

The Path Of Algerian National Struggle During World War II (1939 – 1945)

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Received: 22/05/2024; Accepted: 16/09/2024; Published:
03/10/2024

Abstract:

The article addresses a critical phase in the trajectory of the Algerian national movement, spanning from 1939 to 1945. While the world was engulfed in a conflict between the Allies and the Axis, Algerians, like other colonized peoples, found themselves drawn into this struggle, even though it was not directly relevant to them. On the eve of this war, France mobilized all its economic and social resources for the French war effort, transferring agricultural and industrial wealth to the war fronts and enlisting thousands of Algerians as soldiers and factory workers in war industries. Politically, under martial law, French policy aimed to suppress the significant developments in the national movement that had been emerging since the late 19th and early 20th centuries. After World War I, Emir Khaled Al-Jazairi began advocating openly for Algerian rights, marking the first instance of political activism on behalf of Algerians. This political momentum continued intensively, beginning in France itself, where Messali Hadj and other Algerian immigrants founded the North African Star in 1926 and the Algerian People's Party in 1937. Additionally, a group of scholars established the Association of Algerian Muslim Scholars in 1931, while, in 1927, a group of elite deputies formed the Federation of Algerian Muslim Elected Representatives.

During World War II, France froze all political and press activities, dissolving parties such as the Algerian People's Party and the Association of Algerian Muslim Scholars, and targeted nationalists from all sides. Messali Hadj was imprisoned again, Bashir Ibrahimi was exiled to the desert, and Abdelhamid Ben Badis was placed under house arrest. However, these repressive measures did not affect Ferhat Abbas, who was granted considerable freedom. Abbas utilized this freedom to represent the Algerian national

movement, seeing the Allies' landing in Algeria on November 8, 1942, as a turning point. He viewed it as an opportunity to bring the Algerian cause before the Allies. Thus, in the "Algerian Manifesto" issued on February 10, 1943, he called for the Allies to apply the principle of "the right of peoples to self-determination" outlined in the Atlantic Charter on August 14, 1941. Later, on March 14, 1944, he solidified this by organizing the Algerian national movement under the "Friends of the Manifesto and Liberty."

This dynamic sequence of rapidly unfolding events culminated tragically in the demonstrations of May 8, 1945, which concluded a critical phase in the Algerian national movement and ushered in a new era marked by numerous developments and transformations.

1. Introduction:

On the eve of World War II, France implemented several repressive measures against the Algerian national movement. It dissolved the Algerian People's Party, suspended all its publications, and imprisoned its leaders. The same was true for the Association of Algerian Muslim Scholars, which was dissolved; Abdelhamid Ben Badis was placed under house arrest, and Ibrahim Al-Bashir was exiled to the desert.¹ These oppressive actions were taken against the Algerian national movement to prevent any activity that might threaten France, especially since the movement had refused to support France in its war against Nazism and Fascism.²

These measures did not extend to members of the elite group who quickly declared their support for France in the war, with its leaders volunteering on various battlefronts. They believed this would improve the conditions of Algerians following a French victory, particularly as France had made significant promises to improve the status of its colonial populations after World War II. Thousands of conscripted Algerians were deployed to European battlefields, and economically, all Algerian resources were mobilized for the French war effort.³

One direct consequence of these arbitrary measures was the complete cessation of activities across all factions of the Algerian national movement. Between September 1939, when World War II broke out, and November 8, 1942, when Allied forces landed in North Africa, the Algerian national movement remained inactive. All attention was focused on Europe, especially after the fall of Paris in June 1940, with much of France under German occupation, splitting the nation between

Marshal Pétain's Vichy government, which signed a surrender document with Germany, and General de Gaulle's faction, which refused to surrender and established the Free French Government in London to liberate France.⁴

2. The Allies' Landing in Algeria and Its Impact on the Algerian National Movement:

- **The Algerians' Memorandum to the Allies:**

The Algerian national movement entered a new and highly significant phase on November 8, 1942. Although Paris had prohibited any activity since September 1939, this changed with the Allies' landing in Algeria. Despite being a purely military operation, the event had substantial political implications for the Algerian national movement, which sought to leverage this new international context to advance the Algerian cause.⁵ The Atlantic Charter, issued on August 14, 1941, played a central role, as it explicitly recognized the right of peoples to self-determination. Algerians saw themselves entitled to this right, especially given their substantial sacrifices in support of freedom, democracy, and human rights during the war.

