

The Failure of Progress

Algeria and the Crisis of the Colonial World

It is true that most of our people are still illiterate. But politically that counts far less than it did twenty years ago. . . . Radio has changed everything. . . . Today people in the most remote villages hear of what is happening everywhere and form their opinions. Leaders cannot govern as they once did. We live in a new world.

Gamal Abdel Nasser ¹

Asia and Africa could potentially form a union capable first of transforming the colonial problem—in countries which still submit to European allegiance—into a problem of European minorities in countries which have gained their autonomy and are capable, furthermore, of changing the face of the world.

These perspectives can only convince European nations to abandon their petty squabbles. Otherwise they will not even be left the choice of the sauce with which they will be eaten.

Maurice Papon, *secrétaire général*, French Protectorate of Morocco ²

In 1952 the French government of Algeria commissioned a study of local conditions based on a questionnaire given to the heads of every commune—the smallest administrative unit. The responses came back over the following two years and covered a broad array of issues, ranging from Islamic reformism to immigration, from population growth to nationalist parties. As they compiled these answers, the authors of “Algeria at Mid-Century” were mainly concerned with the perennial question of political reform: whether it was possible to assimilate Muslims as citizens, in this case by abolishing the old system of “mixed communes,” which subjected them to military administration. But this report leads one to question whether any reform could have kept Algeria French. Quite unconsciously, its authors had cataloged all the main causes of the coming revolt.³

From the perspective of colonial authorities, the greatest problem facing French Algeria was the increasing preponderance of its Muslim

population. Aside from a temporary surge during the Spanish Civil War, relatively few Europeans settled in Algeria after the turn of the century. Their numbers rose from 833,000 in 1926 to 984,000 by 1954, a natural rate of increase of about one percent a year. The Muslim population, on the other hand, was growing twice as fast by the eve of war, rising from just over 5 million to 8,546,000 in the same period (not including the 300,000 working in France).⁴ Between 1900 and 1954, average death rates in the Muslim population fell from 24–27 to 17.5 per thousand. At the same time, birth rates remained high, rising to 42–44 per thousand in 1954—2.5 times the rate for Europeans.⁵

French officials not only possessed precise data on the scale of this problem, they also understood its principal causes. As the chief of Tizi-Ouzou commune explained:

We cannot rely upon “natural selection” which could operate when the country was abundantly “taxed” by illness, insecurity, and war. Today security is total, the average life expectancy has considerably risen, epidemics have disappeared, and families are growing with typical oriental abandon.⁶

Insecticides, vaccines, and antibiotics had indeed succeeded in stamping out plague and curbing cholera, typhus, and malaria, though public health programs were for the benefit of the colonists more than the Muslims. As the Scientific Congress of Algiers declared in honoring the French Army doctor, François Clément Maillot, who pioneered the use of quinine, “It is thanks to Maillot that Algeria has become a French land; it is he who closed and sealed forever this tomb of Christians” (a statement that reads altogether differently in the light of subsequent events).⁷

The improved health and subsequent growth of the Muslim population inspired a palpable sense of foreboding among French officials. The one in Phillippeville found himself “isolated among 41,000 still primitive Muslims whose reactions are often unpredictable and violent.”⁸ All but three hundred Europeans had sold their land and moved to the cities. His colleague in the Kellermann commune reported that its thirty European families “feel literally absorbed by the indigenous mass, and they do not hide their pessimism. Kellermann,” he concluded, “is a dying center.”⁹

For Europeans the distress was psychological. For Muslims, population growth in combination with a transformation of the rural economy produced physical suffering on an appalling scale. Since the passage in the nineteenth century of property laws intended to disorganize Muslim society—and resistance—and free up land for settlement, a system of joint control by tribes, families, and religious foundations had been replaced by individual ownership.¹⁰ Over time, those lands not consolidated by the colonists or more prosperous Muslims were typically divided and subdivided until they could no longer support their owners. While a family needed an estimated 12 to 20 hectares to stave off malnutrition, by 1950 70 percent had less than 10. The top 2 percent of the rural population, on the other hand, controlled a quarter of the cultivable land. They typ-

ically benefited from credit and irrigation programs to produce crops for export.¹¹

Poorer Muslims sometimes found seasonal work on the large estates, but the mechanization of agriculture reduced demand for their labor. From 1934 to 1954, the number of tractors increased fourfold, and combine harvesters multiplied by seven—each of the latter replacing a hundred hired hands. By 1954, half of the working-age population in the countryside was usually unemployed. Moreover, intensive cultivation—especially as it expanded into forests and the pastoral lands of the high plains and steppe—led to exhausted soil and ruinous erosion.¹² As one administrator concluded with Malthusian fatalism: “While humans multiply, the soil’s yield is regressing. . . . This is the eternal problem of overpopulated and poor countries.”¹³

In fact, the problem was not “eternal,” but man-made. Property transfers, population growth, and changing modes of production—each caused or conditioned by colonial policies—degraded the living standards of most Muslims along with the lands that had once supported them. This rural crisis also eroded the foundations of French rule. The exodus of small-scale European farmers from the countryside deprived the administration of eyes and ears. Moreover, replacing tenant farmers with wage laborers or even farm machinery broke traditional bonds of patronage between landowners and the local population.¹⁴ “Today calm prevails everywhere,” observed the head of Fedj M’zala. “But the barely evolved, very fanatic population is always susceptible to follow the least reasonable movement.”¹⁵

Who then would lead the uprising that so many officials had come to see as inevitable? For most, “the least reasonable movement” was the Association of Muslim Algerian *‘Ulama*, or religious scholars. Beginning at the turn of the century, they had sought to restore their moral authority by regaining control of training and appointments from the French and imposing orthodoxy on popular practices. The movement’s leadership came from older, declining towns like Constantine, Tlemcen, and Nedroma and had their strongest support among the middling peasants.¹⁶ The head of Akbou commune spoke for many of his colleagues when he asserted that the *‘ulama* “represent the stable base upon which nationalist and panislamist sentiments develop. . . . Their action is so insidious, flexible and rigorous at the same time. They are certainly our most dangerous enemies.”¹⁷

The image of Islam as the basis of opposition to French rule was an old idea that served a continuing need: opposition to colonialism could in this way be made to appear as xenophobia, nationalism as fanaticism, revolution as *jihad*.¹⁸ While the Islamic influence on the development of Algerian nationalism cannot be dismissed as a colonialist canard, it was far more complex than most of the French imagined. Some historians have suggested that the real roots of national resistance are to be found not among the *‘ulama*—politically cautious and socially conservative—but

their doctrinal opponents, the Sufis, who were leading populist revolts even under the Turks. The 'ulama fully shared the administrators' disdain for the religious mysticism exemplified by the Sufis and their veneration of holy men, the marabouts.¹⁹

