French colonisation (1830-1962)

Algeria was annexed to France despite intense popular resistance. Resettlement programmes were implemented by the French government using land-owning incentives to draw French citizens to the new colony. The French introduced a wide variety of measures to 'modernize' Algeria, imposing European-style culture, infrastructure, economics, education, industries and government institutions on the country. The colonials exploited the country's agricultural resources for the benefit of France. The concept of French Algeria became ingrained in the French collective mind.

This period of early French influence over the country saw a huge drop in Algeria's native population, as it fell from around 4 million in 1830 to only 2.5 million in 1890.

The French colonials looked upon the Muslim populace as an inferior underclass that had to be tightly controlled. Muslims were not allowed to hold public meetings, bear arms or leave their districts or villages without government permission. Although they were officially French subjects they could not become French citizens unless they renounced Islam and converted to Christianity. It was a brutal, racist regime which alienated the vast majority of Algerians. The French attempt at acculturating an Algerian elite backfired badly. Those few schooled in French academies and infused with French values suffered the inherent racism of their French overlords and became the nucleus of the Algerian nationalist movement.

The Algerian nationalist movement emerged between the two World Wars, first simply demanding civil rights for the indigenous peoples of Algeria. The French government proposed concessions to the nationalists but these were blocked by French colonial reactionaries in the National Assembly. The colonials resisted any reform giving Muslims equal rights until, after 20 years of fruitless non-violent activism, the frustrated nationalists formed a militant anti-French party in 1939 called the Friends of the Manifesto and Liberty, combining Islamic and communist factions.

In the aftermath of World War II the French government revived attempts to bring Muslim Algerians into the decision-making process but these were too little and too late to offset deep-rooted colonial attitudes and a growing mutual hatred between the French and their Muslim subjects. Algerian Muslim attitudes had also hardened and an increasing number of nationalists were calling for armed revolution.
By the 1950s revolutionaries were being hounded into exile or hiding and the stage was being set for the Algerian War of Independence.

In March 1954 a revolutionary committee was formed in Egypt by Ahmed Ben Bella and eight other Algerians in exile which became the nucleus of the National Liberation Front (FLN). On November 1st of the same year the FLN declared war on the French through a spectacular simultaneous attack on government buildings, military installations, police stations and communications facilities in the country.

The populist guerrilla war paralyzed the country and forced the French government to send 400,000 troops to try and put down the uprising. However, the courage and ruthlessness of FLN fighters and their tactical use of terrorism dragged the French into the reactive trap of bloody reprisals against the general population, which served to galvanize the Algerians and strengthen the revolution.

The cruelty and brutality of French colonial forces and the government’s inability to find a political solution turned world opinion against France. The French use of concentration camps, torture, and mass executions of civilians suspected of aiding the rebels, isolated France and elicited invidious comparisons with totalitarian regimes and Nazism.

The French government was caught between a colonial policy based upon racism and exploitation, and its place as a standard-bearer of democracy. On the one hand, the French colonials were intransigent. On the other, the world community was calling for a cessation of hostilities and a political solution.

In 1958 colonials and French army officers joined forces to bring down the French government and demanded the return of General Charles De Gaulle to lead France to victory over the Algerian Nationalists and the preservation of French Algeria. De Gaulle returned to power with the support of the political extreme right but, realizing that the war could never be won, announced a referendum allowing Algerians to choose their own destiny, be it independence or remaining part of France.

De Gaulle's move was seen as betrayal by the colonials, the extreme right wing and certain parts of the military. The OAS, a militant terrorist organization, was formed by an alliance of these groups with the aim of overthrowing the general. The OAS carried out a ruthless terrorist campaign against the FLN and the French government, but they were doomed to failure.

In March 1962 a cease fire was negotiated between the French government and the FLN and De Gaulle's referendum was held in July. The Algerian people spoke with a single voice. They voted for independence. Following the referendum the French departed from Algeria en masse. By the end of the year most colonials had evacuated the country that had once been French Algeria.