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WAR
AND COLONIES
1914-1918

CONFERENCE PAPER • PROF. DR GILBERT MEYNIER



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Algerians and the First World War

Abstract

Of all the French colonies, Algeria was, along with French West Africa (AOF), the largest provider of "metropolitan" France in terms of material and human resources bought or requisitioned on the cheap by the military supplies office - a situation that had some bearing on the great famine of 1917. Still, the war provided the Algerians with an opportunity to leave their homeland, as 175 000 men were drafted into the French army, half of them as volunteers, the other half as conscripts. In the autumn of 1914, there was but one short-lived and localized revolt near Mascara. Though the widespread use of conscription led to a rebellion in the Aurès region in 1916-1917, there was, however, no general insurrection despite the fatwa calling for jihad issued by the Shaykh-ul-Islam in Istanbul on 23 November 1914. The first months of the war were horribly bloody but once they were withdrawn from the front in the early days of 1915 and given better training, the Algerian infantrymen (tirailleurs algériens) came to be among the most praised and decorated French military units. As a matter of fact, they became fully integrated into the French armed forces: what with its esprit de corps and paternalism, army rule came to be perceived as less discriminatory than colonial rule. 120,000 workers also found employment, mostly in "national defense factories". Even though they were harshly treated, they became familiar with working class culture and rubbed shoulders with trade unionists - Messali Hadj's wife, Emilie Busquant, was the daughter of an anarcho-syndicalist militant working in the steelworks at Neuves Maisons, near Nancy (eastern France).

Though France oppressed the Algerian people, it also set out to free them, willy-nilly. Yet, access to education remained negligible, the Jonnart law (4 February 1914) failed to introduce significant changes and the Indigenism Code (a set of laws creating an inferior legal status for natives) which had been suspended in 1914, was reinstated. Hence the resentment and frustration felt by many Algerians who considered themselves belittled. The First World War added one more chapter to the long story of broken promises and other frustrations inherent in colonial rule. These formed the breeding ground for the emergence of the anti-colonial / national movement.

Profile

Gilbert Meynier was born in Lyons in 1942. He is Agrégé in History, has a PhD in History and is Professor emeritus at the University of Nancy II. He taught in several secondary schools in France and Algeria. He was a lecturer at Constantine University (1968-70) and at the University of Nancy II (1971-84) before becoming Professor at the same university (1984-2002). He was invited to several symposia and conferences in France, the UK, Germany, Italy, and Hungary. He edited and co-edited several journals and organized and co-organized a number of symposia, among which the symposium on Franco-Algerian history (ENS Lyon, 20-22 June 2006) cf. <http://colloque-algerie.ens-lyon.fr/>. He wrote about a hundred articles and published, among others, the following books: *L'Algérie révélée: La 1ère guerre mondiale et le premier quart du XXe siècle*, Genève: Droz, 1981, 793 p. & Algiers: El Maarifa, 2010; *Histoire intérieure du FLN 1954-1962*, Paris: Fayard, 2002, 812 p. & Algiers: Barzakh, 2004; rééd. Fayard, 2004.