Algeria: What were the effects of assimilation?

Assimilation is the process by which one culture becomes more like another culture. In the case of Algeria, French leaders wanted to change Algeria's culture to make it more French—for example, by encouraging people to speak French, limiting the influence of Islam, and educating Algerians about French history, literature, and political ideas. In this case study, you will explore the effects of French attempts to assimilate Algerians into French society by examining social and cultural colonial policies. As you read, consider how colonial laws pushed Algerians to change their cultural practices. What effects did these changes have?

Algeria is the largest country in Africa, and was a French colony for more than 130 years—much longer than the colonial experiences of most African countries. Like other countries in North Africa, Algeria has a long history of contact with Europe and the Middle East, and has a large Arab population. The vast majority of Algerians are Muslim.

How did Algeria become a French colony?

The French army invaded Algeria in 1830. France colonized Algeria for a number of reasons, including a desire to increase trade, spread French culture and religion, and respond to rising diplomatic tensions with Algeria's ruler. Algeria's experience of colonialism was different from that of most African countries because of its relationship to France. Unlike other colonies, Algeria was administered as if it were a province of France, not a separate entity. The French viewed Algeria as an integral part of their country.

Algeria became a French "settler colony," that is, a colony with a significant population of European settlers that wielded a great deal of political power. The majority of these settlers were small farmers who grew wheat or produced wine. Living in Algeria afforded them a status that they would not otherwise have had in mainland France. This was in large part due to the social divisions in Algerian society. By the late nineteenth century, colonial policies had turned Muslims into second-class citizens compared to European settlers. Laws defined Algerians as "subjects," rather than citizens unless they agreed to stop following Islamic laws, and governed their behavior with harsh punishments for offenses such as speaking ill of the French government or being rude to a colonial official. Informal segregation kept Algerians out of certain neighborhoods, beaches, and businesses. Racism and discrimination permeated society. By 1936, out of a population of more than 4.5 million, only 2,500 Muslim Algerians had chosen to become citizens.

What was life like in the colony?

By the 1930s, inequalities between settlers and Algerians were stark. Colonial policies had divided up communal Algerian lands, allowing settlers to buy thousands of square miles of the best land where they could produce crops for export. Most Algerians, on the other hand, were subsistence farmers on small
plots of land. Poverty, hunger, and malnutrition were widespread. To escape destitution, many migrated to Algeria's towns and cities or worked for low wages on settler farms. Tens of thousands migrated to France.

The French believed their civilization was superior, and viewed Algerian Muslim culture as "primitive" and "medieval." Algerians were frustrated with the inequalities of the colonial system. They resented the ways in which their culture was belittled by colonial policies and settler racism, and were angry about their loss of land. Many refused to accept French rule. At the same time, after more than a century of French rule, some Algerians viewed themselves as French as well as Algerian.

European settlers used their political power to oppress the native population and to protect their own privileges. By 1954, there were nearly one million European settlers living in Algeria, almost 80 percent of them born in Algeria. These settlers felt a deep attachment to Algeria as their homeland. Although French politicians often supported measures to assimilate Algerian Muslims and grant them citizenship, settlers opposed any attempts to increase rights for Muslims.

How did people in Algeria resist colonialism?

When French forces invaded Algeria in 1830, they ended the Ottoman Empire's three hundred year rule of the region. Although Algerians were pleased to be freed from Ottoman rule, they did not submit to another foreign power willingly. Algerian militants fought against the French for decades. Parts of Algeria, for example, the remote mountain regions and Sahara Desert in the south, did not come under French control until the twentieth century.
Algerian resistance was often linked to religion, with Islam playing an important role in organizing opposition. Islam also allowed Algerians to assert an identity and cultural pride outside of the colonial system. As a result, French repression of Algerian uprisings also aimed to limit the influence of Islam. For example, after a rebellion in 1871, the colonial authorities not only confiscated the land of those involved, but also passed decrees to label Arabic a foreign language, limit pilgrimages to Mecca, and monitor Islamic schools.

In the 1920s and 1930s, a number of Algerian nationalist groups formed in Algeria and France. By the mid-1940s, many Algerians were calling for independence by force if necessary. On May 8, 1945—the official date of the end of World War II in Europe—nationalist groups staged demonstrations across Algeria in order to draw attention to the link between the end of fascism and their desire to end colonialism. In the town of Sétif, the demonstrations turned into a violent revolt, and Algerians murdered more than one hundred settlers. The French response was swift and brutal. The colonial army and settler vigilante groups killed thousands of Algerians in return. It was clear that France was not budging from its position on Algeria’s colonial status. The brutality of France’s response drove many more Algerians to join the nationalist cause, and to see violence as the only way to win independence.

