
The Rise of Algerian Nationalism after the Great war

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Abstract

This paper aims at underscoring that notwithstanding its detrimental worldwide repercussions, the Great War was a decisive watershed in the history of Algerian nationalism. It was the momentum that rekindled the nationalist movement in Algeria which reached its summit in the 1954 War for Liberation. The paper will shed light on the incentives that gave rise to the Algerian nationalist movement in the post First World War era as well as its leading nationalist figures. Those leaders were divided between gradualist reformers namely Young Algerians, Emir Khaled and Ferhat Abbas and those who opposed assimilationist reforms and pleaded for an independent Algeria most notably the Ulema led by Ben Badis and which stressed the Arab and Islamic roots of the country as well as Star of North Africa. The latter, under the leadership of Messali Hadj, was more radical in its nationalist claims by demanding a full liberation of the country.

Keywords : First World War; Algerian Nationalism; Ferhat Abbas; Abdel Hamid Ben Badis; Messali Haj.

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INTRODUCTION

Of all the French colonies, Algeria stood as the major provider of material assets and labor for France. During the First World War, Algeria was expected to contribute more than any other colony in what is designated “French North Africa”. It supplied the colonial power with capital, products and men for the war effort and factory work. Aware of having rallied round France to the hour of risk and baffled by unfulfilled guarantees, Algerians opened the pathway to a national liberation claim.

The Algerian nationalist movement thrived approximately between the close of the two World Wars surfacing as an immediate aftermath of the Great War (1914-1918) and ensuing in the start of the Algerian liberation struggle in 1954. While the First War signed the beginning of the decline of the major European colonial powers, France appeared disinclined to surrender its North African pearl, Algeria. There is no doubt that the First World War was the momentum that kindled the anti-colonial nationalist movement in Algeria. It transformed and reshaped the political and nationalist horizons in the colonised country. The paper will shed light on the incentives that gave rise to the Algerian nationalist movement in the post First World War era as well as its leading nationalist figures namely Ferhat Abbas, Ben Badis and Messali Haj.

I. FIRST FLAMES OF THE ALGERIAN NATIONALIST MOVEMENT

Algerians’ immigration to the French metropole increased during the First War due to the fact that many lost their lands and jobs and thus were coerced to seek their livings in the coloniser’s home.

¹ The shortages of the War caused France to employ several hundred thousand Algerian labourers to serve the war effort by working in factories. Others were among the about 173,000 Algerians who had fought in the ranks of the French army during the War. Many Algerians stayed on in France after the end of the War in 1918, and sent the money they earned there to their families in Algeria.

Therefore, thrown into the European continent by the War and then by economic reasons, some Algerians came to recognise the sharp discrepancies between the democratic ideals in France and their grim realities in their colonised land. They began to awaken to their own religion, culture, and psychology of France. Such comparisons had never struck them while they were in their own country. Now they found their own identity in their understanding of apparent inequalities, an awareness that paved the way for Algerian nationalism.

Those Algerians became conscious of a standard of living higher than any they had experienced at home and of democratic and egalitarian concepts exercised there but strongly annihilated in Algeria. Robert Aaron deems that immigration of Algerians to France to work or to fight truly led to the nationalist movement because “... *les musulmans on pris conscience de l’inégalité qui existait entre leur statut et celui d’autres catégories*”.²

The First World War also worsened the economic condition in the colony, which constituted another driving engine for the rise of the Algerian nationalist movement as elucidated by John Ruedy (1992):

The Algerian nationalist movement appeared and developed within the context of a progressively deteriorating economic situation which was caused by the conjuncture of negative world market forces, a series of bad crop years at home, and demographic pressures, all of which contributed to the growing disequilibrium within the economy as a whole.³

According to Ruedy (1992), the war effort had engendered major inflation; industrial prices were soaring much more rapidly than the prices of agricultural goods- which were the beating heart of the Algerian economy- and surpluses of unsold grain were adding fuel to the economic fire.⁴ Those poor economic conditions further accelerated the migration of Algerian workers to France, a France that was turning into an enormous classroom for future nationalists.

