

REVISITING COLONIAL BEHAVIOUR IN FRENCH ALGERIA AND BRITISH INDIA

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Abstract: The British and the French differed in both the approach and method adopted in governing their overseas subjects during their colonial enterprise in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This had a tremendous impact on the psyche of the colonized and was a determinant factor in shaping the nature of the relationship between the colonizers and colonized before and after independence. Therefore, this paper seeks to juxtapose the colonial behaviour of two colonial powers, French and British, in two major colonies, Algeria and India.

Keywords: British India, French Algeria, colonialism, resistance, violence, racism

When reading about the history of French involvement in Algeria and British involvement in India, one can hardly fail to realize the huge difference in the kind of colonial policies that were pursued in these two former colonies by both colonial powers, France and Britain. Indeed, French Algeria and British India were two totally different contexts where the legacy of colonialism is well reflected in the post-independence era. Therefore, the objective of this comparative study is to juxtapose two different colonial systems, French and British, in these two major colonies, Algeria and India.

Both Algeria and India held a special place in the eyes of their respective colonizers. For Britain, India was the Jewel in the Crown and the British could not afford to lose such an important colony, given the fact that, besides being largely self-financing, it represented a significant source of wealth to Britain. This was confirmed by Lawrence James, who quoted a contemporary saying that “without India, Great Britain would subside into a third-rate state.” (James 278)

On the other hand, Algeria, besides its economic significance, was seen as a geo-strategically important colony for France which

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served as a gate, or a springboard, to the Dark Continent as well as an essential element through which France would maintain its pivotal role as a global power. This explains why Algeria was directly annexed to the metropolis and became a set of French *Départements*. In fact, Algeria was upheld to the extent that the Mediterranean Sea was often likened by many French officials to the Seine River (in Paris), dividing France into two halves. Edmond-Marcel Naegelen, a key French politician, was once quoted as telling the socialist daily *Le Populaire* that losing Algeria would mean “losing in quick succession all of Africa, then the French Union, it would make France fall to the level of a second rate power, and even a vassal power.” (Evans 130)

However, the discrepancy between French and British colonialism in Algeria and India is so flagrant that they can by no means be put on the same footing. First, the circumstances that led France and Britain to conquer both colonies were different. In the case of Algeria, there was a decision in Paris to invade it which used the flyswap incident¹ as a pretext. In reality, by invading Algeria, France wanted to restore its past glory and also wanted to divert the attention of the French people from their internal problems. In other words, the French ruling class wanted to unite the nation behind a popular cause – and hence encourage a sense of patriotism among ordinary French citizens – as a ploy to forestall any attempt at questioning and seeking socio-economic change that would not be in their interests. The British Empire in India, however, was not purpose-built, but rather, as many scholars would agree, was acquired in ‘a fit of absence of mind’ – though this was not always the case throughout the whole Sub-continent. In fact, the local conditions in the Indian Sub-continent in the eighteenth century, characterized mainly by a state of lawlessness and insecurity that prevailed in the wake of the passing of emperor Aurangzib led the East India Company to get involved – willy-nilly – in internal affairs. Thus, for the sake of their survival, the East India Company officials had to react given the new – rather hostile – context that resulted from the disintegration of the Mughal Empire. In this regard, Robert Johnson states that “British imperialism replaced existing empires or their decaying remains, such as the Mughals” (Johnson 105); therefore, had the Mughal empire remained intact, the

¹ This was a diplomatic incident (also known as the ‘Fan Affair’) that took place in 1827 when the ruler of Algeria (the Dey of Algiers) struck the French Consul-General with a flyswap.

English East India Company would probably have never changed its mission in the region, i.e. from a trading to a ruling one.

In addition, most of the annexations in the Indian Sub-continent were the initiatives of men-on-the-spot who, acting partly out of self-defence and partly out of ambition and avidity for the acquisition of new territories, carried out the task of conquering India without seeking prior approval from London. The late British scholar Barbara Ward pointed out the fact that very often the men-on-the-spot acted on their own. As she put it: "I often think that if, in the earlier phases of the occupation of India, men like Lord Wellesley had been obliged to cable: 'Would you like me to take over the rest of Bengal?' the expansion of British power in India might have taken a different course." (Ward 96)