Yet, on a more basic level, if France's difficulty in Algeria was not the "irrationalism" of Algerian Muslims but rather their refusal to become French, then the 'ulama were undoubtedly part of the problem. Since the 1930s 'ulama schools, circles, and associations had taught a generation to proclaim, "Islam is my religion, Arabic is my language, Algeria is my fatherland." Though they distinguished between the cultural and political spheres and disavowed any ambition to overthrow the colonial regime, their successful defense of a distinct Algerian nation was sufficient to cast the most serious doubts on the future of French Algeria. As their leader, Abd al-Hamid Ben Badis, defiantly affirmed: "[T]his Algerian Muslim nation is not France; it is not possible that it be France; it does not want to become France; and even if it wished, it could not be France."²⁰

If the 'ulama wanted to have nothing to do with the French, some administrators made clear the feeling was mutual: "This people, who has known different masters, has not modified its way of life," complained the chief of Clauzel commune. "Primitive morals and customs remain. Development is mediocre. No elite. Development manifests itself particularly in the (anti-French) political arena. Very easily influenced character: mistrustful, fatalistic, prone to lie, and above all, to steal."²¹ Such sentiments could be expressed in this kind of shorthand because they were so widespread, but they spoke volumes about the attitude of many administrators toward their *mission civilisatrice*.

More enlightened officials bemoaned the mutual incomprehension and mistrust characterizing relations between Muslims and Europeans, blaming *colon* racism and the lack of contact between the two communities.²² But would integration inevitably lead to mutual tolerance? The question was critical since an increasing number of Muslims were migrating to the cities, where four out of five *peu noirs* lived in 1954. By then Muslims made up 60 percent of the population of the thirty largest cities and towns, with one-third living in *bidonvilles*, or shantytowns.²³

The famed French anthropologist Jacques Berque later produced a vivid portrait of this growing population and the menace it appeared to pose to Algeria's cities: "Far from the elegant crowd, the well-stocked shops, the lit-up districts, some other crowds move about, infinitely larger, in districts infinitely less bright. Behind the hills, in the curves of the ravines . . . a powerful and miserable life has been gathering . . ."²⁴ Part of what made *les misérables* seem so powerful was that they did not integrate themselves into an urban way of life but instead appeared to settle and organize themselves as tribes with no regular source of income. In 1962, Berque's colleague Pierre Bourdieu found that it was impossible to categorize their lives as traditional or capitalist—indeed, they existed entirely outside this framework of analysis.²⁵ The administrators saw it as

much more than an intellectual challenge. One warned that it was imperative to "slow the creation of an uncontrollable and miserable urban proletariat, easily drawn into turbulence."²⁶ In fact, the authorities periodically bulldozed *bidonvilles* and trucked their inhabitants out to the country. But their places were quickly taken by new arrivals, who set up their cardboard and tin-can constructions in the very heart of the city. Some of those lucky enough to find an apartment lived fifteen or sixteen to a room.²⁷

If there was any hope of turning these peasants into Frenchmen, it rested in the schools. Yet due to the initial resistance of some Muslims and the continuing objections of the *peu noirs*, only a small portion of non-Europeans ever received a French education—less than 9 percent in 1944. Most attended separate classes with high student-teacher ratios and low standards. In 1935, for instance, classes for Muslims averaged eighty-three students—hardly an ideal atmosphere for imparting an appreciation of French civilization. Though Muslim parents had begun to clamor for an improved and expanded school system in the interwar years, 80 percent of outlays for education continued to go to Europeans, who made up just 14 percent of the population.²⁸ Thus, if the 'ulama were "the true school of North African nationalism," as the administrator in Bourd-Bou-Arredj complained, the reason may have been that so few other schools were open.²⁹

In 1944 de Gaulle's provisional government finally initiated a crash program to educate more Muslims. But even after ten years, only 13 percent of boys were enrolled in primary schools while 86 percent of the adult male population remained illiterate. Among women it was even worse: only one-fifth as many attended school and just one in twenty could read, further limiting the French influence on Muslim families.³⁰ Some administrators recognized this as both a problem and an opportunity. As the head of Cassaigne commune argued, "Women are more accessible to our civilization and our customs than men. They could constitute a remarkable channel for French action and propaganda." (In fact, Algerian women would come to see education as a "channel for action" against the French.)³¹

Some Muslims did manage to attend integrated schools and a few even pursued more advanced studies—6,260 in lycées and 589 at the University of Algiers in 1954, with another 200 going to universities in the metropole. But that year, there were still just 28 non-European engineers, 185 secondary school teachers, 354 lawyers and notaries, and 165 doctors, dentists, and pharmacists in all of Algeria. Altogether, this professional class accounted for less than one in ten thousand Muslims.³² And even they could not all be counted as converts to the *mission civilisatrice*. The majority came from modest backgrounds and had received a traditional Muslim upbringing. Outnumbered 10 or 20 to 1 in their classes at the University of Algiers, they were the most likely to encounter European racism and official condescension. Even those who renounced their

separate legal status in order to acquire French citizenship typically returned to the *shariah*, or Islamic law, for marriage and inheritance.³³

Nevertheless, while much of this elite was privately ambivalent about their cultural identity, publicly most kept faith with France. The Young Algerian movement, which emerged after the turn of the century among these *évolués*—as the more “evolved” or “advanced” elements were called—eventually divided between those who accepted full French citizenship and those who wanted all Muslims to have that status without appearing to renounce Islam. None questioned the goal of assimilation. The history of their efforts to expand Muslim voting, educational, and employment opportunities is protracted and complex. But it never amounted to more than halting, incremental progress because of the *pièdes noirs*’ powerful lobby in the National Assembly. In 1936, they forced even the Popular Front government of Léon Blum to withdraw support for a bill that would have extended suffrage to a small minority of Muslim soldiers, professionals, and public employees.³⁴

French historians have long treated the defeat of the Blum-Viollette bill as a turning point—the point at which *pièd noir* intransigence completely discredited loyal Muslim opposition. But this interpretation draws a false distinction between colonialism and the colonists, as if there was some essential—and essentially good—idea of French Algeria that existed apart from its historical reality. The prospect of a reformed society that would afford equal opportunities to all was important to the self-image of *évolués* and their supporter and was the centerpiece of French wartime propaganda. But in retrospect—and from the perspective of the vast majority of Muslims and *pièdes noirs* at the time—*Algérie française* would then have lost its *raison d’être*.³⁵

The North African Star

One group of Muslims opposed the Blum-Viollette bill from the beginning, Messali Hadj’s North African Star (*Etoile Nord-Africaine*, or ENA), which succeeded the *‘ulama* and the *évolués* in leading the opposition. Messali had the most support not in the countryside nor the cities of Algeria, where he was little known before 1936, but among North African workers in France. Like their *évolué* counterparts in French classrooms, Muslim *émigrés* came to a new consciousness of their second-class status through direct exposure to France—beginning with restrictions on immigration imposed during economic downturns.³⁶ It was not until after 1944—when Muslims became citizens and could circulate more freely to the metropole—that emigration really started to increase. By 1949, there were about two hundred thousand living in France and by the eve of war nearly three hundred thousand—more than the entire Muslim workforce in Algeria’s own cities. Here, too, Algerians tended to settle according to their place of origin, with a particular *quartier* in Paris populated by the former inhabitants of a particular Berber village.³⁷

