

# Invasion and Empire



## Core Questions

- How did Algerians react and respond to the arrival of the French army?
- How did the invasion impact Algerian political and economic systems?
- What was the experience of invasion like?

## Invasion and Empire

Core Questions

3 Quotes

Introduction

An Eyewitness Account

The Treaty of 1830

Khodja's Experience

Petitions

Military Resistance

Conclusion

### 3 Quotes

**Quote 1:** “Unfortunately, there is no link between Muslim society and Christian society...There is absolutely [sic] nothing to prevent us from treating Europeans as if they were the only ones here.” – Alexis de Tocqueville: *Travail sur Algérie* [1841] Reprinted in Alexis de Toqueville, *De la colonie en Algérie*, ed. Tzvetan Todorov (Editions Complexe, 1988), 141–42.

**Quote 2:** “The conquest of Algeria has raised the question of how to govern and civilize the indigènes. Those who regard this merely as a question of European colonization are clearly looking from the fat end of the spyglass.” – Ismael Urbain, *L’Algérie française: Indigènes et immigrants* (Challamel Aine, 1862), title page.

**Quote 3:** “Why do the French refuse to govern us as they govern themselves? Why . . . do they not act according to the law of justice, if they wish to create peace among us?” – Sidy Hamdan ben Othman Khodja: *Aperçu historique et statistique sur la régence d’Alger, intitulé en arabe “le Miroir”* 2 vols (Imprimerie de Goetschy fils, 1833), 250–51.

#### Quote Reflection Questions:

- What is a phrase from one of these quotes that stands out to you as surprising, confusing or interesting?
- What do you think is the meaning or significance of the quote you selected?
- Based on these quotes, what is something you think, feel, notice, or wonder? What do you predict you will learn about in the reading?

#### Key Terms:

Sidy Hamdan ben  
Othman Khodja

Gates of Algiers

Sultan

*Le Miroir*

Ottoman Empire

Pacification

# Introduction



*French fleet bombarding the defenses of Algiers, July 3 and 4, 1830*

When the French army landed on the shores of Sidi Fredj on July 5, 1830, and began its march towards the Ottoman provincial capital of Algiers, they did not intend to establish a settler colony. For all of its profound consequences, King Charles X's fateful decision to invade Algiers was made primarily with a short-term goal: to bolster his faltering image through a flashy foreign military conquest.

Although many French people opposed Charles X and the Restoration monarchy, they celebrated the invasion of Algiers as a “liberation” and a victory for the people. Although most had never been to Algeria, they believed that Algerians suffered under a despotic Ottoman government, and they wanted to spread the French revolutionary values of “*Liberty, Equality, Fraternity*.” Out of the lively public debates at the time emerged a somewhat naïve conviction that France could pursue a new and truly benevolent kind of colonization in Algeria, one that represented “modernity” by replacing Ottoman “despotism” with European Enlightenment ideals.



*Charles X and an Ottoman, 1830*

One French petitioner to the Ministry of War summed up this conviction succinctly: “It is by enlightening the populations, by civilizing them, that we wish to colonize today . . . for in this age of positive interests, we feel that we must no longer destroy, but create and preserve.”

**In this reading we will ask:**

- What actually happened during the conquest?
- How did Algerian people perceive and experience the French invasion?
- Was there any truth to the claim that the French army was liberating Algeria?

# An Eyewitness Account



*Scene of Algiers at the beginning of the 19th century*

To answer these questions, we will look at one of the only primary source accounts that exists from an Algerian perspective. It is a memoir by Sidy Hamdan ben Othman Khodja, a prominent businessman and legal scholar who played an influential role within the Ottoman ruling elite at the time of the conquest.

Born in 1773, Khodja was 58 years old and at the height of a long and distinguished career when the French army appeared off the coast of his home city of Algiers. With his entire family deeply embroiled in late Ottoman politics, Khodja was a direct participant in the events surrounding the invasion and a firsthand observer of its social, political, and economic impact on Algeria's populations.