Unlike Britain's, French colonial rule was characterized, from the beginning to the end, by violence and blood-letting. Corroborating this statement, Raymond Rudorff, in his landmark book entitled *The Myth of France*, brought to light the very contradictions between what the French claimed as regards their colonization (notably of Algeria), that it was part of French *rayonnement* and *mission civilisatrice*, and the reality. He wrote: "No country's colonial history is edifying. France's is simply more tragic than most others. Culture apart, French *rayonnement* throughout the world has had the smell of gunpowder and high explosive from 1830's until 1960's." (Rudorff 21)

Along the same line of thought, many contemporaries bore witness to the high level of violence they had seen when French troops were invading Algeria as well as in the aftermath. One of these was the distinguished French poet Alphonse de Lamartine who admitted the fact that the "Algerian conquest was 'an atrocious, impious war'." (Rudorff 26).

In reality, the resort to the disproportionate use of violence inflicted on the civilian population in Algeria knew no limits and French officers were expert at devising new unconventional, inhuman methods in order to subjugate the country. This contradicted with the very principles of the so-called *mission civilisatrice* the French claimed to be pursuing there. For the sake of illustration, it is worth mentioning General Thomas Robert Bugeaud, whose bloody involvement in Algeria earned him worldwide notoriety. When arriving to Algeria, General Bugeaud was determined to employ all the ruthless means he had learnt throughout his career as a military man in order to bring the popular resistance, led by the then national resistance leader, Emir

Abdelkader, to a halt. These means included the shooting of everything that moved and the destruction of everything that stood in his way, and in the process, many villages were totally destroyed and their crops flamed. Indeed, the destruction of crops and hence, the livelihood of the civilians, a method widely known as the scorched-earth policy, was systematically used by Bugeaud in order to limit the resources that could, to use his own words, “nourish the enemy”. (Rudorff 25)

Another example reflecting the harshness of French colonial policy in repressing local resistance was the French overreaction to the Mokrani popular uprising in Kabylia in 1871. The man in charge of dealing with the Mokrani insurrection was General Galliffer, who was not very different from General Bugeaud in the scale of violence he employed. In this respect, the American scholar, Patricia Lorcin, asserted that the reprisals on the civilian population in the wake of the uprising were so cruel that they can by no means be “commensurate with the insurrectionary events.” (Lorcin 174) Moreover, to add insult to injury, after this uprising had been quelled, the whole population of the region was indiscriminately made to pay for it. First, an exorbitant sum of money had to be paid to the French as indemnity for the insurrection. Even worse to come was the confiscation of lands. According to Patricia Lorcin, in addition to the total of 31,500,000 francs of reparation exacted from the insurgents, the French confiscated most of the arable lands, even those belonging to the tribes that did not take part in the rebellion, which included 324,000 hectares of collective land holdings and 250,000 hectares of individual land holdings. (Lorcin 174)

The innovative spirit among the French army personnel in devising new methods to quell local resistance was to persist until the end of French rule in Algeria, as confirmed by Raymond Rudorff, who observed that “the mind of Bugeaud himself was the mind of such generals as Salan and Massu.” (Rudorff 24)

According to many contemporaries, all this was taking place with the connivance of Paris. In fact, some even went further in stating that not only did the then French government wink at such cruel activities, but it did encourage them. In this respect, Raymond Rudorff claimed that the French government sanctioned the methods used in Algeria by the generals Bugeaud and Galliffer. Regarding the latter, and as a token of gratitude for his outstanding ‘achievements’ in putting down the Mokrani insurrection so brutally, he was generously rewarded in

that he was appointed military governor of Paris in 1880, Minister of War in 1899 and a lion of Paris society. (Rudorff 28)

Later on, with the technological progress, which resulted in the development of the means of communication, combined with an international opinion very hostile to all forms colonialism, the French government became determined to conceal the reality from the outside world and took effective measures to intercept any reports sent abroad depicting crimes committed by French security personnel in Algeria. With this objective in mind, and at the height of the Algerian war of independence, French political leaders always exhorted their military staff to 'finish the job properly' and without making any 'mistakes' or leaving loose ends.