The vast majority of these immigrants were men who were unmarried or had left their families behind, supporting them with their remittances before returning after a few years. In some cases, their earnings enabled them to purchase new properties, and in that way the area of land sold by colonists to Muslims after 1940 began to exceed that sold by Muslims to colonists.³⁸ But French administrators were most concerned about the cultural impact of crossing the Mediterranean. As one complained: “Few return satisfied or wealthy. On the other hand, they bring with them rather harmful social and political ideas.”³⁹

What were these ideas? Since the time of Toussaint L’Ouverture, colonialists had found that the most dangerous ideas were French ideals, which appeared radical when applied irrespective of race and religion.⁴⁰ Many of the items on the ENA’s first list of demands—equal access to education, application of French social legislation to Algeria, abolition of the discriminatory *code d’indigénat*, universal suffrage, freedom of press and association—reflected the republican principles of equal rights and responsibilities. In this respect, they did not differ from the *évolués*. On the other hand, Messali also called for the creation of Arabic language schools like the *‘ulama* before him. And along with the Communists, who originally encouraged him to form the ENA before he repudiated the party over its complaisance toward colonialism, he favored confiscating the big estates and nationalizing banks and industry. The originality of Messali’s ENA was to incorporate the desiderata of all the other opposition groups and, unlike any of them, demand independence from the beginning. For this reason, the authorities banned it in 1937 but it quickly regrouped as the Parti du Peuple Algérien (PPA). As Muslims traveled to and from France in growing numbers, the PPA became the dominant nationalist movement on both sides of the Mediterranean.⁴¹

In the course of World War II, France’s loss of prestige, the sacrifices of Muslim soldiers, and economic hardships all raised expectations of reform. In March 1943, the new leader of the moderate opposition, Ferhat Abbas, drafted a “Manifesto of the Algerian People” which echoed many of the ENA’s original demands. A year later, de Gaulle abolished the *code d’indigénat* and accorded Muslim men citizenship and universal suffrage, though they would still elect only half the National Assembly delegation.⁴²

By now Muslims had come to expect much more. In March 1945, the PPA managed to take over a meeting of Abbas’s *Amis du Manifeste et de la Liberté* and force through resolutions favoring an Algerian government and proclaiming Messali “the uncontested leader of the Algerian people.” French authorities then deported him amid rumors that the United Nations conference, which was shortly to convene in San Francisco, would declare Algeria independent. The nationalists associated themselves with American anticolonialism and scheduled celebratory marches for V-E Day. These quickly turned into bloody clashes in the towns of Guelma and Sétif, and for the following week Muslims attacked European settlements in the surrounding areas. More than a hundred *pièdes*

noirs were killed as the authorities unleashed a ferocious repression, including aerial bombardment, naval gunfire, and summary executions. The PPA belatedly called for a general revolt, which succeeded only in increasing the casualties.⁴³ In the aftermath, one high official in Algiers, Commissaire Bergé, judged that "if instead of facing local and uncoordinated uprisings we had clashed with a general and well-organized insurrection . . . few French people would have made it back to the Metropole."⁴⁴

No one knows exactly how many Muslims perished. French historians speak of six thousand to eight thousand, Algerians put the figure at forty-five thousand. At the time Bergé and the rest of the French administration in Algeria preferred not to know. He acknowledged that they could "dig up some bodies" and punish wrongdoers, but only the nationalists and France's British and American rivals would benefit: "[W]e should ask ourselves if the country is capable of withstanding this dose of truth," he concluded, "if the cure is not worse than the disease."⁴⁵

Instead, local authorities resorted to a more traditional remedy. Ten days later, an Interior Ministry informant described how the militia and gendarmes of Guelma were using Italian POWs to disinter and burn some five hundred corpses of Muslims who had been summarily executed—more than three times the official death toll. And rather than acting in the heat of battle, as was claimed at the time, the militia had actually rounded up Muslim political activists using lists provided by the local Gendarmerie. They had hoped to ensure secrecy by shooting one of the truck drivers *pour encourager les autres*.⁴⁶ Perhaps emboldened by this evidence—and harried by the Communists in the Assembly—Interior Minister Adrien Tixier pressed for action on complaints filed by families of the slain. The administration in Algiers then put Commissaire Bergé—the very same Bergé who had ruled out any serious inquiry—in charge of monitoring the investigation. The Interior Ministry finally dropped the matter.⁴⁷

PPA militants regrouped as the *Mouvement pour le Triomphe des Libertés Démocratiques* (MTLD) and won municipal elections across Algeria.⁴⁸ Indeed, by January 1948 the new interior minister, Jules Moch, was worried that the nationalists might be voted into power. The previous year the National Assembly had finally passed a new statute for Algeria that established a local assembly. Its powers were limited, however; the *peuple noir* minority was guaranteed half the seats, and all measures required a two-thirds vote. Even so, Moch took no chances. In a letter to the prime minister, Robert Schuman, he advised against dissolving the MTLD outright since it "would have a bad effect abroad." Instead, he would back progovernment candidates wherever possible, favor Abbas's new *Union Démocratique du Manifeste Algérien* (UDMA) everywhere else, and block or arrest all MTLD candidates.⁴⁹ Along with blatant fraud, this succeeded in electing "Beni oui-ouis"—or Muslim yes-men—to forty-one of sixty seats. Subsequent elections were also spurious, and the assembly proved to be all but powerless. Similarly, five years after the statute mandated the abolition of "mixed communes," which did not display even the same

balance of democracy—French authorities were still debating the matter. By that point, even Abbas concluded that "there is no other solution but the machine-gun."⁵⁰

Of course, Abbas and the UDMA would not be the ones to wield it. Only the MTLD had a force prepared for armed revolt, the *Organisation Spéciale* (OS), counting one thousand to fifteen hundred members by 1950. But that year a French crackdown completely dismantled it.⁵¹ Moreover, the MTLD had already been weakened by the so-called Berberist crisis. Constituting some 25 percent of Algeria's population, the Berbers descend from the earliest inhabitants of North Africa—that is, predating the influx of Arabic-speaking peoples in the seventh and eleventh centuries. Concentrated in the densely populated, impoverished areas of Kabylia and the Aurès mountains, they were the first to emigrate to the metropole and many more settled in Algerian cities. French authorities favored them with the first schools, and a disproportionate number served as minor officials. Nevertheless, Berbers were also heavily represented among France's enemies, sustaining the only effective *maquis* after the dissolution of the OS, and producing many of the FLN's outstanding leaders—another example of how increasing integration through urbanization, education, and emigration undermined colonial control. On the other hand, they also suffered Messali's wrath for resisting his emphasis on Arabism and Islam, instead favoring a less exclusive, more secular Algerian identity.⁵²

