

Algeria's colonial history revisited

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On June 13th 1830, 675 French ships carrying 37,000 troops, dropped anchor in the bay of Sidi Ferruch, due west of what was then the capital of the Regency of Algiers. The expedition commanded by the minister of war of King Charles X of France, the General Comte de Bourmont had been sent, ostensibly to punish the *dey* of Algiers for having hit the French consul with his fly whisk: relations had soured between Husayn Pacha and Pierre Deval, reaching breaking point when the French government failed to respond to letters from the *dey* demanding repayment of the grain debt incurred to provision Napoleon Bonaparte's military campaigns in Italy and Egypt between 1793 and 1798.

Having failed to restore absolutism to the French monarchy and suspended the Constitutional Charter, The King and his prime minister, the Prince of Polignac, gambled that a foreign adventure might rally public opinion behind the throne ahead of elections due in July 1830. The French took Algiers in June but the news arrived too late in Paris to prevent the fall of the elder Bourbon branch. Thus Algeria was intertwined with the domestic politics of France from the start – in 1958, the Algerian war of independence brought down the Fourth Republic and brought to power General de Gaulle. It was the only 19th century colony to which the invading power owed money; it was the only 19th French colony which was split into three French *départements* and settled by a large number of Europeans, the majority of whom were of Spanish and Italian descent.

Un siècle de passions algériennes : histoire de l'Algérie coloniale 1830-1940ⁱ reads like a thriller. Detailed descriptions of economic and social events, famines, locust's invasions, rebellions etc make it a compelling read. The range of subjects the author covers in crisp short chapters is worthy of note; he also brings to life this quarrelsome mosaic of people, the sheer beauty of the country, the harshness of the treatment meted out to the native people by the new rulers, the absolute refusal of the settlers to ever consider the Arabs and Berbers as equals, let alone worthy of respect. The reputation of the *patrie des droits de l'homme* is not enhanced by Pierre Daumon's masterpiece.

Two features of French rule

Two features of French rule stand out, the first of which is the extreme violence which accompanied the actions of the army and, after 1871 of the settlers when civilian rule was established. It took forty years to beat the less than 2 million natives of 1830 into submission. General Bugeaud pursued a scorched earth policy, burning villages, driving away cattle, destroying harvests, uprooting orchards and poisoning well; land was expropriated on a massive

scale, whole towns like Constantine destroyed. Meanwhile the Arabs and Berbers turned to the son of the head of the Qadiriya Sufi order of western Algeria, Abd al-Qadir, whom they proclaimed *amir*, to lead them in a wholly war against the French. There followed one of the most remarkable careers in the modern history of the Middle East and North Africa. For fifteen years from 1832 when he was appointed at the age of 32 Abd al-Kadir led the resistance of the tribes against one of the most powerful armies in the world and went on to become a legend in his lifetime, in the Arab world and in the West.

After years of being imprisoned in France after he surrendered in 1847, the emir was received with all due honours by Emperor Napoleon Third and given a state pension by France. In 1860 when living in Damascus he helped save the lives of many Christians during riots – Abraham Lincoln, the Pope and the Ottoman Sultan all paid homage to this man who was immensely pious yet a freemason, upright to the extreme, curious of everything western and attended the opening of the Suez Canal. After 1832 he pursued a remarkably intelligent war, raising enough money from taxes to arm 8000 regular infantry, 2000 cavalry and 240 artillerymen with 20 canons; he sought to draw the French forces inland and fought very effective guerrilla warfare. All along he was helped by his close English friend, John Churchill whom he met again as British Consul General in Beirut in 1860. Abd al-Kadir's effort to forge a modern state were however doomed when face with the sheer might of the French army.

Daumon does not quite do justice to the emir, nor does the author of another sympathetic but slightly sketchy book, the first to appear in English on the emir in many years. In *The Life and Times of Emir Abd el-Kader, A story of true jihad*ⁱⁱ John W. Kiser draws a sympathetic portrait of this extraordinary character that deserves to be better known outside a narrow circle of university specialists outside Algeria and France. This book is easy to read and offers a good introduction to the aftermath of the early years of French colonial rule in Algeria but the author sometimes fails to convey the sheer complexity of the man and the broader canvass of events which swirled around him. This is a pity as recent scholarship has offered many new insights into the character and life of this exceptionally talented Sufi leader, so intent of dialoguing with Christian Europe: but Christian Europe was otherwise engaged, too busy constructing the racist theories which would prevail a few decades later and in the early 20th century and help destroy Europe's hegemony worldwide. The emir is revered today in Algeria as the "father" of the nation. In the current mood of near hysteria in the West about "radical Islam" reading about Abd al-Kadir restores one's faith in the worth of serious religious thought and practice. One could also wish Algeria and the broader Maghreb boasted a leader with half the vision and piety of the emir.

Turning back to the conquest, Darmon notes that in 1866-68 a combination of locusts, drought and typhus cost Algeria 17% of its native population, which dropped from 2.9 to 2.1 people. European settlers were not spared by these calamities but they never died of hunger as the natives did by the tens of thousands – many died of hunger as late as the winter of 1947-48. The Europeans showed a callous lack of interest in the fate of their Muslim neighbours who had become, in the words of the famous French anthropologist writing in the 1930's "mere shadows in their former land." They were like clouds floating across an empty landscape. France may well have wiped out smallpox by massive vaccination campaigns, it may well have built modern towns, railways and ports but the natives were simply not part of that modern picture. In 1930, 7% of all native children attended school!

The second ugly feature of French colonial Algeria was the wave of anti-Semitism which swept the major cities in the 1890s during the Dreyfus Affair. Native Jews had been granted French citizenship in 1871 yet ugly scenes involving settlers and natives were witnessed in Constantine, Oran and Algiers, scenes which were to be repeated in the 1930s, when the mayor of Oran, a clergyman of Spanish origin would preach against the Jews from the pulpit. Colonial Algeria was the laboratory for modern anti-Semitism, a fact which is largely ignored in the West. The European settler's fear of the recently "assimilated" Jews indicated a fear of any further assimilation of natives. Most settlers were hell bent on denying native Algerians, with very few exceptions, anything resembling equal rights with their European neighbours: this remained true even as thousands of native Muslims gave their life to defend France in 1870, 1914-18 and 1940-45. Anything more removed from the ideals of *liberté, fraternité, égalité* is difficult to imagine.

ⁱ Pierre Daumon *Un siècle de passions algériennes, Une Histoire de l'Algérie Coloniale 1830-1940* Fayard 2009

ⁱⁱ John W. Kiser *The Life and Times of Emir Abd el-Kader, A story of true Jihad* Monkfish Book Publishing Company 2009