In his very recent book *Algeria: France's Undeclared War*, Professor Martin Evans quoted a personal testimony by General Allard saying that he was often present at one of the several meetings held with French politicians during which the latter gave Colonel Bigeard carte blanche to resort to all means in order to exterminate the FLN fighters. When presented with statistics regarding the military 'achievements', one of these politicians expressed his great satisfaction. Here, it is worth quoting the short exchange between Bigeard and that politician that followed: "Mr Minister, do you think that we arrive at such results with the procedures of a choir boy?" The only reply was that he should be careful that too much mud did not stick." (Evans 206)

The practise of torture in French Algeria became commonplace. Despite all attempts by the French authorities to cover up the effects of the reality, news of such atrocities was always smuggled out of the colony. Professor Martin Evans reported a first-hand account given by Robert Bonnaud, one of those who were revolted by the Gestapo-like methods of torture in the interrogation centres throughout Algeria: "The suspect is lashed to the table with chains in wet rags that are attached to electrodes. A gendarme turns the handle on the field telephone; the strength of the electric charge varies according to the rate at which he turns the handle; he knows that variations in the current are especially painful ... The electrodes are fixed to the temples, to the underside of the tongue, to the genitals as well as to any other sensitive part of the body ... Such torture leaves hardly any marks." (Evans 212)

Actually, there were always leakages. Those very few slightly soft-hearted French soldiers, feeling remorseful, in person admitted

having practised or seen Gestapo-like methods being practised by their comrades against Algerian freedom-fighters as well as anyone suspected of being involved in freedom fighting. This was confirmed in a personal report written in December 1955 by the then French Director-General of the *Sûreté Nationale* in which he explicitly stated that the methods of interrogation used by the French police in Algeria “belonged far more to the Gestapo than to a democratic force.” (Rudorff 36-37)

Such inhuman torturing methods pushed some scholars and contemporaries to liken France to Nazi Germany. Raymond Rudorff, for instance, stated that: “Of the so-called “‘civilized’ Western nations, it is France, after Germany, which has earned the melancholy reputation of a conquering power that has allowed torture to be used systematically in her territories.” (Rudorff 30)

This statement implies that Britain can by no means be put in the same category with France when tackling the issue of the treatment of the colonial subjects. Indeed, no one can deny the fact that violence was not so typical of British rule in India. Apart from the happenings of 1857, probably the gravest incident that occurred in British India where the British hands got stained with blood, was the Amristar Massacre of 1919. This was a serious blunder committed by General Dyer when he opened fire on a crowd gathering peaceably in Jallianwala Bagh, an open area in Amristar, to listen to nationalists talking about the prospect of self-government and express their opposition to the Government’s decision to extend the wartime martial laws. The result was 379 killed and more than 1200 wounded.

This fateful event has often been regarded by many scholars as unique rather than typical, though nationalist historians have held a different opinion. In the light of this idea, General Dyer’s irresponsible actions are seen as a special reaction to special circumstances. First, Karl de Schweinitz argued that Dyer’s move was vindictive and that his hostility towards the local population of Amristar was nurtured by the recent fatal attack on an innocent European woman, Miss Sherwood, a missionary doctor, seemingly for no other reason than that she was European. (de Schweinitz 1).

Another argument regarding these ‘special circumstances’ was a widespread assumption throughout the Sub-continent of the existence of a Russian-inspired conspiracy that could threaten the very stability of the Raj, which reminded the British officials of the bloody events of 1857. In this respect, Lawrence James stated that “paranoia about

Russian intrigue was rife in India” and added that “officials from the Viceroy downwards had been bracing themselves for possibly widespread Russian-inspired subversion.” (James 482-483)

Yet, despite the huge support he received from his fellow countrymen both in India and Britain, General Dyer, by his blunder, incurred the wrath of many high-profile British officials, who openly expressed their disgust with his bloody action and concluded that he did not abide by the “accepted principles of imperial policing.” (Johnson 152). Winston Churchill, for instance, unequivocally condemned Dyer’s blunder as being a “monstrous event which stands in singular and sinister isolation” and which was “without precedent or parallel in the modern history of the British Empire.” (Ferguson 278) Churchill himself made it clear that firing on unarmed civilians was not “the British way of doing business” and therefore, he believed that General Dyer, by his bloodbath in Amristar, was not doing a service to British rule in India but rather precipitating its demise. (Ferguson 278)

The Hunter Commission of Inquiry, which was set up in the wake of the Amristar event, took disciplinary actions against General Dyer and severely criticized him for his hasty move, for not having warned the crowd to disperse, and for not making any effort to offer medical assistance to the injured. (Judd 258)