The discovery of France and Europe by the Algerian *fellah* was a crystallizing moment in the history of Algerian nationalism. Following the conclusion of World War, I, the initial calls for Algerian independence came from Algerians who privileged a French education and who were extremely inspired by the Arab nationalist movement of the 1920s and 1930s. The growth of this nationalist spirit amongst the Algerian people is owing to the realization that ultimate freedom did not lie in the hands of their conquerors but in their own hands. In *The Agony of Algeria*, Martin Stone (1997) affirms that

The First World War can be taken as the true starting point of nationalist aspirations among the Muslim community in Algeria. It was around this time that Muslims who had been forced to immigrate to France became aware of democratic and egalitarian principles vigorously suppressed in Algeria, and of the emergent Arab nationalist movements in states of the Arab east.⁵

On those grounds, more than the sufferings and mistreatment experienced on the European lands by the Algerians, it was the contrast between their lives in their colonised land and that of the coloniser, which they were now able to draw, that spurred the growth of the nationalist movement. The thousands of Algerians who moved to work in France during the 1920s learnt lessons which previously thousands had grasped during the War. Inexorably, Algerians who returned to their homes brought with them the new concepts they had explored in Europe.

Also, the fact that France appealed to Algerians during the War left no room for suspicion that the colonisers were not invincible. Indeed, Algerians considered their service as an opportunity to demand more rights from the colonial government. There were also the reverberations of the October 1917 Russian Revolution, with its call for the imperialist war to be transformed into a global class war, and the American President Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Point Declaration for a new world order grounded on national self-determination. In addition, there was interaction with French trade unions and the 1920 split within the Socialist Party (SFIO) and formation of the French Communist Party.⁶

As more Algerians asked for full parity with French citizens, they formed stronger political parties which played a crucial role for the emergence of the nationalist movement. In this way, we can distinguish between the so-called French Algerians, led in the 1930s by Ferhat Abbas, who demanded full assimilation; the reformed *Ulema*, led by Abdel Hamid Ben Badis, who were concerned with developing the Islamic and Arabic character of the Algerian population in opposition to French

culture; and the proletarian followers of Messali Hadj- originally in France- who demanded liberty.

II. GRADUALIST REFORMERS UNDER EMIR KHALED AND FERHAT ABBAS

In the 1930s, Ferhat Abbas led a group consisted of Algerians who had accessed French schooling and earned their living in the French area. Often labeled as assimilationists, they followed gradualist reformist strategies, evaded illicit activities, and were set up to consider lasting unification with France if the privileges of Frenchmen could be stretched out to local Algerians. This group- starting from the pre-World War I era, was slackly sorted out under the Young Algerians and included (in the 1920s) Khaled Ben Hachemi (Emir Khaled) the grandson of the national legend Abdel Kader, and then the leading advocate of their cause became Ferhat Abbas, who later turned into the first premier of the Provisional Government of the Algerian Republic and a standout amongst the most prominent figures in twentieth-century Algerian politics.⁷

The Young Algerians added a critical voice to the reformist movement against French colonial strategy that inaugurated in 1892 and proceeded until the episode of World War I. To some degree to remunerate Muslims who battled and kicked the bucket for France, Clemenceau designated reform-minded Charles Jonnart as governor general. Reforms declared in 1919 and known as the Jonnart Law extended the number of Muslims allowed to vote to around 425,000. The enactment likewise confiscated all voters from the jurisdiction of the mortifying —*Code de l'indigénat*. Some Young Algerians were ready to work within the system set out by the reforms; however, Emir Khalid kept on exerting pressure for the total Young Algerian program. He was able to winelectoral victories in Algiers and to invigorate political discourse with his calls for reform and full assimilation. Yet, by 1923 he felt sick of the struggle and left Algeria, in the end resigning to Damascus.

In 1926, some members of the Young Algerians framed the Federation of Elected Natives (*Fédération des Élus Indigènes, FEI*), the same number of the previous gathering's members had joined the hover of Muslims qualified to hold public office. The organisation's targets were the assimilation of the *évolués* into the French community, with full citizenship however without surrendering their own status as Muslims, and the possible join of Algeria as a full province of France. Other aims included equivalent pay for equal work for government representatives, abrogation of movement confinements to and from France, annulment of the *Code de l'indigénat* (which had been reinstated earlier), and electoral reform.

According to Abbas, Algeria had to be transformed from a colony into a French province. Through an end to bigotry, Muslims had to be enabled passage to the French nation. In 1930, he established Federation of Elected Muslims, an association with an assimilation agenda that called for representation in the French parliament, concealment of legislation that discriminated antagonistically against Muslims and similar rights for Muslims without the abandonment of their Muslim status.