November 8, 1942, thus marked a dividing line between two stages in the history of the Algerian national movement. Algerian nationalists established contacts with the Allies, particularly the United States, requesting assistance to achieve Algerian independence. Ferhat Abbas initiated this effort by reaching out to Robert Murphy, the Allied representative in North Africa, asking him to discuss Algeria's independence post-war. His letter to Murphy stated: "If America is committed to winning the war for the sake of democracy and freedom, what benefit is there for Algeria in winning a war that keeps it under the yoke of French sovereignty?"⁶ Given the enthusiasm shown by Ferhat Abbas after these meetings, some historians believe that the United States implicitly promised the Algerians a change in their legal status. Some even suggest that Ferhat Abbas met with President Franklin Roosevelt when he passed through Algeria, requesting an invitation to the San Francisco Conference based on the Allies' promise that colonized peoples would have the right to participate and express their voices at the peace conference.⁷

After the Allied forces' arrival in Algeria, the French authorities released several Algerians from prison, though this did not include members of the Algerian People's Party, whom the colonial authorities feared might exploit the new situation against them. The party had openly advocated for Algerian

independence even before World War II.⁸ Nevertheless, these actions inspired optimism among Algerians and encouraged nationalists to reach out to one another and even to the Allies to achieve independence, possibly under some form of American guardianship. It became clear after November 8, 1942, that the Algerian question was no longer about integrating within the French system or merely discussing personal status issues, as it had been before the war. Instead, it was about the legitimacy of Algeria's continued inclusion within this French system.⁹

This sentiment was embodied in communications between Algerian nationalists, with Ferhat Abbas playing a pivotal role. He intensified his contacts with various Algerian nationalist leaders, including unjailed leaders of the Algerian People's Party, such as Lamine Debaghine and Asselah Hocine, as well as members of the administrative council of the Association of Algerian Muslim Scholars, including Mohamed Khayreddine and Larbi Tebessi. These efforts culminated in a joint memorandum addressed to the representatives of the United States, Britain, and France, in which the Algerians expressed their willingness to support the Allied cause in World War II, provided they received their rights through the establishment of an Algerian constitution guaranteeing all political, economic, and social rights for Algerians and ensuring full rights and freedoms for all Algerians.

The memorandum included the following statement:¹⁰

"The representatives of Algerian Muslims, aware of the significant events occurring in their country since November 8, 1942, submit the following memorandum to the responsible authorities: "...If, as the President of the United States has declared, this war is a war for the liberation of peoples and individuals without discrimination by race or religion, then the Algerian Muslims are wholeheartedly joining this liberation struggle, securing their political liberation while simultaneously supporting the liberation of France. However, it is essential to remind that the population they represent is, in reality, deprived of the fundamental rights and freedoms enjoyed by others in this country, despite the sacrifices they have made and the formal and public promises given to them on various occasions. Therefore, before calling on Muslim masses to participate in any war effort, they demand the convening of a conference that includes elected representatives and qualified delegates of all Islamic organizations. The purpose of this conference is to establish a political, economic, and social constitution for Algerian

Muslims. The only condition that can instill in the Muslims of this country a profound sense of duty is a constitution based on social justice..."¹¹