However cruel the Amristar event might have been, it could never reach the level of cruelty of the events of the 8 May 1945 in French Algeria, in particular in the cities of Setif, Guelma and Kherrata, during which 45,000 Algerians were gunned down by the French security services. Unlike the Amristar Massacre in India, to which the British government reacted furiously by setting up a commission of inquiry which resulted in punitive measures taken against General Dyer, the atrocities of 8 May 1945 in Algeria were downplayed by the French administration, and De Gaulle in person ordered his Minister of Interior, Adrien Tixier, to “bury the whole affair.” (Evans 90)

Modern history has shown that, unlike the French, the British imperialists were not quick on the trigger and General Dyer’s was one of the very rare cases. Indeed, when looked at objectively, and without exaggeration, British colonialism in India was not so cruel when compared to French colonialism in Algeria, which was excessively harsh and repressive. Unlike the French at the time, the British could feel bad conscience and were to a great extent self-critical. In this regard, Niall Ferguson stated that “if Hitler had a criticism of the

British it was merely that they were too self-critical and too lenient towards their subject peoples.” (Ferguson 279)

In my opinion, this is a quite plausible statement. For instance, had there been a Gandhi in French Algeria, he would have been exterminated without delay by the colonial authorities. In British India, however, Gandhi kept being in and out of prison. Actually, the British officials did not appreciate him much and always frowned upon his actions which were a serious challenge to the very stability of the Raj. Winston Churchill hated him to the extent that he referred to him as the “half-naked faker”; however, there was no willingness to kill him. The British simply did not have the guts to do it. Here it is interesting to note that, being very familiar with the British mentality, Gandhi was convinced that the British were not so ruthless and that they could feel bad consciences. Therefore, he became an expert at giving the British a guilty conscience by appealing to their principles and standards. In one of his lectures, Professor Patrick Allitt stated that Gandhi was “an absolute master at exploiting the British bad conscience about the Empire and the British did not have the heart to repress him ruthlessly.” (Allitt Lecture 27)

In addition to violence, French colonialism in Algeria was also characterized by racism and marginalization of the indigenous population. While initially calling for assimilation, the French paradoxically put in place measures which served as hurdles pushing Algerians further back into poverty, and in the process, positions of power were made off-limits to them. In this respect, Patricia Lorcin wrote: “The measures adopted to assimilate the administrative organization and political and cultural institutions of the Algerian colony to those of France inexorably led to an exclusion of the indigenous population from positions of power and to their alienation due to their unfamiliarity with the new system.” (Lorcin 172) Meanwhile, the fact of not being familiar with the French system was always interpreted by the settlers as indicative of the inferiority and backwardness of the Muslim population. In fact, the settlers always sought to give a negative picture of the Muslim majority depicting them as lazy, treacherous, unreliable, and so on, as reflected in the writings of some prominent French officials and intellectuals who were posted in Algeria.

Further to their efforts to make assimilation unworkable for the indigenous population, the colonial authorities issued a piece of legislation *Senatus-Consulte* of 14 July 1865 which imposed a

discouraging condition whereby, in order to be eligible for French citizenship, Algerians were required to repudiate their Islamic faith. Given the extent to which Islam was a defining characteristic of the Algerian culture and identity, this measure was a determinant factor that made the overwhelming majority of Algerians shy away from applying for French citizenship. According to Jonathan Hill, between 1865 and 1954, only about 2000 Algerians were willing to renounce their religion. (Hill 32)

In the meantime, reflecting the double standards policy of the then French government, it is worth mentioning that this measure did by no means apply to the Jewish community. Very small in number at the time, the Jews were collectively declared French citizens following the Crémieux decree of 1870, with their faith, civil and family law remaining untouched. (Lorcin 172)

Such defects in the assimilation theory were, under the insistence of the settlers, to give way to association. The shift towards this new approach was prompted by a widespread conviction among the European settlers that the indigenous population belonged to an inferior race, and hence cannot be assimilated. Instead, the settlers proposed that Algerians should retain their institutions and lifestyle to co-exist with the French. (Lorcin 173). This gave rise to institutionalized racism since the settlers called for, as put by Patricia Lorcin, the “separation of the races.”

Eventually, society in colonial Algeria became polarized into the settlers, withholding all the privileges, vs. the indigenous population, marginalized and discriminated against in all walks of life. Therefore, with this unfair context characterized by a haves and have-nots dichotomy, where the majority and the minority lived unequally and separately from each other, a sort of apartheid system was set up in Algeria, the result of which would be seen by the mid-twentieth century.