Though Berber-Arab tensions would resurface during the war for independence and afterward, this was not the most important issue among Algerians in the preceding years. Instead, members of the MTLD disagreed on the question of whether it was best to continue political opposition, cooperate with the colonial administration, or reconstitute a paramilitary organization—and whether Messali would make this decision by himself. After years of failure in both elections and armed resistance, the MTLD could no longer abide his autocratic style, epitomized by his election as president for life in July 1954. Most of the Central Committee broke away and began to plan a broad coalition with other parties.⁵³

A third faction, led by former OS members, rejected both Messali's personality cult and the Centralists' politicking. They proclaimed their program with the very name of their group: the *Comité Révolutionnaire d'Unité et d'Action* (CRUA), which was rechristened the FLN after they launched the war for independence. But this was neither a clean break nor a radical departure. As Mohammed Harbi argues, the Front shared with their former comrades in the MTLD "the same preoccupations, the same political itinerary, the same social base" and were indebted to all of the pre-1954 nationalist movements for their ideas.⁵⁴ They eventually inherited many of the followers of Messali, the more upwardly mobile Centralists, the assimilationist UDMA, and the 'ulama, too.⁵⁵

The CRUA militants always hoped that other nationalists would rally to their cause, though in 1954 they could not have counted on it. But as

pessimistic. One of the most striking facts brought out in "Algeria at Mid-Century" is the failure, even before the war, of these officials to distinguish between the "extremist parties"—equating the UDMA and the *ulama*, accusing the PPA of inciting religious intolerance, and so on. Many of the administrators assumed that Muslim society as a whole was merely awaiting the opportunity to throw off French rule. Thus, one could already foresee "the day when, in overwhelming masses, carefully prepared and hardened elements will unmask themselves . . . and seek to overthrow the tricolored flag in this territory, following the example of Indochina, whose evolution is observed here with great interest."⁵⁶

Part of the administrators' pessimism was doubtless due to their experience in Vietnam—and Morocco, and Tunisia—where nationalists had constructed broad coalitions against French rule. But how were Muslims in Algeria able to follow events as far away as Indochina? Though the vast majority were still illiterate, by the 1950s they could hear radio broadcasts in cafes across Algeria, with battery-powered models reaching even the most remote villages. Ironically, French authorities had pioneered the use of radio in the 1920s as a cheaper, more reliable alternative to submarine cables for communicating with their colonies in Africa and Indochina.⁵⁷ Now this same technology guaranteed that their defeat at Dien Bien Phu would be announced instantaneously in every part of the empire. The news arrived on the same day the CRUA had its first full meeting and helped to persuade them to begin planning the November uprising.⁵⁸

The ironies of the Algerian case exemplify the larger history of decolonization, in which the more advanced "tools of empire"—insecticides, combine harvesters, radio—became the mechanisms of its demise; "development" simultaneously weakened and sustained a subsistence economy while creating an intolerable burden for the metropole; and exposure to Western ideas inspired demands for both the realization of liberal rhetoric and a renewal and reassertion of indigenous cultures. In these conditions French administrators began to lose their sense of direction and a few even wanted to shift into reverse. One suggested that they reform traditional marabout schools, arguing that, "[a]fter having been our most bitter adversaries, the 'marabouts' have in general become our best auxiliaries." Another agreed that encouraging the particularism of the Sufi brotherhoods was their best defense against pan-Islamism. Others questioned whether improved standards of living would really lower fertility rates or whether additional social services in the cities might not simply encourage more Muslims to migrate. One even wondered whether they ought not to let "natural selection" among infants produce a hardier (and smaller) Muslim population. While the head of La Meskiana commune was still confident that a new influx of colonists could make Algeria truly French within ten years, others were actually considering the resettlement of Algerian Muslims in underpopulated parts of France.⁵⁹ With officials proposing the promotion of Sufism and local saints, the deliberate ele-

vation of infant mortality, and reverse colonization, the *mission civilisatrice* had begun to seem a little mad.⁶⁰

What ailed the colonial project were not just its "internal contradictions" and unintended consequences. It also suffered from the discrediting of the ideas that had long separated ruler and ruled and legitimated imperial power. In the aftermath of Nazi atrocities, explicitly racist justifications were no longer acceptable.⁶¹ French authorities could—and would—continue to justify their rule based on seemingly objective technical and economic criteria, arguing that Algeria's development depended on its continued cooperation with France. During the war, the "civilizing mission" was recast as a "modernizing mission." Yet this position was also problematic, and not just because subscribing to a universalist model of modernization undermined their claim to a particular vocation in Algeria.⁶² The underlying problem for French authorities and eventually the Algerians, too, was much deeper. To uncover it Algeria must be viewed in the wider context of the colonial world.

The Crisis of the Colonial World

The Algerian War came at the crest of a wave of anticolonial insurgencies that presented both challenges and opportunities to the two superpowers. Yet until Khrushchev, Stalinist dogma hobbled Soviet diplomacy, posing as it did that any nationalist movement not led by Communists was the tool of local bourgeoisie and foreign capital. As Anastas Mikoyan scathingly remarked to the members of the Soviet Institute of Oriental Studies in 1956, "[A]lthough in our day the whole East has awakened, this institute is still sleeping."⁶³ Similarly, George C. Marshall was awed by the unrest sweeping the colonial world:

We are in the middle of a world revolution—and I don't mean Communism. The Communists are . . . just moving in on the crest of a wave. The revolution I'm talking about is that of the little people all over the world. They're beginning to learn what there is in life, and to learn what they are missing.⁶⁴

American social scientists were quicker than their Soviet counterparts to respond to the demand for "development" or "modernization" theory, and their work became conventional wisdom in France as well as the United States.⁶⁵

Like Marshall, most theorists were confident that what Third World peoples wanted was to grow up—that is, to become more modern, "more like us." It was therefore up to the West to steady them through their growing pains. Implicit in the "little people" imagery and modernization theory's more sophisticated schema of "stages of economic growth" was the conviction that they could not *interact* with outside influences but could only adhere to tradition or accept modernity through either its capitalist or communist variants—though most Western observers thought the latter would eventually be proved fraudulent. They were

oblivious to the tautology inherent in arguing that "the Western model of modernization" was universally relevant since all modernizing societies were—by definition—becoming more Western.⁶⁶

While modernization theory generated a vast literature, perhaps the quintessential work was Daniel Lerner's *The Passing of Traditional Society*, which studied the impact of new means of mass communications in six Middle Eastern countries.⁶⁷ Lerner believed that the ability to empathize, to imagine oneself in the place of another, was the mark of modernity. Like other development theorists, he stressed radio's role in teaching Third World peoples "what there is in life," which he defined as what the West had to offer. Dangers were inherent in the resulting "revolution in rising expectations," but at least the direction of progress was clear: the new media raised expectations, and economic and social development would meet them. It remained only to balance the demand and supply sides of development and measure with "empathy indexes" and statistical analyses the rate of advance along the road to modernity.