3. The Algerian People's Manifesto, February 10, 1943:

- **Historical Context of the Manifesto's Issuance:**

The memorandum submitted by Algerians to France and the Allies, advocating for the improvement of their conditions, had a significantly positive impact, revitalizing the national movement, which had been dormant since the outbreak of World War II in September 1939. Even under the Vichy government aligned with Germany, the situation for Algerians remained unchanged. However, after issuing the memorandum, which included calls for the improvement of Algerian conditions post-war, the Algerians initiated a renewed movement to pressure the Allies to support their demands. The Algerian People's Declaration was issued on February 10, 1943, signed by 56 Muslim notables and elected officials. This text departed from the pre-war objectives, which aimed to obtain the right of French citizenship for a section of Algerians.¹² Ferhat Abbas prepared the manifesto after consulting with other national leaders he could reach, including leaders from the elite, scholars, and the Algerian People's Party. He based the manifesto on previous resolutions, such as the Islamic Congress Resolution of 1936 and the principles of the Algerian People's Party, drawing heavily on the spirit of the Atlantic Charter issued in August 1941. The manifesto included an introduction on Franco-Algerian relations since 1830, describing them as rooted in oppression and the deprivation of basic rights for Algerians. It also outlined Algerians' demands directed at the Allies and France under these circumstances.

- **Content of the Algerian Manifesto:**

The key demands of the manifesto were as follows:¹³

- ❖ **Condemnation and abolition of colonialism.**
- ❖ **Application of the principle of self-determination for all peoples.**
- ❖ **Granting Algeria its own constitution** (separate from the French constitution) to guarantee freedom and equality for all inhabitants, regardless of race or religion. The manifesto also called for the abolition of feudal landownership, extensive agricultural reforms, protection of workers' and farmers' rights and livelihoods, recognition of Arabic as an

official language on par with French, freedom of the press, the right to organize and assemble, free and compulsory education for all children, both boys and girls, and freedom of religion with the application of the principle of separation of religion and state across all faiths.

- ❖ **Immediate and effective participation of Algerians in their own governance**, similar to Britain's approach in India, General Catroux's policies in Syria, and the collaboration between Pétain and the Germans in Tunisia.
- ❖ **Release of all convicted and imprisoned political detainees from all parties.**

The Algerian People's Manifesto of February 10, 1943, was effectively a revolt against the conditions resulting from the outbreak of World War II, as it emerged after a period of complete inactivity in the national movement since the war began in September 1939. Its contents reflected the drafters' awareness of international and regional developments and a desire to capitalize on them. The manifesto's text was formulated as follows:¹⁴

The Algerian People's Manifesto, February 10, 1943

"Since November 8, 1942, Algeria has been under Anglo-American forces. This occupation, which separated the colony (Algeria) from France, created a true power struggle among the French in Algeria; each faction—whether Gaullist Republicans, Royalists, or Zionists—attempts in its own way to cooperate with the Allies, each aiming to defend its personal interests.

Amid this turmoil, everyone seems oblivious to the existence of eight and a half million natives. Yet Muslim Algeria, though indifferent to this rivalry, remains vigilant and cautious for its future. Today, the representatives of Algeria, responding to the social aspirations of their people, cannot neglect the duty to address their own destiny. In doing so, they do not renounce the French and Western culture they received and still hold dear. On the contrary, drawing from the moral and spiritual wealth of France and from the traditions of liberty of the French people, they find strength and justification for their current movement.

With a sense of their responsibilities before God, these representatives here sincerely express the deep aspirations of the entire Muslim Algerian people. This manifesto is more than a plea; it is, in truth, a testimony to history and a pledge of faith. Thus, we must look beyond past mistakes and outdated

expressions to find a reasonable solution that permanently ends this long-standing conflict.

We are in North Africa, at Europe's doorstep, and the civilized world witnesses this disordered scene—colonialism practiced upon a people of the white race, with a celebrated civilization, belonging to Mediterranean races, and capable of progress, who have shown a sincere desire to advance.

This colonialism cannot endure—politically or morally—due to the existence of two distinct communities, each foreign to the other. Its outright or concealed refusal to grant Muslim Algerians the right to integrate into French society has disillusioned all supporters of the integration policy proposed by the natives. Today, this policy is universally seen as an unattainable and dangerous tool in the hands of colonialism.

The time has ended when the Algerian Muslim was simply a Muslim desiring to be an Algerian Muslim. Since the revocation of the Crémieux Decree, in particular, Algerian nationality and citizenship now provide the Algerian Muslim with greater security as an Algerian Muslim, offering a clearer, more logical solution to his development and emancipation.