What were the human costs of the Algerian War?

In 1954, France lost a nine-year war against nation-

In 1956, the French government sent paratroopers into Algiers. The crackdown by paratroopers was brutal; entire neighborhoods of Algerian Muslims were taken in for interrogation or imprisonment. Paratroopers were known for using torture to extract information. This photograph shows French paratroopers standing guard near a crowd of FLN supporters.
to 1957 in Algiers, Algeria's capital city. It began as a series of FLN attacks on city police and settler targets. The French military responded with mass torture, executions, and imprisonment. By the late 1950s, two million Algerians had been placed in detention camps, an effort by the French to isolate the FLN. The war took a devastating toll, with as many as one million Algerian casualties and tens of thousands of settlers and French soldiers dead.

When did Algerians gain independence?

The French were militarily successful, but their methods came under sharp international criticism. By the end of the 1950s, it was clear that France had lost the war for public opinion. In March 1962, the French government negotiated a ceasefire with the FLN.

Continued violence between settler groups and the FLN resulted in the deaths of tens of thousands more in the months after the ceasefire. Algeria gained its independence on July 3, 1962. Divisions in the FLN led to more violence in July and August. After elections in September, Ahmed Ben Bella became the first president of Algeria.
From the Historical Record

Overview: French policy aimed to assimilate Algerian into French society by pressuring them to speak French, follow French customs, and gradually participate in government and society as French citizens. But Algerians could only gain French citizenship if they agreed to disavow Islamic civil law, which governs matters such as marriage, divorce, and inheritance. By 1936, out of a population of more than 4.5 million, only 2,500 Muslim Algerians had chosen to become citizens. The adoption of French culture meant losing aspects of Algerian culture. By 1954, some Algerian Muslims could no longer speak Arabic, and most could not read or write in Arabic. Although French leaders continued to claim Algeria as a part of France until 1960, many Algerians worked hard to protect or regain aspects of their culture that had come under attack from French colonialism.

The following sources express French and Algerian perspectives on assimilation. The sources are from a variety of French and Algerian scholars as well as political and religious leaders.

French Perspectives

Background: During much of the colonial period, French leaders viewed their own culture as superior and believed that one of the goals of colonialism should be to spread French culture to France’s colonial territories. Although leaders in France tried to ease some of their citizenship requirements for Algerians in the twentieth century, settlers in Algeria blocked any attempts to give more rights to Muslim Algerians.

Gabriel Hanotaux, French government official and historian, in his book L’Energie francaise, 1902

“Let me be clearly understood: this is not only a matter of a vast number of conquests; it is not even a matter of the increase of public and private wealth. It is a question of extending overseas to regions only yesterday barbarian the principles of a civilization of which one of the oldest nations of the world has the right to be proud. It is a question of creating near us and far away from us so many new Frances; it is a question of protecting our language, our customs, our ideas, the French and Latin glory, in face of furious competition from other races, all marching along the same routes.”

The Sénatus-Consulat (senate decree) of 14 July 1865 under France’s Emperor Napoléon III

“Art. 1. The Muslim native is French; nevertheless he shall continue to be governed under Muslim law....

“He may, on application, be granted the rights of French citizenship; in this case, he shall be governed under the civil and political laws of France.”

Governor-General of Algeria Jacques Soustelle, at the Algiers Assembly in February 1955

“France is at home here...or rather, Algeria and all her inhabitants form an integral part of France, one and indivisible. All must know, here and elsewhere, that France will not leave Algeria any more than she will leave Provence and Brittany [two provinces in mainland France]. Whatever happens, the destiny of Algeria is French.”

Max Lejeune, French Minister for the Armed Forces, March 15, 1956

“We want the men in Algeria to be more free, more fraternal, more equal, that is to say more French. We must guarantee their political liberties and their social emancipation in the face of a few thousand rebels inspired by unemployment, the absence of hope, religious fanaticism, and not least the fit of nationalists who aspire to an unrealizable independence.”