In 1951, Lerner's survey teams found that radio and film had begun to reach broad sections of Middle Eastern societies. In Egypt, for instance, 78 percent of workers reported listening to radios every day and 45 percent said that they attended movies weekly. Among farmers, 42 percent heard radio broadcasts daily, while more than half went to the movies once or twice a month. What they heard and saw, however, did not just come from the *Voice of America* and Hollywood. In this period, the Cairo-based *Voice of the Arabs* became the most popular service in the region, reaching listeners from Morocco to Iraq. Beginning in 1953, the service coordinated its broadcasts with North African nationalists, and it announced the rebels' "proclamation to the Algerian people" on the first day of the revolt.⁶⁸ By 1956, the FLN had its own *Voice of Algeria* broadcasting from clandestine transmitters just beyond its borders. Muslims responded by buying up every transistor radio in the markets. French authorities tried to control sales and then turned to jamming transmissions but with only intermittent success. As the famed FLN theorist and diplomat Frantz Fanon observed: "[T]he purchase of a radio in Algeria has meant, not the adoption of a modern technique for getting news, but the obtaining of access to the only means of entering into communication with the Revolution."⁶⁹

Egypt's movie industry also radiated its influence throughout the region. In Algeria alone, over two hundred and fifty Egyptian films had been granted import licenses by 1956 for screening in the nearly one thousand movie houses across the country.⁷⁰ Though devoid of overt political content, authorities came to fear that they were one of the principal vehicles for the spread of Arab nationalism. However anodyne and inoffensive, they subverted French rule by representing a "supposedly free and modern" Arab society.⁷¹

After being refused any new import licenses, the Egyptians began producing pro-FLN films like *Djamila Bouhired*, which celebrated an ur-

ban guerrilla who hid bombs in her handbag before being captured and tortured by French soldiers. Instead of simply rejecting European influence, the film's hero is taught that French education "is a weapon we shall use against our enemies." Likewise, the film's protagonists mobilize the international media and arouse world opinion to save Bouhired from execution.⁷² Paris tried to ban its foreign distribution but had little success.⁷³ The French responded by training Muslims to make Arabic language films following the official line. But almost all of those selected for an accelerated course defected and began producing FLN propaganda films instead, parts of which eventually appeared on American television.⁷⁴

Of course, the French possessed powerful means of propagating their own message and waged "psychological warfare" with unprecedented intensity. They were particularly effective in controlling the print media within Algeria, seizing left and liberal newspapers from the metropole and banning over a hundred foreign publications. By 1957, no independent Arabic-language newspaper remained in the country.⁷⁵ But rumor, or the "Arab telephone," could reinterpret the official line and rally resistance. In 1954, one Muslim remembered hearing "that there was no longer any French army; that it had been destroyed in Indo-China." When the *Voice of the Arabs* broadcast assurances of Arab solidarity after the start of the war, some of their audience began to speak of a seventy thousand-man Egyptian army descending on Algeria. Nationalist leaders eventually found it necessary—but difficult—to discourage their compatriots from placing their hopes in an international intervention. Muslims were not, therefore, mere receptors of the propaganda of either side, but rather active participants in a creative process that reimagined Algeria and its people as a concern of the wider world. In this way, radio and rumor together formed a nervous system that connected colonized peoples and encouraged a new consciousness of their common condition and the possibilities of collective action.⁷⁶

Arabs' use of new communications technologies posed a conceptual problem for modernization theory, especially given their message. Lerner complained that in Egypt the *Voice of the Arabs* "unleashed the violent xenophobia of fanatics while silencing the voices of modern rationality." In North Africa, it "became a major relay in the chain-reaction of assassination and mob violence through the area." Even in the languages of Pakistan and Indonesia, it preached Nasser's theme of "Islamic World Power," while in Swahili it called for a renewal of the Mau Mau revolt against white rule "not only in Kenya but in the entire continent . . . until Africa belongs to the Africans." Measured by radio listenership, film attendance, and rising expectations, Asians and Africans were becoming ever more modern, but not in the way modernization theorists had in mind.⁷⁷ As Irene Gendzier has shown, if these trends led to an anti-Western regime, as in Iran, Lerner associated them with alienation rather than modernity, while "those who exhibited an enthusiasm for social change,

previously considered a sign of empathy, were now castigated as trouble-makers."⁷⁸

If the demand side of the modernization model challenged Western expectations, the supply side was still more aberrant. Development theory anticipated that Third World peoples would endure deprivation and threaten unrest during a transition phase, though integration in the world economy through specialization and trade would eventually lead to greater prosperity. In this respect, Algeria exhibited all the key features of the erosion of traditional economies occurring across the Third World: In China, too, commercialization had led to the abolition of public granaries. In Mexico and Vietnam, as in Algeria, it threatened peasant control of communal land. In both these cases and Cuba as well, property seizures by colonists or private companies drove peasants onto marginal lands insufficient for their subsistence, just as in Algeria.⁷⁹ In all these countries, peasants challenged the new economic order. Development theorists and their critics would agree that the commercialization of agrarian society was a primary cause of political unrest, even while disagreeing about whether this painful process was unavoidable.⁸⁰ But neither group explained why development—or exploitation—did not pay.

In Algeria, for instance, integration with global markets was exemplified by the fact that, by 1954, wine accounted for more than half of all exports of this Muslim country. Yet the government paid wine growers 25 percent more than the market value of their product, much of which was considered unsaleable. Moreover, from 1952 on, the metropole had to make up for annual shortfalls in the Algerian budget as social services strained to accommodate the expanding, increasingly urban population. Just like their French counterparts across the Mediterranean, nonagricultural workers were entitled to family allowances and, beginning in 1950, school-enrollment bonuses for their children.⁸¹

But rather than forming a consumer society, many Muslims in the cities continued to live outside the cash economy. As Bourdieu observed, the real Algerian Muslim proletariat had emigrated to France only to send most of their earnings home, thus shoring up the rural economy. On the other hand—and despite massive development projects—private capital began to flow out of Algeria at an accelerating rate: 3.6 billion (old) francs in 1954, 19.5 billion in 1955; 121.1 billion in 1956.⁸²