Economically, this colonialism has proven incapable of improving conditions and addressing the major issues it has created. Properly managed, well-organized, and thoroughly equipped, Algeria could support at least twenty million people in prosperity and ensure them social peace. However, as long as it remains under a colonial system, it cannot feed, educate, clothe, shelter, or even care for half of its current population.

Algeria's current infrastructure, sufficient only to ensure the comfort of a class representing merely one-eighth of the population, will remain superficial and laughable unless Algeria has a government born from the people and working for the people. This is the historical truth and cannot be otherwise.

President Roosevelt, in his statement on behalf of the Allies, guaranteed that the rights of all peoples, whether large or small, will be respected in the new world order. Based on this declaration, and to prevent any misunderstandings, and to deny any harmful intentions or aspirations that may arise in the future, the Algerian people now demand the following:

1. **Condemnation and elimination of colonialism**, meaning an end to the policy of annexation and the exploitation of one people by another. This colonialism is merely a collective form of individual slavery from medieval times, and, moreover, it is one of the main causes of rivalry and disputes among major powers.

2. **Application of the principle of self-determination for all countries**, whether large or small.
3. **Granting Algeria its own constitution** that ensures:
 - ❖ Absolute freedom and equality for all its inhabitants, without discrimination based on race or religion.
 - ❖ The end of feudal land ownership through a substantial agrarian reform, securing the right to livelihood for the large class of workers and farmers.
 - ❖ Recognition of Arabic as an official language on equal footing with French.
 - ❖ Freedom of the press and the right to assemble.
 - ❖ Free and compulsory education for all children, boys and girls.
 - ❖ Freedom of religion for all inhabitants, with the principle of separation of religion and state applied to all faiths.
4. **Immediate and effective participation of Algerian Muslims in their country's government**, similar to the approach taken by Her Majesty's Government in India, as General Catroux did in Syria, and the government of Marshal Pétain and the Germans in Tunisia. This government alone would be capable of engaging the Algerian people in the common struggle in an atmosphere of complete moral unity.
5. **Release of all convicted and imprisoned political detainees**, regardless of their party affiliation.

The guarantee and implementation of these points will secure the wholehearted and sincere commitment of Muslim Algeria to the struggle for the victory of justice and freedom.

Although the [Anfa or Casablanca] Conference was held on North African soil, it remained silent on the issue of colonialism, which deeply affected the Algerian people. To say that we must fight first only led to disappointment for us in **1918**. This claim cannot satisfy anyone. There are nations, like ours, that have made tremendous sacrifices and, at the end of the Great War, were forced to make even further sacrifices without attaining the freedom for which their sons had laid down their lives.

The Algerian people, well aware of the fate of promises made during the war, wish to see their future secured by tangible and immediate achievements. The Algerian people will accept all

sacrifices if the responsible authorities accept their freedom."¹⁵

- **France's Response to the Manifesto:**

The Governor-General of Algeria, General Catroux, who was appointed in June 1943, stated that France was not prepared to consider "premature and unthought-out measures, and any attempt that does not aim at maintaining the complete unity between Algeria and France will be rejected, as Algeria is an integral part of France." He declared, "Algeria is French and will remain French."¹⁶ The colonial authorities viewed the "Algerian Manifesto" as a liberation storm blowing from the East over North Africa... and sought to halt this storm.¹⁷ In response, the colonial authorities took intimidating actions against the Algerians. They dissolved the Financial Delegates Council and arrested both Ferhat Abbas and Abdelkader Saïah, exiling them to the south of the Oran region. These measures were intended to convey a message to the Algerians that France's power was still intact.

Simultaneously, the colonial authorities took additional steps to buy time and weaken the impact of the Manifesto movement. General de Gaulle established a committee of sixteen members (six Algerians and ten French) to study reform issues and make recommendations to the Free French Government, as announced in his speech in Constantine on December 12, 1943. This led to the issuance of the March 7, 1944 decree on French reforms in Algeria, as a response to the Algerian People's Manifesto of February 10, 1943.