In 1936, the French Prime Minister Blum set forward the Violette Plan that was to grant full citizenship to 25,000 Algerians without repudiation of Muslim status. Another factor affecting Muslim response to the reintroduction of that Plan,

which by that date even a number of moderates had dismissed as deficient, was the move in Abbas' position from support for incorporation to the interest for a self-governing state federated with France. To that end, he framed Friends of the Manifesto and Liberty (*Amis du Manifeste et de la Liberté*) to work for Algerian autonomy with similar rights for both Europeans and Muslims. Within a brief span, the AML's daily paper, *Égalité*, asserted 500,000 subscribers, demonstrating remarkable enthusiasm for autonomy. At this point, more than 350,000 Algerian Muslims (out of an aggregate Algerian Muslim populace of nine million) were working in France to help their relatives in Algeria, and a large number more worked in towns.

In March 1943, Abbas, who had relinquished assimilation as a possible alternative to self-determination, presented the French administration with the Manifesto of the Algerian People, signed by fifty-six Algerian nationalist and worldwide leaders. Sketching out the apparent past and present issues of colonial occupation, the manifesto demanded particularly an Algerian constitution that would ensure urgent and viable political cooperation and legitimate fairness for Muslims in their own country, in language, education and religion; nullification of colonisation together with agrarian reform; full and prompt participation of Muslims in the legislature of their country and acknowledgment of the political self-governance of Algeria as a sovereign state.

III. ULEMA UNDER ABDEL HAMID BEN BADIS

This group comprised of Muslim reformers who were inspired by the religious Salafi movement established in the late nineteenth century in Egypt by Sheik Muhammad Abduh and Muhammad Rashid Reda that accentuated the Arab and Islamic underlying foundations of the nation. Beginning in the 1920s, the reform *Ulema*, religious researchers, advanced a refinement of Islam in Algeria. The reformers supported the embracing of modern techniques of inquiry and discarded the superstitions and folk practices of the countryside, acts that led them into showdown with the *marabouts*. The reformers distributed their own periodicals and books, and built up free modern Islamic schools that focused on Arabic language and culture as an alternative to the schools for Muslims controlled for a long time by the French.

Under the dynamic authority of Shaykh Abdel Hamid Ben Badis, the reformist *Ulema* composed the Association of Algerian Muslim *Ulema* (*Association des Ulema Musulmans Algériens*, AUMA) in 1931. Despite the fact that their support was amassed in the Constantine region, the AUMA struck a responsive harmony among the Muslim masses, with whom it had closer bonds than did the other patriotic associations. As the Islamic reformers gained ubiquity and impact, the colonial authority reacted in 1933 by refusing them consent to lecture in official mosques. This move and similar others glimmered quite a while of sporadic religious agitation.

While at first keeping out of politics, the *Ulema* regularly favored one side, particularly they were against Muslim promoters of assimilation. The well-known "Clear proclamation" of April 1936 was made in answer to the similarly eminent announcement of Ferhat Abbas in February that Algeria existed just as part of France:

We the oulema, speaking in the name of the majority of natives of this country, say to those who claim to be French: 'You do not represent us! . . . The Muslim

*population of Algeria has its own history, religious unity, language, culture and traditions. . . This Muslim population is not part of France, cannot be part of France, and does not want to be part of France.*⁸

The association resolutely opposed assimilation and expanded the significance of Islam as part and parcel of Algerian identity. Ben Badis broadly expressed that —Islam is my religion, Arabic is my language, Algeria is my country. As such, drawing upon notions like people (*chaab*), nation (*watan*) and nationality (*qarwmiyya*), the *Ulema* underscored the presence of a different Algerian nation in view of Muslim and Arab values and closely associated with the world Islamic community (*umma*)⁹. Light years from the settlers' sense of what it was to be Algerian, this national character, Ben Badis emphasised, would never be assimilated into France.¹⁰

IV. MESSALI HADJ'S LIBERATIONIST DEMANDS

If Ben Badis spoke to religious renaissance and Ferhat Abbas symbolised assimilation, the other strand was political nationalism, which was incarnated in the third figure of the 1930s, Ahmed Ben Messali Hadj.