Khodja's father was the former first secretary, his uncle was director of finance, and Khodja himself was a law professor and councilor to the Dey (the regent of the Ottoman Empire, as well as a successful landowner who claimed that before the French arrived he had owned: 10,000 sheep, 600 milking cows, 200 pairs of cattle, 60 camels, 200 stallions, silos full of grain from his farmlands, and significant savings from his profitable commercial enterprises. A man whose net worth the French estimated at 40 million francs, Hamdan Khodja was a wealthy and highly educated individual who witnessed, as he called it, the "intertwining of all possibilities in the aftermath of the Algiers occupation."

Khodja was also a man with a great deal of foresight, who in the midst of a chaotic transition, took the time to write a detailed account of everything he saw, and everything he lost, during those fateful years. When the French king sent a commission to investigate the state of the occupation, Hamdan Khodja was one of the two Muslim delegates called upon to testify. In addition to a lengthy speech and a number of detailed memoranda, Khodja presented the commission with a book he had written and published himself.

As the only surviving memoir of the French invasion written from an Algerian perspective, Khodja's *Miroir* is an especially rich source. It is over 200 pages long! It contains detailed anecdotes, raw emotions, and unfiltered prose, like a personal diary at times: "I cannot calm myself down, I am continually distressed by the misfortunes of my country," he wrote. "I am often obliged to set down my pen and let my tears flow."



# The Treaty of 1830

So what did Khodja say about the invasion? Interestingly, in the book's opening pages, Khodja wrote that he believed Europe had the potential to help modernize and galvanize North African society. In fact, he was so convinced that there would be positive benefits to a French occupation that he allowed the Dey to send his son to personally negotiate the surrender of Algiers:



*Portrait of French General Louis-Auguste-Victor Bourmont, c. 1820-1840 (left) Portrait of Hussein Dey of Algiers, 1830 (right)*

“We thought that an honorable nation would not violate its own treaties; that we would have liberty and that we would be treated with justice,” he remarked. “Besides, civilization is based upon human rights, so . . . we should have nothing to fear from a civilized government . . . we don’t care if we are governed by Pierre or Paul, just so long as we are governed well . . . such were . . . the reflections which brought us to capitulate.”

Here is a translation of the original agreement signed by the French General and the Dey of Algiers:

## *AGREEMENT*

*between the chief general of the French army and His Highness the dey of Algiers*

*July 5, 1830*

*The Casbah fort, all the other forts of Algiers, and the port of this city will be handed over to French troops this morning at ten o'clock in the morning (French time). The chief general of the French army undertakes to His Highness the dey of Algiers to leave him freedom and possession of all his personal wealth.*

*The dey will be free to retire with his family and his wealth to the place he chooses; and, as long as he remains in Algiers, he and his family will remain under the protection of the chief general of the French army. A guard will guarantee the safety of his person and that of his family.*



*The keys of the city of Algiers, given by the Dey of Algiers to the French army during the capture of the city on July 5, 1830*

*The chief general promises all the soldiers of the militia the same advantages and the same protection.*

*The exercise of the Mohammedan religion will remain free. The freedom of inhabitants of all classes, their religion, their property, their commerce and their industry, will not receive any attack. Their women will be respected. The chief general undertakes this on his honor.*

*The exchange of this agreement will be made before ten o'clock this morning, and the French troops will immediately enter the Casbah, and successively in all the forts of the city and the navy.*

**Pause here to reflect:** What does the treaty promise? Do you think this treaty will be respected? Jot your thoughts down in your notes!

## Khodja's Experience

According to Khodja's account, the army immediately violated its own treaty. He complained that the army failed to respect the property rights of Algerians and "became a reign of fear and terror" within days, forcing people from their homes and separating families: "With my own eyes I saw Frenchmen turn their heads and cry tears of pain at the sights [they witnessed] . . . a general discontent burst forth among the people, and we grew suspicious of these French who did not fulfill their commitments."