These political reforms were outlined in several provisions. The first provision granted Algerians the same rights and responsibilities as the French. The second stated that Algerians and French would be equal before the law, eliminating exceptional laws, with Algerian Muslims subject to Islamic law in judicial matters. The third provision allowed certain categories of Algerians to acquire French citizenship and register on the French electoral roll, including former soldiers in the French army, state-employed civil servants, local chiefs (bashaghas and caïds), and other loyalists to the French administration. The fourth provision extended French citizenship to additional groups of Algerians, while the fifth provision granted all French residents in Algeria the right to vote and run for Algerian councils without restrictions. The contents of this law included the following:

French Citizenship Law for Some Algerians, March 7, 1944

- ❖ **Article 1:** Muslim French citizens in Algeria will enjoy all the rights and bear the responsibilities of non-Muslim French citizens. All official positions, whether civil or military, will be open to them.
- ❖ **Article 2:** The law will apply without distinction between Muslim and non-Muslim French citizens. All legal provisions used against Muslim French citizens are considered repealed. However, Muslim French citizens who have not explicitly declared their intent to follow the general French legal framework will remain subject to Islamic law and Berber customs regarding personal status and property rights.
- ❖ **Article 3:** The following groups will be considered French citizens and placed on the same voting register as non-Muslim male citizens over the age of 21:
 - Veterans and holders of any of the following degrees: Higher education diploma, secondary education baccalaureate, higher certification, primary certification, upper primary studies certification, secondary studies certificate, graduation certificate from a national high school or national professional school, whether industrial, agricultural, or commercial, and Arabic or Berber language certificates.
 - Civil servants or administrators employed by the state, provinces, municipalities, or accredited services.
 - Those holding permanent positions as specified by future regulations.
 - Members of chambers of commerce and agriculture, bashaghas, aghas, and caids who have held their positions for at least three years and have not been dismissed.
 - Individuals who have been elected or have previously been elected as deputies in financial councils, municipal councilors in fully empowered municipalities, or as community chiefs.
 - Members of the Legion of Honor, the Liberation Order, holders of the Military Medal, the Work Medal, and members of labor councils within legally established labor federations who have held their positions for at least three years.
 - Members of notarization councils and certified agents.

- Members of the administrative councils of workers and farmers of the Public Welfare Association and members of subcommittees for workers and farmers.
- ❖ **Article 4:** Other Muslim French citizens may be permitted to acquire French citizenship. The Constituent National Assembly will determine the procedure for this change. From this date, Muslim French citizens in this category, male and over 21, will be subject to the provisions of the law of **February 9, 1919**, and will be listed on the electoral roll for electing deputies to municipal councils, general councils, and financial councils, as specified in the above-mentioned law. These deputies in general and financial councils will make up half of the total members of these councils. The same 50% representation will apply to municipal councils, except where the ratio of Muslim French citizens to the total population is lower, in which case their representation will reflect the proportion of Muslim residents.
- ❖ **Article 5:** French citizens are entitled to serve on Algerian councils without discrimination, regardless of their electoral district, and are not subject to regular eligibility requirements.
- ❖ **Article 6:** The laws currently in effect concerning the residents of the M'zab Valley and the recognized desert areas will remain in force.
- ❖ **Article 7:** The French Committee of National Liberation will issue a decree specifying the methods for applying this law.¹⁸

4. Friends of the Manifesto and Liberty Movement, March 1944:

- **Establishment:**

The Algerian national movement considered the reforms introduced by the March 7, 1944 law to be too delayed and lacking immediate implementation. Even within this law, some provisions included lengthy timelines for full application. Consequently, all Algerian nationalists rejected the law, including those who had previously advocated for some of its provisions, such as the assimilationist elite. This rejection meant that Algerian nationalists continued to demand the goals outlined in the February 10, 1943 Manifesto. They subsequently adopted a new, more organized, precise, and clear approach than before.