In this respect, Algeria was an extreme case of a problem confronting colonial authorities throughout the continent. After World War II, Britain and France began to devote considerable resources to developing their African colonies, but private capital did not follow public investment. Moreover, once the expense of imperialism had begun to pinch taxpayers, the press and publics in both countries began to subject it to cost-benefit analyses.⁸³ In the summer of 1956, Raymond Cartier argued in a series of influential articles for *Paris Match* that France ought to redirect investment to the metropole since it paid inflated prices for what little its African colonies had to offer.⁸⁴ Likewise, in 1959 John Strachey—former

war minister under Clement Attlee—demonstrated that “imperialism has ceased to bring appreciable benefits to the advanced countries (without ceasing to be ruinous for the underdeveloped).”⁸⁵

There were economic successes in Africa, but they did not fit the development model. Just as in Algeria, migrant laborers from other African states used their wages to strengthen the village economies, though British and French officials were little interested in the growth of exports from small farms. As Frederick Cooper has argued, they wanted to form a disciplined labor force but “Africans proved adept . . . at using mobility, kin networks, and the ability to move between alternative systems to avoid too much dependence on white employers”—in the same way that Algerian Muslims escaped the colonists and low wages by working in France despite official efforts to keep them on the farm.⁸⁶ This was a rational response to market incentives, but even the most liberal economists shudder at the thought of allowing labor to cross borders with the same freedom as capital, goods, and services.⁸⁷

The issue of labor mobility was potentially explosive given the pattern of world population growth. According to the prevailing dogma on the “demographic transition”—demography’s contribution to modernization theory—urbanization and industrialization reduced mortality rates and, after a lag period and rapid population growth, rates of natality. The population of developing countries was therefore expected to stabilize, just as in the West.⁸⁸ But by the late 1950s, demographers discovered that improved public health measures had rapidly reduced death rates in non-industrial economies not just in Algeria, but also in Ceylon, Malaya, the West Indies, and much of Latin America. Moreover, in Algeria (as well as India and Egypt), urbanization initially appeared to have no effect on birthrates.⁸⁹

Indeed, the relative decline of Algeria’s European population reflected a shift in the proportion of European and non-European peoples around the globe. Whereas Asians, Africans, and Latin Americans accounted for 55 percent of world population in the second half of the nineteenth century, by the 1950s they made up more than 77 percent, a trend that would accelerate in the following years.⁹⁰ From the perspective of Western policymakers, population growth made economic development more difficult but all the more imperative given the potential threat posed by impoverished Third World peoples. It threatened to overburden both the supply and demand sides of the development model and overturn the entire modernization project.

In this period, the focus of Western activity in the Third World began to shift from development to direct aid, from modernization to “basic needs.” Some argued that aid should be given to developing areas as a moral imperative. But there was also a pragmatic argument for the alleviation of poverty in areas with rapidly growing populations—one based on Western self-interest, even survival. In 1959, a French National Assembly report asserted that advances in telecommunications were “making

the misery that spans the globe each day less bearable. . . . And if, tomorrow, nothing is done, the demographic deadline of the year 2000 will see not only wealthy countries, above all North America, Europe and the USSR, unable to protect their wealth from others' misery, but misery and hunger will become the lot of all humanity."⁹¹ New communications technologies and the capacity of Third World peoples to empathize was not necessarily a formula for development. Western observers had begun to fear that, instead of *imagining* themselves in their place, impoverished masses might actually take possession of it.

Thus, the idea of modernization had become muddled in Algeria, which helps to explain its vulnerability to alternative views. New means of communications, market integration, and mass migration had so complicated ties between metropole and colony, city and countryside, modernity and tradition as to make the relationships between these apparent dichotomies increasingly ambiguous. The question was not just who ruled in Algiers but whether it was still possible to constitute authority in a system that had become so decentered.

With their deepening engagement in Algeria, it became ever more difficult, even disturbing, for the French to go on defining themselves either against or through Algerian Muslims. When the Algerian—often living in their midst—might be both peasant and proletarian, neither liberal nor communist, French citizen, Algerian nationalist, and racial and religious separatist all at the same time, it became impossible to know the "other," or even to name him. Moreover, the fight against nascent Algerian nationalism led to violations of civil liberties integral to France's self image, which was still shaken by the Vichy experience. The ensuing domestic conflict ended with some aiding the rebels and others assaulting the state. But for all their partisan fervor, few were certain how French ideals that were supposedly universal could apply to the case of Algeria: liberty appeared to mean abandoning citizens to an Islamic state, equality required admitting a hundred Muslim deputies to the Assembly, and fraternity necessitated accepting—rather than assimilating—a culture that seemed alien even to the most cosmopolitan.⁹²

This posed both a practical and an ideological challenge to the very identity of the nation and the integrity of the state. The question was not so much competing ideas of truth and justice but whether such concepts retained any real meaning. Fanon asserted that "truth is the property of the national cause. No absolute verity, no discourse on the purity of the soul, can shake this position. . . . Truth is that which hurries on the break-up of the colonialist regime." On the other side, Albert Camus declared that he would choose his pied noir mother over justice, indicating how ethnic violence could undermine faith in universal ideals even among the most committed humanists.⁹³

Many of those who went on to pioneer poststructuralist and post-modernist theory were shaped by the Algerian experience. During Vichy, Jacques Derrida found himself excluded from his school in Algiers as Jews

were rejected by both sides of a polarizing society. Marginality would be one of the main themes of an *oeuvre* distinguished by a profound distrust of all claims to authority.⁹⁴ Similarly, after Bourdieu's experience in Algeria—where social scientists served a repressive state—he espoused a more reflexive sociology and strove to transcend false antinomies.⁹⁵ "Something has changed now, radically," Philippe Sollers wrote after his best friend was killed in the war, "The world is less pure." He hoped to reclaim an autonomous space for texts and textual analysis by founding the journal *Tel Quel*, which became a hothouse for critical theory.⁹⁶ As Michael Fischer has observed, Algeria "focused attention on the need to find alternatives to the construction of totalizing ideologies, the need for theories and strategies of government that could accommodate multiple cultural perspectives and not insist that everyone see history or progress the same way."⁹⁷

Of course, not everyone saw things this way. Most observers judged that modernization simply needed to be accelerated. Indeed, French propagandists moved beyond American development theory—which identified nationalism with modernity—to assert that, because of technological advances and economic integration, no nation was truly independent. Instead, they argued, France and Algeria were interdependent in an increasingly interdependent world. This made it impossible to be indifferent to the fate of human rights or the environment among other peoples. In films like *The Falling Veil*, they sought to convince American television audiences that only France could end "the Moslem tradition of female subjugation stretched back through the centuries of Arab rule"—an issue that was all the more important since, even then, educating women was recognized as a means of reducing birthrates.⁹⁸ In 1947, the *Manchester Guardian* offered an environmentalist argument against self-determination in North Africa that would often recur in French propaganda, albeit less explicitly:

Which should come first: National independence or the development of a country and the conservation of its soil? To what extent has a nation the right to ruin its own land? . . . Is it really in the interests of the world to allow the desert to swallow up the last naturally green hills of Libya to satisfy their claims to self-government?⁹⁹