Khodja claimed that from the very first day, the French army began to overturn what they had promised to protect, wantonly destroying homes, gardens, and government documents and stealing money from the treasury. He recalled his distress at seeing so many important files, the contents of which he knew by



*Attack on Algiers by Sea, July 3, 1830, by Antoine Léon Morel-Fatio, c. 1836-1837*

heart, thrown fluttering out of the palace windows: "Thus did they throw them onto the cobblestones, and I myself walked upon their remnants in the Casbah. At this moment there was unimaginable confusion and disorder."

Khodja was taken aback by the disrespectful and arrogant attitude of the French commanders. He recalled being shamefully kicked out of his own villa and reported that the

officer who kicked him out smugly asserted, "We have conquered Algiers, we are the absolute masters, everything is in our possession," before taking Khodja's fine porcelain and heirloom ornamental gun collection, killing his donkey, dismissing his servants, and forbidding Khodja's entire family from entering the premises. "The French have acted like barbarians," complained Khodja bitterly. "They pushed their depredations even further, for they demolished what was built and destroyed all that was established."



*Fighting at the Gates of Algiers, 1830*

But from Khodja's perspective, even worse than the wanton dismemberment of the Ottoman government, the humiliating dispossession of its elites, and the undignified behavior of the French commandment were the "inhuman laws, opposed to all forms of equality and peace" that he saw inflicted on the poor and dispossessed.

In one of his most moving passages, Khodja described the experience of the wife of a certain Mohamed ben Sefta, an unarmed locksmith from Algiers who had taken refuge with his family in a small room in Blida after his place of business had been destroyed:

"Soldiers having knocked upon his door, he came to open it with his wife; almost immediately multiple shots were fired, and this man fell down dead in the entryway along with his little two-year-old girl; his wife had her arm broken, and her house was entirely pillaged. This poor woman, without resources . . . believed her duty was to present herself to the General. All he felt compelled to do was to put her on a mule, without even bandaging her arm, and her blood dripped all down the road . . .

How much it pains us to have to recount such details! . . . Alas, what remedy to so much evildoing?"

In closing, he argued that the actions of the French army were destroying the country and betraying the modern values of civilization:

"I wonder why my country must be shaken to its very foundations, and struck in all its areas of vitality?

. . . I see Greece rescued [from Ottoman despotism]. . . I see all free peoples take an interest in the Polish and in the re-establishment of their nation, and I see the English government immortalize its glory through the liberation of Negros . . .

And when I carry my eyes back to the land of Algiers, I see its unhappy inhabitants placed under the yoke of arbitrary rule, of extermination and all the plagues of war, and all of these horrors committed in the name of free France."



Despite Khodja's high hopes, he remarked sadly, "The promises of the French are nothing but words without meaning, perfidious ruses . . . The Turks were despots, but with less perfection than the French governors."

In 1833 Khodja traveled to Paris and spent two years publishing articles and pleading with the government to stop the violence: "Several [of your] illustrious generals have not hesitated to propose the extermination of an entire nation," he wrote. "Among civilized men, is it not considered a crime to kill so many millions?"

Based on what we know of the rest of his life, it is likely that his outspoken protests got him into quite a lot of trouble. He lost his job as a "native consultant" after he opposed transforming a local mosque into a theater. His two sons were arrested after he published his book: One was exiled, and it is unknown what happened to the other son. With his career in tatters and his finances in ruins, a defeated Khodja wrote in desperation to the Ottoman sultan in 1835: "I am responsible for the welfare of 32 people, I have no means of ensuring their survival. . . . we cannot go to Algeria, we have nothing left there . . . our land has been burned and all [manner of] misfortune has fallen upon my head." The sultan permitted him to move his whole family to Turkey, where he continued unsuccessfully, until his death in 1842, to speak out in support of the Algerian resistance leaders Ahmed Bey and Abd el Kader as they continued to fight the French.