Algerians rejected the March 7, 1944 law, deeming it outdated in light of domestic events, such as the February 10, 1943 Algerian People's Manifesto, which clearly expressed opposition to colonial policies. Internationally, the developments of World War II, which spread ideas of freedom, equality, democracy, and the right of peoples to self-determination, further highlighted the inadequacies of the law, rendering it a "dead-born" project with nothing new to offer the national cause.¹⁹

Ferhat Abbas continued to lead the Algerian national movement, but this time, he aimed to create a more precise, organized, and comprehensive movement by uniting all reformist and independence-oriented factions in a single entity to confront the law. The national movement had become stronger, more aware, and more experienced, entering a new phase of direct challenge and confrontation with the French that was unprecedented.²⁰

In March 1944, the Friends of the Manifesto and Liberty (AML) was founded in Sétif. It included members from the deputies, the elite, the Algerian People's Party, and the Association of Algerian Muslim Scholars. This movement was a coalition united around a single project, with Ferhat Abbas as its secretary-general. The weekly newspaper Equality, published in French, became the official voice of the AML. Quickly, it grew to become the official and sole representative of the Algerian national movement, attracting a large number of Algerians, with French reports estimating membership at over half a million. Its founding statement declared that it "defends the demands recommended by the February 10, 1943, Manifesto, spreads new ideas among Algerians, and condemns the colonial regime in Algeria, describing it as a form of slavery."²¹

Within a short period, the AML succeeded in building a solid popular base. This success was due to Ferhat Abbas's outreach efforts to other national leaders for their support. He contacted Messali Hadj, who was imprisoned in Lambèse in Tazoult, Batna, discussing the new national project. Although Messali accepted the idea, he stated to Abbas that Algeria's liberation could only be achieved through revolution. Nevertheless, he allowed Abbas to pursue this effort, enabling members of the Algerian People's Party to mobilize and operate once more under this new party's framework—not necessarily due to a belief in its principles but as a means for activists to advance their demands and ideals within a legally permissible structure. Abbas also reached out to Bashir Ibrahimi in his desert exile, who shared a similar stance,

allowing the association's members a renewed outlet for activity within the AML.²²

- **Basic Law of the Friends of the Manifesto and Liberty Movement:**

The foundational law of the Friends of the Manifesto and Liberty (AML) party encompassed a series of principles that highlighted the unique character of this movement and the historical context in which it emerged:

- ❖ **Article 1:** An organization was established in Algeria, taking on the responsibility of presenting and defending the “Algerian People’s Manifesto” before both Algerian and French public opinion, as submitted to the relevant authorities on **February 10, 1943**. This organization, advocating for freedom of expression for all Algerians, was named the “Friends of the Manifesto and Liberty.”
- ❖ **Article 2:** This organization opposes colonial arrogance and the abuses of imperialist forces in Africa and Asia through freedom of expression, writing, and public statements. It condemns the use of force against vulnerable peoples. The AML also aims to contribute to building a new world in which human dignity is respected globally.²³
- **Goals of the Friends of the Manifesto and Liberty Movement:**
 - ❖ Defend the February 10, 1943 Algerian People’s Manifesto.
 - ❖ Spread new ideas of the Friends of the Manifesto and Liberty.
 - ❖ Denounce oppression, racial discrimination, and tyranny.
 - ❖ Provide relief to all victims of repression, persecution, and unjust exceptional punitive laws.
 - ❖ Convince the masses of the legitimacy of the Friends of the Manifesto and Liberty movement.
 - ❖ Emphasize the idea of establishing an independent Algerian state federated with a new anti-colonial and anti-exploitation French Republic, fostering a spirit of solidarity among Muslim, Christian, and Jewish Algerians, promoting equality and cooperation in both good times and hardships.²⁴

Thus, on the eve of the May 8, 1945 massacres, Algeria faced a contradictory situation: on one side, an escalating national awareness and determination for liberation among Algerians, and on the other, France’s staunch refusal to alter the legal status that annexed Algeria to France, as declared on June 22,

1834. This contradiction became starkly evident in the massacres of May 8, 1945.

5. The May 8, 1945 Massacres:

- **Background of the May 8, 1945 Massacres:**

The period from November 1942 to the end of World War II marked a significant turning point in the Algerian national movement's ideas and organization. For the first time, it united around a cohesive list of demands with an internal sense of awareness and determination. Additionally, the movement's organizational structure became unified and represented by the Friends of the Manifesto and Liberty (AML). This shift occurred during a unique international context with the Allied forces' landing in Algeria and a national context marked by the founding of the Arab League in March 1945. These internal and external factors harmonized to create an unprecedented internal momentum for the Algerian national movement. According to Algerian historian Abu al-Qasim Saadallah, Algeria was prepared for a moment of liberation.²⁵