In its latter phases, official propaganda tended to ignore the issue of self-determination altogether and instead trumpeted French aspirations and achievements in liberating Muslim women and developing Algeria, all the while implying that the war was over but for the shouting. But the international media proved to be more interested in reporting the anarchy and atrocities that were actually occurring. Moreover, officials undercut their claims to be opening Algeria to the world by constructing barbed wire fences around it, banning foreign films and newspapers, and jamming international radio transmissions. The Algerians, on the other hand, cultivated the media and presented themselves as a secular, nation-

alist movement in which men and women participated equally in building a modern nation.¹⁰⁰ Indeed, at this time—and partly because of the progress of such movements—the “end of history” was already in sight. “The fundamental political problems of the industrial revolution have been solved,” Seymour Martin Lipset asserted, “. . . [T]his very triumph of democratic social revolution in the West ends domestic politics for those intellectuals who must have . . . utopias to motivate them to social action.¹⁰¹ The FLN won over international opinion by portraying itself as part of that “democratic social revolution.” But there were others, on both sides, who were motivated by *dystopias*, some indeed who felt that they were living in the shadow of a new dark age.

The Specter of Jihad

Despite the contradictions and contrary evidence, the idea of “development” could support these different political projects because of its deep roots in a powerful intellectual tradition that views progress as “inevitable and inevitably directional from lower to higher forms of society, knowledge, religion.”¹⁰² But another intellectual tradition, less respectable but no less influential, posits the inevitability of *decline*.¹⁰³ It emphasizes fragmentation rather than integration, racial and religious conflict instead of universal ideals. We will not find a body of “Medievalization theory” backed by empirical research and expressed in social science jargon, but this approach to international politics never depended on evidence. Long before demographic trends turned against them, Europeans and Americans found reason to fear that their own decadence might invite the overthrow of Western civilization. From Hermann Knackfuss’s famous painting *Die Gelbe Gefahr* through American “Yellow Peril” novels, nonwhites were imagined as a nameless, faceless mob crowding about the periphery.¹⁰⁴ By the 1930s, demographers had begun to provide data supporting the idea that Europeans and their progeny were increasingly outnumbered. In 1932, Oswald Spengler warned that “the battle for the planet has begun” amid a wave of anticolonialist unrest in East Asia, Africa, and the West Indies. He castigated Europeans for having given way to pacifism and infertility in the face of “a colored world-revolution.”¹⁰⁵ Similarly, Paul Valéry was only the best known of a number of French writers who foresaw the relative decline of Europe, wondering whether it would “become *what it is in reality*—that is, a little promontory on the continent of Asia?”¹⁰⁶

Cold War-era policymakers grew up in this period, so it should be no surprise that fear of population decline and international race war influenced them through the 1950s. But it did not necessarily run contrary to the idea of “development.” The two were usually presented as alternatives. As John Foster Dulles told Robert Schuman in 1949, when Schuman was serving as foreign minister:

There are in Africa vast resources which can be developed to the natural advantage of Africa and West Europe and more than make good the loss of access to the natural resources of Eastern Europe and the loss of Asiatic colonies. This North-South development, however, requires friendly collaboration between the native peoples and the peoples of Europe. . . . If the Italian colonies were dealt with in a manner which excited a Moslem Holy War or race war of black against white, then the foundation of North-South development would disappear.¹⁰⁷

Once he had become secretary of state, Dulles often reiterated this same hope and fear. Thus, in 1958, he said that North Africa was “to be considered as a kind of pool of raw materials for Western Europe like the Western states were for the thirteen colonies during the formation of our republic.” But he warned that a confrontational policy undermined moderate nationalists and strengthened the extremists, leading to “grave dissonance between the West and Islam.”¹⁰⁸

Of course, there was another side to the frontier. That same year another American official, George Allen, shortly to become director of the U.S. Information Agency, advised a French colleague to arm the *peïds noirs*. He explained that, in view of the history of the American West, this “would evoke sympathy for a white community settled for many generations in a non-European country, exposed to the attacks of the natives, who organize themselves for the defense of their hearths and homes.”¹⁰⁹

French leaders also thought of Algeria as a potential frontier in the positive as well as the negative sense. Jacques Soustelle, the governor-general, described the Sahara as “a little like the Far West, the opening towards the future, a hope for a country which had begun to be without hope.”¹¹⁰ Alternatively, Michel Debré, de Gaulle’s first prime minister, argued in his investiture speech that without the French Algeria would become “a frontier between two hostile worlds.”¹¹¹ Over the years, official propaganda displayed both aspects of the frontier, with France promising development and cooperation while an FLN victory portended anarchy and holy war.

While this analysis could conflict with an East-West, Cold War approach to international politics, French spokesmen reconciled the two by arguing that the Communists would take advantage of any disorder to turn NATO’s flank from the south. Even so, they gave inordinate attention to China years before there was any evidence of its providing aid to the rebels. For instance, when army officers gave a briefing at Oxford on the threat to North Africa, their maps displayed arrows emanating from the Eastern bloc. But by far, the biggest arrow swept from the heart of China through India and the Middle East to point directly at Casablanca.¹¹²

Sometimes French officials were so serious about the Chinese that they appeared ridiculous—as when strategists illustrated Chinese subversion by plotting the path of their acrobatic team as it toured Africa, or

when their consul in Hong Kong warned that they would have to "pay particular attention to the exodus toward Europe of pseudo students and Chinese chefs."¹¹³ But even ridiculous ideas can have an influence, especially when they are entertained at the highest levels. Thus, in 1956, Prime Minister Guy Mollet told Henry Cabot Lodge that "the world hero to whom the people look for leadership was not any Algerian leader; nor was it Colonel Nasser nor was it Khrushchev. The man they talked about was Mao Tse-tung." The recent defeat in Indochina helps to explain this obsession, but the racial dimension clearly colored such thinking. Mollet went on to assert that "they looked to Mao Tse-tung as the man who had thrown out the white man." Similarly, France's representative in Rabat judged that, "Much more than Russia, which seems white and Western to them, it is China, yellow and Asian, that seduces maghrebans longing for decolonization."¹¹⁴ The vision of an international race war or jihad was so compelling that the Soviets sometimes were left out of the picture.¹¹⁵ The Quai d'Orsay's briefing book on Algeria—what they called their "bible"—characterized the rebellion as "pan-Islamic" and "pan-Arabic," a "furious wave of fanaticism and xenophobia" that was "one part of the fight of the peoples of Africa and Asia . . . against the West."¹¹⁶

The question of whether the Algerian conflict can indeed be characterized as a religious or racial war is complex and controversial. During the war, the FLN used Islamic names and symbols, in some instances rallying supporters with explicit appeals to their religiosity and even to their pride as a "pure and superior race."¹¹⁷ In 1956, rebel commanders in the Aurès region called on fellow Muslims fighting with the French to quit this "army of infidels" and "heretics." While they were subsequently relieved, such appeals indicate how the struggle could be represented in religious terms.¹¹⁸