*Portrait of Abd el-Kader, 1852*



*Portrait of Ahmed Bey*

**Pause:** What is a quote that stands out to you from this passage and why? What is an emotion you feel or hear in the text? Do you think Khodja's story was unique or common during the invasion? Why?



# Petitions

Khodja was not the only one to write to the French government. His enemies tried to portray him as crazy, vengeful, and lying. But his views are corroborated by 25 other petitions sent by local leaders of the *mitidja* region (a plain on the outskirts of Algiers) to the French army between 1831 and 1835. In several letters, the petitioners announced that they had chosen representatives to lead them. In at least two letters, they expressed a desire for the French to recognize their representative as “Sultan of the Arabs” through gifting a flag and a fortress in exchange for loyalty. In others, they presented the French with lists of demands: maintenance of social and religious order, property and financial stability, indemnities for landowners whose buildings and gardens had been destroyed or occupied by the French army, and money to rebuild mosques and schools.



*La Mitidja, 2011*

Beginning in 1832, an increasing number of petitions complained about the wanton destruction and desecration of mosques, unwarranted massacres, theft and corruption by French administrators or power-hungry local intermediaries. To get a feel for these petitions, read the following snippets:

From the tribes of the *mitidja* in 1831:

“You have taken Algiers by force . . . and you have installed yourself there, a king like any other king. We obeyed you . . . you took your troops and overran this region from one end to the other without any reaction from us. But today you have committed a great inequity towards us, for you have sent your troops to attack us without cause, and you have taken everything our people owns, our children are destitute . . . You have made a treaty and ordered us to be peaceful, and then you destroy everything . . . [these military excursions are] without any valid motive. . . . now you are betraying not only the established treaty but also the hope and confidence of the people.”

Notables of Algiers to the French Minister of War in 1833:

“You ought to know, your Excellence, that the day the French entered Algiers all the people were full of joy. We believed ourselves to be delivered from all the inequities of the Ottoman government [but] . . . our joy has transformed into sadness . . . we have been subjected to a great inequity . . . [your General] has massacred the people and he has spared neither children, nor women, nor the elderly. What he has done, no nation would do, especially not a nation like that of the French, which teaches civilizations [sic] to all the nations . . . we cry and we implore God night and day . . . to deliver us from the oppressions to which we have been subjected.”

**Pause:** What are the common concerns expressed in the petitions? What picture of the invasion do they paint? What do you think it would have been like to experience this? Write down your thoughts in your notes.

# Military Resistance

Khodja's book (the *Miroir*) represents a claim to Algerian nationality and is viewed today by many Algerians as proof that the Algerian nation existed prior to the arrival of the French. His writing, combined with the petitions of other local leaders, demonstrate that prior to the invasion, Algeria benefitted from well-established systems of governance and sophisticated forms of diplomacy and power sharing. They also show that Algerian leaders in 1830 were open to allying with the French Empire instead of the Ottoman Empire and were willing to negotiate to ensure they were ruled with fairness. However, the unexpected violence and traumatic destruction of the invasion destroyed the credibility of the French government for many Algerian leaders.



*The capture of Constantine, October 13, 1837*

But Khodja was an educated, wealthy, urban individual. What about other Algerians? How did they respond?

When it became obvious that the French army would not respect the terms of the treaty, Algerians in the countryside fought back. Local populations throughout the countryside were defiant and well-armed. Quickly, two major armies, led by powerful and popular leaders, emerged to rival the French for sovereignty. In the eastern province of Constantine, Khodja's second cousin Ahmed Bey

raised an army and held off the French advance until 1837, when the capital city fell following a dramatic siege. Ahmed Bey then fled to the Aurès Mountains with some loyal men, where he continued fighting until his surrender in 1848.

