Algeria Wins Its Independence, July 3, 1962

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Ending of colonial status for African country

Principal Personages

Charles André Joseph Marie de Gaulle, President of the Fifth French Republic

Youssef ben Khedda, Prime Minister of the provisional Algerian government

Louis Joxe, de Gaulle's minister in Algeria

Ferhat Abbas, first Prime Minister of the Algerian Provisional Government

Maurice Challe, General, French general who played a leading role in the revolt of 1961

Summary of Event

Algeria was the chief area of French settlement overseas, and had been an integral part of France since 1945. It operated, however, on a double standard of citizenship; the European settlers were all-powerful and regarded themselves as having as much right to power as the native population.

Stimulated by Pan-Arabism and Arab successes in Egypt, the native Algerians revolted in 1954; the French decided to repress them and continued this policy for the rest of the decade. The Fourth French Republic vacillated in its attitude towards Algeria, frequently following periods of negotiation with the rebels with new waves of military action. While the ministry in France wavered, the French civilians and military personnel in Algeria, the colons, agreed that the only possible policy was to resist the rebels to the last. The rebels insisted on total independence for Algeria, and the colons knew that independence would lead to a Moslem-ruled country which would terminate their privileges.

The war in Algeria promised to be long, costly, and cruel. By 1956, the French had 400,000 troops in Algeria, including many young conscripts. The war was a merciless struggle in which the French replied to the cruelty of their enemies by the use of physical torture. In France, the war troubled the consciences of the intellectuals and clergy. The government resorted to arbitrary arrest and press censorship to silence its critics. The French army, having suffered a serious loss of prestige through its defeat in Indochina, was anxious to defeat the rebels and restore its glory.

In 1958, the Fourth Republic was attacked by the colons, by army officers, and by the
majority of Moslem Algerians for failing to provide a settlement satisfactory to each group. On May 13, 1958, a riot occurred in Algiers, and the main government building was seized by French dissidents who opposed independence. These dissidents planned to attack the French homeland and take over the government in Paris. General Charles de Gaulle offered the only alternative to civil war and chaos. On June 1, 1958, he was installed as premier, with the power to govern for six months by decree and to rewrite the constitution. At the end of this time de Gaulle established himself as president of the Fifth French Republic.

De Gaulle had been called back primarily to deal with the Algerian problem. At first, he procrastinated and attempted to give both the colonists and the Moslems the impression that he favored their causes. The Constantine plan, drawn up in 1959, was designed to raise the Moslem standard of living and to spur Algerian economic development. De Gaulle refused to deal with rebel leaders who had organized a provisional government of the Algerian Republic and he permitted new attempts at military pacification. On September 16, 1959, he presented Algeria with three choices: to secede from France, to be integrated with France, or to exist in close association with France. As a consequence of de Gaulle's pronouncement, open insurrection broke out among the colonists and some of the military in Algeria. By June, 1960, de Gaulle realized that no alternative existed to negotiations with the rebels. Ferhat Abbas, the leader of the Algerian Provisional Government, met with Louis Joxe, French minister for Algerian affairs, and opened talks near Paris. The talks came to a quick end due to intransigence on the part of both parties.

The rebels in Algeria faced many internal problems of their own. They wanted to influence the Moslem population in favor of independence, and at the same time, under the leadership of Ferhat Abbas, they were attempting to establish themselves as leaders of the revolutionary movement. These rebels were afraid that de Gaulle might negotiate with another Algerian group.

After the failure of the peace negotiations with Ferhat Abbas in 1960, de Gaulle held a referendum in France on his proposal to give Algeria the right of self-determination, and three-fourths of those voting approved. The colonists and French officers in Algeria concluded that de Gaulle was a traitor, and under the leadership of General Challe they attempted, on April 22, 1961, to seize control of Algeria in order to keep it French. Panic ensued in Paris as rumors of an invasion from Algeria circulated. De Gaulle used his personal influence to order the army to obey the legally constituted authority. The revolt collapsed within four days. Terrorism continued in Algeria in opposition to independence.

In the midst of this chaos, new talks were begun with the rebels in February, 1962, and agreement was finally reached on March 18. The Algerians were to decide by plebiscite whether or not they desired independence; France was to retain the right to oil deposits in the Sahara, and would give financial aid to Algeria after independence; any colonist would be free to return to France. After these agreements were announced, a new wave of terrorism gripped Algeria. Europeans by the thousands began to flee from Algeria to France. Some 800,000 refugees eventually fled.

On July 1, 1962, the Algerians voted overwhelmingly for independence, and on July 3, de Gaulle proclaimed the independence of Algeria. A struggle ensued in Algeria for political control between Mohammed ben Bella, leader of the Algerian National Liberation Front, and Youssef ben Khedda, Prime Minister of the provisional Algerian government. The Algerian army stepped in and settled the issue in favor of ben Bella who thus became the first leader of an independent Algeria.

FURTHER READINGS


A biased account of the events leading to Algerian independence, written during the revolution as a plea for a French Algeria.


A collection of essays originally given as lectures by the author.


Concentrates on Algerian nationalism, its historical antecedents, and the conduct of the revolution.


A study of the historical position of Algeria written before Algeria became independent.


This study deals with the role of the French army in the Algerian war for independence.


Examines native Algerian culture and the veneer of French culture placed over it.


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