One would never suspect that some participants in the Algerian War saw it as a defense of Islam from the far more famous writings of Frantz Fanon. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, he instead described decolonization as a winner-takes-all race war. While this vision seized the imagination of some European intellectuals, his FLN colleagues considered it a losing strategy in a world still dominated by white powers.¹¹⁹ Indeed, the editor of their official newspaper, *El Moudjahid*, once had to stop the presses to prevent publication of one of his more inflammatory pieces. The party organ could not have been more emphatic in rejecting the idea that they were waging jihad, much less race war: "Ours is an organized revolution—it is not an anarchic revolt. Ours is a national struggle to destroy an anarchic colonial regime—it is NOT a religious war. It represents a march forward in the historical path of human progress."¹²⁰ But to the extent that westerners conceived of the conflict as a jihad or race war, the French were probably hurt more than the Algerians. Raising the specter of an anarchic and implacably antiwestern North Africa could only undermine their argument that Algeria could be pacified, prosperous, and retained as an integral part of France.¹²¹

Appeals to white solidarity certainly did not win favor with key U.S. policymakers, who were inclined to distance themselves from their ally in colonial confrontations. When ordering a review of North African policy in July 1955, Dulles argued that the United States had to avoid alienating "the great mass of mankind which is non-white and non-European." The Americans were made to pay for the "sins" of their colonial allies, he later complained, along with their own racial problems at home, and were lumped in with "the whites." Dulles felt that this was more than a moral concern, but rather "... a very grave problem, and it affects our whole military-political strategy."¹²²

Dulles did not credit French claims that the Communists were the cause of their troubles in North Africa, but he agreed that Moscow would back or at least benefit from a wider conflict.¹²³ After the seizure of the Suez Canal, he began to see Arab or Islamist nationalism as a serious threat in its own right and feared that Nasser might manipulate oil shipments to reduce Europe to dependency.¹²⁴ When the Joint Chiefs urged the preparation of contingency plans for using force to free the canal, Eisenhower did not rule out the option but dreaded that it would "array the world from Dakar to the Philippines against us."¹²⁵ The State Department even entertained the idea of a regional entente with the Soviets.¹²⁶ Toward the end of his presidency, Eisenhower sometimes appeared ambivalent as to whether or not the Third World might ultimately pose the greatest threat to American security. "We have had a narrower view than we should have," he told his National Security Council. "The real menace here was the one and a half billion hungry people in the world."¹²⁷

The evidence on French and American anxiety about the Third World relative to fear of the Soviets is ambiguous. For one thing, the two concerns were not mutually exclusive. In both countries, the worst-case scenario was always an international lineup pitting "the West against the rest," with Moscow in the lead. Moreover, as a 1959 congressional report on foreign aid noted, "[T]he simple assumption that communism flows from poverty is so widely accepted in America that it is almost an article of faith."¹²⁸ So concern about Third World poverty and population growth—even when it was given higher priority than the direct confrontation with the Soviets—could be reconciled with a conventional, zero-sum game approach to the Cold War. But others were convinced that the Cold War coalitions would break down along racial lines. In a 1958 meeting with Chancellor Konrad Adenauer that renewed the Franco-German entente, Charles de Gaulle explained that it had to be extended to include Russia: "We know that the true danger is Asia," he explained, which was "all the more reason to revive Europe."¹²⁹

The Algerian War was part of this ongoing process by which "the West" is constructed, its members counted, its borders patrolled. Consider, for instance, how in 1956 the French ambassador described for the foreign minister of Spain, which was then seeking entry to NATO, the choice it faced at the United Nation between "the countries of the Near

East and the Maghreb [and] those of the Atlantic Alliance." The question, he said, "was whether a Christian, Western power would give its moral support to the independence movement in Algeria. She would then isolate herself completely from the Western nations."¹³⁰ Three years later, Francisco Franco finally pledged support for "the cause of Western civilization."¹³¹

Clearly, Africa no longer began at the Pyrenees, but it was becoming ever more doubtful that France extended to Algeria—or that Muslims would always have entrée to Europe. French officials had already begun to assist German border control officers in identifying Algerian Muslims to discourage them from entering, deny them asylum, and obtain their fingerprints and photographs.¹³² De Gaulle himself could not imagine how they could be part of the *patrie*. "These people are different from us," he told a Gaullist deputy. "Do you see yourself marrying our daughters with Arabs?"¹³³ Before the war, one of the French administrators had actually suggested, "very shyly. . . a policy of mixed marriages."¹³⁴ But in 1959, de Gaulle thought the question was too absurd to warrant an answer. Instead, France had to "marry her time," as he declared in a speech which called for an *Algérie algérienne*.¹³⁵ While this was hailed as a progressive statement at the time, few seemed to grasp its logical counterpart: *une France française*.

The contemporary relevance of these issues will be addressed in the conclusion to this book, but the intellectual dimensions of the war will continue to unfold through the narrative. Since the FLN could not physically control territory, the basis for their claim to sovereignty was abstract: it rested in peoples' estimations of their legitimacy as the rightful rulers—not just people in Algeria, but in France, the United States, and anywhere else influence could be brought to bear on the course of events. In a very real sense, one of the most important battles in the Algerian War was waged in the realm of ideas. Its ultimate outcome is still uncertain.

2

The Ambivalence of Power

North Africa in International Politics, 1942–1954

The isolation has lasted too long.

The party that has the heavy responsibility of liberating Algeria must break this isolation . . . This is an imperative, essential at this decisive stage of preparation, which will make our revolutionary strategy one of expansion and of opening onto the world.

Hocine Aït Ahmed, 1948¹

It is no secret that there is a vast conspiracy joining the religious fanaticism and xenophobia of the Middle East with the anti-colonialist ideology of America which seeks to ruin our position in North Africa. . . . To round this dangerous cape it will be necessary to have a government in Paris fiercely resolved to defend our imperial possessions foot by foot.

Général Alphonse Juin, 1951²

Before dawn on November 8, 1942, three convoys consisting of more than five hundred American and British warships and transports closed on the coasts of Algeria and Morocco. Two Royal Navy destroyers carrying a mixed force of British and American commandos separated from the easternmost group and headed for the Bay of Algiers. Just after midnight, President Roosevelt's personal representative, Robert Murphy, had warned the French commander, Alphonse Juin, that he faced overwhelming odds. The armada carried nearly 10,000 vehicles and 100,000 allied servicemen, with another 150,000 on the way. But Murphy and General Dwight Eisenhower, the Allied supreme commander, assured the French that America had no designs on their North African possessions. "We come among you solely to defeat and rout your enemies," Roosevelt had declared in a radio speech to the French people. "Have faith in our words. We do not want to cause you any harm."³