In the western province of Oran, elected leader Abd el Kader united the regional tribes and organized a new government. His men fought so well that the French signed a treaty in 1837 granting him control over the province. However, relations turned hostile again after French commanders failed to respect the terms of the treaty. Abd el Kader led a fierce guerilla resistance movement for 10 years before finally capitulating in 1848.



*Painting of French attack on the Smala of Abd el-Kader, 16 May 1843*



As a result of Algerians' steadfast defiance and military prowess, the French military found it nearly impossible to gain full control over the fertile plains, steep mountains, and harsh deserts that lay beyond Algiers, and they became bogged down in a seemingly endless series of brutal "pacification" campaigns, which continued to extend south into the desert until the 1890s.



*Civilians suffocating by smoke in the cave of Dahra, a method of attack ordered by French General Bugeaud*

Thus, the short-sighted invasion of 1830 led to over 70 years of brutally violent warfare that often targeted civilians through scorched-earth policies, leaving many Algerian people with enduring scars of lasting trauma.

One of the most dramatic atrocities occurred in the prehistoric caves of Guelma, where locals had gone to hide from the French army. The army blocked up the openings and lit fires that suffocated everyone in the caves. Locals can still find remains there today.



*Human bone from Ouled Riyah found in a cave in Nékmaria, or Ghar al-Frachih*



# Conclusion



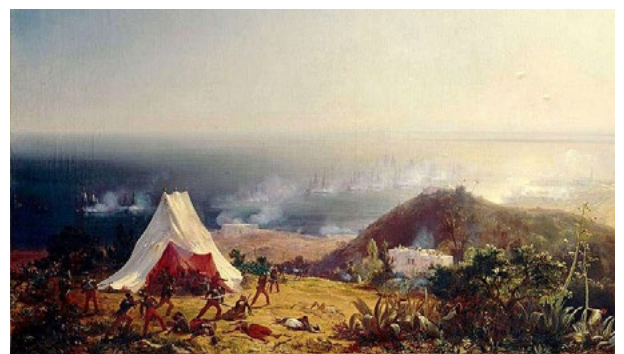
*Scene of a 1837 battle in Constantine during the French conquest of Algeria*

Back in France, the invasion of Algiers did little to boost the popularity of King Charles X and the Restoration monarchy. He was forced to abdicate only a few months later, in the first of a long series of revolutionary regime changes that occurred during the French occupation of Algiers.

On August 9, 1830, Charles X's cousin Louis Philippe assumed the throne and became king. Instead of pulling the army out of Algiers, King Louis Philippe decided to expand the conquest and make it permanent. He annexed "French possessions" in Algeria in 1834 and began encouraging European men and their families to emigrate, promising them that they could become free, landowning farmers. Between 1830 and 1848, his government sent more than 200,000 French soldiers and civilians across the Mediterranean to European settlements.

Why did the French army and government do this? Most of this module will focus on Algerian experiences, but we do need to address the driving motivation of imperialism. Many French officials at the time firmly believed it was good and necessary to expand their empire, whether for the benefit of France or, in their view, the people they colonized. But, while the French government in Paris may have espoused grand ideas for a peaceful and "civilized" form of colonization that would bring prosperity to all, military and civilian leaders were often motivated by their own individual ambitions: They disregarded orders, failed to respect established treaties, and sought their own personal and material advancement.

French leaders themselves were not unified and did not agree about what they were doing and why. To the question—But why are you invading Algeria?—you would have gotten different answers from different people. And this fact had enormous consequences for Algerian people, because it helped to shape the limits and possibilities for them at that time.



*Théodore Gudin, Attack on Algiers by sea, June 29, 1830, 1831*

**Predict in your notes:** What do you think are the different reasons or excuses the French might have given for the invasion? How do you think the violence of the invasion impacted the relationship between French and Algerian people going forward? Do you think the relationship got better or worse over time? Why?

# Image Citations

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