Emperor Napoléon III in a letter to Aimable Pélissier, governor-general of Algeria, 1863

“[W]e have not come to Algeria to oppress and exploit them, but to bring them the benefits of civilization....”
A. Arnaud and H. Mérat, Les Colonies françaises, organisation administrative, judiciaire, politique et financière, 1900

"Assimilation, by giving the colonies institutions analogous to those of metropolitan France, little by little removes the distances which separate the diverse parts of French territory and finally realizes their intimate union...."

French Prime Minister Léon Blum and Government Minister Maurice Violette's proposal to give Muslims in Algeria the right to vote (the bill was never debated in the French Parliament because of strong opposition by Algerian settlers and their allies), December 30, 1936

"[E]xperience has shown that it was impossible to continue treating as subjects without essential political rights French natives of Algeria who have fully assimilated French thought but who for family or religious reasons cannot give up their personal status. Algerian natives are French. It would be unjust to refuse henceforth the exercise of political rights to those among them who are the most cultured and who have furnished important guarantees of loyalty...."

"But it seems impossible to invest all natives immediately with political rights. The massive majority are still far from desirous of using these rights and do not yet show themselves capable of doing so.... [C]ertain (hostile) influences would not fail to profit from the inexperience of this mass by overwhelming it with propaganda...."

"[T]o our way of thinking, the right of suffrage [right to vote] is a reward either for services rendered or for intellectual achievement."

Algerian Perspectives

Background: For most Algerians, French efforts to replace Algerian culture with French culture limited their opportunities in colonial society. For example, an Algerian who did not speak French could not hold certain jobs or communicate with French officials and settlers. The promotion of French culture created a divided society, with Algerians as second-class citizens. Educated Algerians who spoke French often had mixed feelings about French culture. While many strongly opposed the restrictions of colonialism, they also appreciated French political ideas of liberty and human rights.

Sheikh Abdul-hamid Ben Badis, founder of the Association of Algerian Muslim Ulema, April 1936

"[The Muslim Algerian nation]...has its culture, its traditions and its characteristics, good or bad like every other nation of the earth. And...we state that this Algerian nation is not France, cannot be France, and does not wish to be France."

Manifesto of 10 February, 1943 by Ferhat Abbas and colleagues, presented to Algeria's Governor-General Marcel Peyrouton

"Today the representatives of this Algeria, responding to the unanimous desire of their peoples, cannot escape the overriding duty of posing the problem of their future."

"So doing, they do not intend to disavow the French and Western culture that they have received, which remains dear to them. It is, on the contrary, by assimilating the moral and spiritual riches of Metropolitan France and the tradition of liberty of the French people that they find the strength and justification for their present action...."

"[T]he Algerian people, in its desire for peace and liberty, raises its voice to denounce the colonial rule imposed on it, to recall its earlier protests and reclaim its rights to life...."

"One need only examine the process of the colonization in Algeria to realize how the policy of assimilation, applied automatically to some and refused systematically to others, has reduced the Islamic society to the most complete servitude."

"[C]olonization...demands the simultaneous existence of two societies, one oppressing the other...."

"There lies the deep and brutal drama to which colonization has given birth. The identification and formation of a single people under the 'same paternal government' has failed.... The European and Muslim blocs remain distinct from each other without
a common spirit. The one is strong in its privileges and social position; the other is threatened by the demographic problem of its creation and by the place in the sun that it claims and has been denied...."

Recollections of Ahmed Ben Bella, first president of Algeria, 1964

"I think I was fourteen when, at my école primaire supérieure [high school], an incident occurred which made a deep impression on me. One of my teachers...was French and an excellent teacher when he did not bore us with long digressions on the religions of the world.... Faith in his own religion made him believe that all others were bad and despicable.

"One day during school, he did not hesitate to go for his Moslem pupils, launching a violent attack on Islam. ‘Your prophet Mohammed,’ he shouted at the end of this diatribe, ‘was nothing but an imposter!’

‘I stood up, pale with anger. ‘Sir,’ I told him, ‘it’s all very well for you to say that to children. We are too young and ignorant to argue with you, but you must understand that to us our religion is sacred. No, no, it is wrong of you to speak like this.’

‘Of course...[the teacher]...blew up. It was terrible. I was punished, dismissed from the class, and even threatened with expulsion.... And it was a double scandal, as I well knew. Firstly, for a pupil to tick off a teacher was bad enough. But for a ‘native’ to stand up to a European made me a thousand times more guilty.”

Recollectio...