadir's defeat in 1847, relative security existed in large parts of Algeria and the growth of the European population was rapid. The problem of controlling the Algerians remained, however, and soon the French seemed to realize that they had complicated their task of administering the local population by eliminating many of the Muslims' natural leaders.

The Governor General in Algeria, Jules Cambon, reported to the French Senate in 1894 as follows:

After the Turkish authorities had disappeared . . . there was no day on which we did not try to destroy the great families . . . because we found them to be forces of resistance. We did not realize that in suppressing the forces of resistance in this fashion, we were also suppressing our means of action. The result is that we are today confronted by a sort of human dust on which we have no influence and in which movements take place which are to us unknown. We no longer have any authoritative intermediaries between ourselves and the indigenous population.⁵

If the result of French colonization in Algeria in the nineteenth century was to transform a relatively healthy traditional society into "human dust," the early years of the twentieth century gave some indications that social forces soon to produce new men were acting on the Muslim population. Whether these new men would consider themselves Frenchmen, Arabs, Muslims, or Algerians was unknown, but few seemed to fear that nationalism would become a strong force in Algeria. After all, in the minds of nearly all Frenchmen an Algerian nation had never existed. Much of the drama of the Algerian nationalist movement stems from the fact that large numbers of Algerians shared the belief that an Algerian nation was a fanciful idea devoid of reality.

The stages of the movement which eventually led to Algerian independence can be readily identified, although much is still unknown about some historical events. The earliest manifestations of the forces which in time created the nationalist movement took place in the early years of the twentieth century. These consisted of demands for social and sometimes political reforms. Such demands, usually presented as petitions by the most westernized segments of Algerian society, generally met with failure. The consequences of failure would often be that demands were increased and new means of action were sought. French intransigence seemed to lead

⁵ Quoted by Roger Murray and Tom Weingraf in "The Algerian Revolution," p. 29.

inevitably toward the radicalization of the reformist and later of the nationalist movement.

A critical point in the development of Algerian nationalism occurred in the 1930s. During this decade Metropolitan France held out the first promises of substantive reform which would have satisfied many of the moderate nationalists and reformers. These promises of action from Paris frightened the *colon* population in Algeria, however, and great pressures were brought to bear in order to sabotage these liberal plans. As it became clear that the *colons* could determine French policy in Algeria, the Muslim elite began to shift away from a belief that full assimilation of Algerians into French life would be the surest path of progress. Replacing this belief was the conviction that independence, or at least autonomy, would be the best hope for realizing their goals.

A farsighted Frenchman, Maurice Viollette, had warned his countrymen in 1935: "Take care, the natives of Algeria, and through your own fault, still have no country. They are looking for one. They ask us to let them enter the French nation. Let them do so swiftly, for otherwise they will create their own."⁶

Years later, in 1947, a powerful *colon* expressed his contempt for Viollette's warning in the following words:

You appear only to fear the possibility of an Arab insurrection. Try to grasp the fact that there is another danger facing the uncomprehending metropolitan Frenchmen, that of a *colon* uprising. . . . We are tired of this absurd talk of elections for the natives. Even if by some *tour de force* we succeeded once in orienting them in our favor, we could not be forever repeating the operation. There must be an end to all this. We want no more governors drenched in anachronistic sentimentality, but strong men who can ensure respect for our rights by showing force and, if necessary, by using it. In 1936, I sabotaged the Blum-Viollette project and the government capitulated before me. What business had General de Gaulle in meddling once again in this business? Believe me, I know how to bring them to heel."⁷

The era of full assimilation of Algerians into French society was certainly gone by the end of World War II. But the inevitability of violent revolution was not so clearly apparent in the postwar years. One might well have anticipated considerable agitation for change on the part of the Muslim population, but the possibility of a successful armed insurrection seemed slight. And it is well to

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

remember that success was not guaranteed to the men who began the revolution in 1954. For the few Algerians who took up arms against France in November 1954, the most probable result of their desperate actions was failure. Nor is it difficult to imagine ways in which France might have greatly increased her chances of holding on to her most valuable African colony. But the thrust of history in the postwar world was toward decolonization, and French leaders finally bowed to this powerful fact as much as they did to the pressures brought to bear by the Algerian revolutionaries. De Gaulle, one of the main architects of Algerian independence, had foreseen as early as 1944 that Algeria would one day become a separate nation from France. But despite his repeated recognition of this fact in private, it was not until September 1959 that he put forward his plan for self-determination in Algeria.⁸

Algeria became an independent nation on July 5, 1962. With the end of the war in Algeria, the attention of people around the world no longer focused on that war-ravaged country. Its leaders' efforts to build a nation out of the society and economy they inherited have been largely ignored. But in a deep sense the consequences of colonialism and revolution in Algeria are best seen in the independent nation formed by these two forces.

The leaders of the Algerian revolution and of independent Algeria are still acting out the lessons they have drawn from their past. And yet these lessons have been so different for individual Algerian leaders that little consensus exists on how the country should be governed, how power should be used, and how political relationships should be ordered.

If Algerian society today is not quite the "human dust" of an earlier era, it is certainly far from being stable or capable of directing sustained efforts toward development and growth. At least part of the stagnation which so dominated Algerian life in the late 1960s was the result of the debilitating conflicts that had divided members of the political elite from at least 1954 to 1968. This has been both the least anticipated and the most persistent legacy of colonialism and revolution. The Algerian people have had little understanding of or sympathy with these internecine disputes.

With deeper examination one can trace the roots of most intra-elite divisiveness to the events of the past four decades in Algeria.

⁸ See Jean Lacouture, *De Gaulle*, p. 178.

What appears from such a survey is a picture of many highly motivated men struggling to cope, against great odds, with problems affecting the central values of their society. In this process numerous groups developed distinct strategies of political action, no two of which were fully compatible. Revolution brought these groups together in common cause but also served to deepen the differences that had grown up among them. Independence permitted the full expression of these contrasting views of political reality, but soon tolerance for diversity was replaced by dominance of the powerful who saw in the nation's needs the basis for their claim to legitimacy. No doubt it will be many years before Algerians are able to face the present without constant reference to their traumatic past. An explanation of how that past has impinged upon the men who have been responsible for leading Algeria is thus a first step toward understanding contemporary Algerian politics.