This racism was made official by the imposition, in 1881, of the Native Code, *Code de l'indigénat*, which was a set of repressive laws put in place by the colonial authorities in order to further humiliate and brutally reduce the Algerian population to a miserable state. Describing this apartheid-like system, Professor Martin Evans writes: “The *indigénat* reached into every cranny of the Muslim majority’s life. Under its twenty-seven provisions Muslims were controlled by legislation right down to requiring permission to go on pilgrimage to Mecca. They could be imprisoned for making rude remarks about

French authority; holding public meetings without authorization; opening schools without a permit; refusing to supply colonial administrators with transport, food, water, or fuel; not registering a weapon; tax avoidance; even giving refuge to vagabonds.” (Evans 22)

Of course, the adoption of this anti-Muslim attitude by the French government was the result of a huge amount of pressure that was continually exerted by the settlers who vehemently opposed any attempts at granting Algerians their civil rights. (Hill 2)

As a matter of fact, it is important to note that the *colons*, i.e. the European settlers who later on became known as the *pieds noirs*, were a community of die-hards created by France following the conquest of Algeria which, in the course of time, turned into a Frankenstein’s monster. These settlers originated from the northern shores of the Mediterranean Sea, from southern France, Spain, Italy and Malta. Those coming from France did so mostly because of political instability at home. Some were even forced to settle in Algeria. Patricia Lorcin referred to the members of this group as “political ‘hotheads’” whose voluntary or forced emigration to Algeria was occasioned by such events as the revolution of 1848, the 1851 *coup d’état*, the occupation of Alsace-Lorraine by the Germans, etc. (Lorcin 9)

This newly created settler community, whose views and interests gradually became at loggerheads with the metropolis, hardened its position vis-à-vis decisions taken in Paris which often led to friction with the French government. In this respect, Patricia Lorcin pointed out that these European settlers “resented many of the colonial policies originating in France, which they felt were being foisted upon them, and if they did not actually block them they often ignored them.” (Lorcin 11)

Therefore, this nascent community of settlers, that Louis Bertrand, a French intellectual posted in Algeria, referred to as the “Latins of Africa”, came to see itself as a new, superior race in North Africa to whom Algeria belonged legitimately. Patricia Lorcin commented that the “‘Latins’ who came to Algeria in the wake of the conquest could well imagine they were returning to their abandoned domain to repossess their property.” (Lorcin 319) Thus, with this idea well-ingrained in their mind, the settlers trampled on the Muslim majority, who they regarded as inferior and uncivilized. This took the form of nipping in the bud any attempt at introducing reforms which could grant civil rights to the Algerians or even alleviate their day-to-day hardships.

Inevitably, this settlers' intransigence, or rather fanaticism, was going to boomerang on them as it eventually led to the outbreak of the Algerian war of independence by 1954. Indeed, the *pieds noirs*'s determination to marginalize the Algerian population from mainstream society and keep it in extreme poverty only served as a catalyst that, in due course, spelt out the end of their privileged position in Algeria. The more they opposed reforms the more they radicalized the Algerian nationalist movement. As Jonathan Hill observed, "it was actually this racist and zero-sum reasoning that led to French Algeria's demise." (Hill 38) Even when President De Gaulle took matters into his own hands and decided not to listen to the *pieds noirs* lobby, it was too late because the genie was already out of the bottle!

The harshness of French colonialism in Algeria has left a deep wound in the psyche of the Algerians, both at the official and non-official level. This is best reflected in the fact that Algeria, the second largest francophone country in the world after France, has hitherto refused to join the International Organization of the Francophonie. Instead, it is interesting to know that the Algerian government has officially applied for full membership in the Commonwealth of Nations Organization.

To conclude, it goes without saying that colonialism is always an unfair system since it means the subjugation of one country by another, entailing a lot of hardships to the colonized; nevertheless, this does not prevent us from recognizing different levels of colonialism, ranging from less 'cruel' to very 'cruel'. French colonialism in Algeria was very cruel whereas British colonialism in India, though far from being 'mild', was to a large extent less cruel in comparison.

Admittedly, the British did exploit India recklessly; however, this was partly compensated by various positive aspects such as the introduction of western education and the ideals and values of modern democracy that made of India, after independence, a modern democracy. Therefore, when looking back at the history of their involvement in India, the British have at least something to be proud of. On the contrary, when looking back at the history of their involvement in Algeria, the French have hardly anything to be proud of; as put by Raymond Rudorff: "It is not a story of which France can be proud." (Rudorff 28)

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