However, this moment of liberation was perceived differently by Algerians and the French. Algerians saw it as an opportunity for independence, reclaiming national sovereignty, and the end of colonialism in all its forms. They sought to benefit from the global wave of change advocating freedom, equality, human rights, and the right to self-determination, as outlined in the August 1941 Atlantic Charter, the Allies' landing in Algeria in November 1942, and the resolutions from the Casablanca Conference in January 1943, where U.S. President Franklin Roosevelt and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill discussed Algeria's future.²⁶

France, however, had an entirely different view of this post-Allied landing phase, seeing it as a temporary and exceptional situation. Paris remained committed to the December 19, 1834 legal status, which annexed Algeria as "a piece of French soil."²⁷ Even in General de Gaulle's January 1945 "African Union" project in Brazzaville, Algeria was excluded from the new policies directed at French-protected and overseen states. The cooperation framework outlined in the Brazzaville document did not apply to Algeria, which Paris still considered part of France.²⁸

French policy did not appear to be influenced by the wave of changes taking place in Algeria since the beginning of the war, particularly since the Allied landing in November 1942. However, Algeria's evolving situation called for bolder reform

measures from France. Even General Catroux, who served as Governor-General from June 1943, implicitly acknowledged this, recognizing that Algerian Muslims had not attained their rightful place within the French community.²⁹

- **Course of the May 8, 1945 Massacres:**

Amid the profound contradiction between the aspirations of national leaders and the colonial doctrine, Algeria witnessed the events of May 8, 1945, which turned into massacres and crimes against humanity, resulting in over 45,000 martyrs. The wave of protests began on the first day of May 1945, spreading across all Algerian cities. Mostly peaceful, these demonstrations called for the release of Messali Hadj, the only national leader still imprisoned, and demanded Algerian independence while condemning colonialism and oppression. Protesters raised the national flag, and many cities, including Béjaïa, Oran, Annaba, and Guelma, saw significant demonstrations, with over five thousand people gathering in Sétif alone.³⁰

On May 8, 1945, as the Allies officially celebrated their victory in World War II, Algerians seized the opportunity to voice their desire to benefit from this global triumph of freedom, democracy, and human rights. Believing they were entitled to the same rights, having participated in the war and sacrificed for its principles, Algerians sought to benefit from the promise of "the right of peoples to self-determination" as stated in various World War II charters.³¹

During the Allied victory celebrations, Algerians organized their own gatherings. On that day, calls for freedom, independence, and the release of prisoners—especially Messali Hadj—resounded, and the Algerian flag was raised. In Sétif, the day coincided with the weekly market, drawing thousands of people near the Grand Mosque. Holding the national flag, they carried signs reading "Long live independent Algeria," "Down with colonialism," "Long live the Arab League," and "Free Messali." As the march reached the Café de France, police commissioner Olivieri attempted to seize the national flag from Bouzid Saâl, a young protester, who resisted, prompting Olivieri to shoot and kill him, injuring several others. This event marked the start of what Ferhat Abbas described as the "tragic massacres." Similar events erupted in other cities, including Guelma, Kherrata, Algiers, Béjaïa, Batna, Khenchela, Annaba, and the Kabylie region, but the violence was most intense and bloody in Sétif. As the news spread, witnesses, numbering over fifteen thousand, scattered across villages, recounting the horror of mass killings and human extermination.³²

The demonstrations might have stopped there, but the colonial authorities had been awaiting an opportunity to suppress what General Catroux³³ referred to as this "national storm." Thus, an unjustifiably brutal crackdown began. France deployed excessive violence, using all military units, including commandos and all branches of the French army—infantry, navy, and air force—alongside police, gendarmes, and militias formed by settlers, which committed numerous massacres.³⁴ The combined military forces and political factions, from the far right to the far left, united to punish and annihilate the Algerians for the "crime of demanding their natural rights." The far right executed Algerians mercilessly and collectively, while communists called for their punishment for "causing utter chaos." The communist Air Minister in De Gaulle's government, Charles Tillon, ordered airstrikes on Algerian villages, bombing them entirely, with French naval forces shelling coastal villages.