Messali Hadj's group was more proletarian and radical. It was sorted out among Algerian labourers in France in the 1920s and later gained broad support in Algeria. Lecturing patriotism without nuance, Messali Hadj was undoubtedly bound to speak to Algerians who completely perceived their hardships. Messali's firmly nationalistic position, or even the more quieted stance of Ben Badis, could have been checked by such gradualist reformers as Ferhat Abbas if just they had possessed the capacity to demonstrate that well-ordered decolonisation was never far reaching. A number of endeavours to change the treatment of local Algerians, advanced by French reformist gatherings in a joint effort with Algerian reformists in the first half of the twentieth century, came too late to stem the extreme tide.

Young Algerians, for Messali were excessively moderate, excessively bourgeois, advancing a reformist agenda that, as he would like to think, buttressed the colonial status quo.¹¹ Resolved to take in more about revolutionary politics, Messali forged in 1923 connections with Algerians in the French Communist Party that prompted the creation, in July 1926, of the first political party devoted to liberty: the *Étoile Nord Africaine* (ENA) (Star of North Africa).

The social context for the ENA was Algerian emigration to France and communist anti-imperialism. Remaining faithful to the Third International's absolute support for anti-colonialism, the French Communist Party contacted labourers from the settlements inside the metropole, the biggest number of which were Algerian.¹² The ENA's programme demanded the political liberation of North Africa, and the redistribution of land to peasants.

The Star of North Africa had a nationalist and extremist programme that called for Algerian autonomy, withdrawal of French troops, and construction of a national armed force and the nationalisation of huge estates. It is striking in that it was the first to call for Algerian autonomy and was subsidiary with the French Communist Party and bolstered by Algerian workers in France. Messali presented compelling articulation to North African objectives in an affirmation read at the *Socialiste Internationale Conference* in Brussels, Belgium in 1927. It was here that he first set the tone for Algerian freedom. Other than independence from France, the Star called for opportunity of press and affiliation, a parliament selected through

widespread suffrage and the establishment of Arabic schools. The Star was restricted in 1929 and worked underground until 1934, when its daily paper achieved a course of 43,500.

Inspired by the Arab patriotic thoughts of Lebanese Druze Shakib Arslan, Messali got some distance from communist ideology to a more nationalist standpoint, for which the French Communist Party assaulted the Star. He came back to Algeria to organise urban workers and peasant farmers and in 1937 established the Party of the Algerian People (*Parti du Peuple Algerien*) or PPA to counter the new arrangement of French citizenship and to rally the Algerian working class at home and in France to ameliorate its condition through political activity. This faction again was censored by the French and Messali was imprisoned until 1945.

CONCLUSION

Whether reformist gradualist or radical liberationists, those political parties—that were the byproduct of the First World War—constituted the nucleus of Algerian nationalist resistance that further matured by the aftermaths of the Second World War (1941-1945). Indeed, it was not until 1945 that the independence movement truly began to gain momentum. In 1947, de Gaulle refused to surrender French hold on the colony. Eventually, the Algerian War for Independence broke out in 1954, when the National Liberation Army (ALN), the military arm of the National Liberation Front (FLN) staged guerrilla attacks on French military and communication posts and called on all Algerians to rally round their struggle which would last for seven grueling but heroic years.

Therefore, it is fair to say that in spite of all its detrimental worldwide repercussions, the First World War was a decisive turning point in the history of Algerian nationalism. It strongly contributed to exposing Algeria to itself, raising it to the age of maturation and eventually to contemporary political decisions. It was the impetus that rekindled the anti-colonial nationalist movement in Algeria which reached its summit in the 1954 War for Liberation and in the long run led to the liberation of the land in 1962.

¹ MACMASTER, Neil, *Colonial Migrants and Racism: Algerians in France, 1900-62* (New York, St Martin's Press, 1997), 3.

² DOUGLAS RUEDY, John, *Modern Algeria: the origins and development of a nation* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1992, Ruedy. John, Op.cit.), 117.

³ Ibid. , 115.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ STONE, Martin, *The Agony of Algeria* (New York, Colombia University Press, 1997), 23.

⁶ Evans, *Algeria: France's undeclared war* (Oxford University Press, 2012), 44.

⁷ Ibid. , 55.

⁸ AGERON, C.R, and BRETT, Michael, *Modern Algeria: a History from 1830 to the Present* (London, Hurst, 1991), 95.

⁹ EVANS, Martin , *Algeria: France's undeclared war* (Oxford University Press, 2012), 52.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid. , 57.

¹² Ibid. , 58.

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