An American report noted that the French used a significant number of aircraft to strike Algerian civilians, with French bombers destroying entire populated villages. French planes conducted over 300 sorties in a single day, leading American observers to question the justification for such intense violence against the actions taken by Algerians on May 8, 1945.³⁵

- **Consequences of the May 8, 1945 Massacres:**

Despite France's attempt to downplay the number of casualties from these massacres, estimating in some reports that they did not exceed 1,500 deaths, the reality, as reported by foreign sources such as American newspapers, indicated over 45,000 deaths, with some estimates reaching 100,000 martyrs.³⁶ The world had rarely seen repression on the scale of that enacted by the French colonial authorities. To conceal this crime, France took swift and violent measures, intensifying its oppressive actions.³⁷ The colonial authorities arrested leaders of the Friends of the Manifesto and Liberty movement, including Ferhat Abbas and Dr. Saâdane, dissolved the AML, and detained Bashir Ibrahimi along with tens of thousands of members and supporters from the Association of Algerian Muslim Scholars and other movements. These individuals were accused of threatening French sovereignty domestically and internationally, and they remained imprisoned until March 1946.³⁸

The massacres continued throughout May 1945, leaving enduring impacts for years. The rift between Algerians and French deepened, with the wounds becoming more painful and resentment against colonial authorities intensifying. The

bloodshed and the thousands of Algerian bodies left in the wake of these massacres extinguished any notion of coexistence or assimilation, once desired by some Algerians.³⁹ After this, the Algerian national movement abandoned any call for integration, and an insurmountable gulf of blood separated Algerians from the French.

While the world celebrated the triumph of values like freedom, justice, and equality, the Algerian people faced systematic extermination carried out by the “Free French Government.” In the words of Bashir Ibrahimi, president of the Association of Algerian Muslim Scholars, “If the history of France were written with pens of light, this shameful chapter of the massacres of Sétif, Guelma, and Kherrata would erase all of that history.”⁴⁰ Thus, World War II ended with the Allies’ victory, but in Algeria, it concluded with horrific massacres. Although France used all possible means to suppress the rising national movement, it ultimately deepened the divide with Algerians, a divide that became even more evident in the developments Algeria witnessed after World War II.⁴¹

6. Conclusion

During World War II, the Algerian national movement experienced a significant shift in its demands and activities. Despite the repressive measures enacted by colonial authorities on the eve of the war, the movement resumed its activities with bold political determination. Leveraging the Allied landing in Algeria in November 1942, Ferhat Abbas presented a list of demands to the Allies in the February 1943 Algerian Manifesto, later expanding his popular base by founding the Friends of the Manifesto and Liberty in March 1944. However, France’s stance remained unchanged regarding Algeria’s legal status, established after the colonial conquest, viewing Algeria as French territory that could not be altered. Through the March 1944 reforms, France attempted to divert the rising tide of Algerian nationalism, which sought to capitalize on the international conditions tied to World War II. As Algerian historian Abu al-Qasim Saadallah noted, these reforms were merely “throwing dust in the eyes,” similar to the February 1919 reforms, which also informed the March 1944 measures.

By the end of World War II, the Algerian equation consisted of two irreconcilable sides: the Algerian national stance, which, through the 1943 Manifesto and subsequent political activity, aimed for a fundamental change after more than a century of colonial rule; and the French position, steadfastly adhering to

the 1834 decree that annexed Algeria to France. The May 8, 1945 events highlighted the impossibility of reconciling these opposing positions, setting the stage for the post-war developments in Algeria, especially within the national movement, which drew its trajectory from the experiences during this period.

7. Endnotes

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²⁶ Jacques Simon, *L'Algérie dans la Seconde guerre mondiale*, L'Harmattan, Paris, 2015.

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³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

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