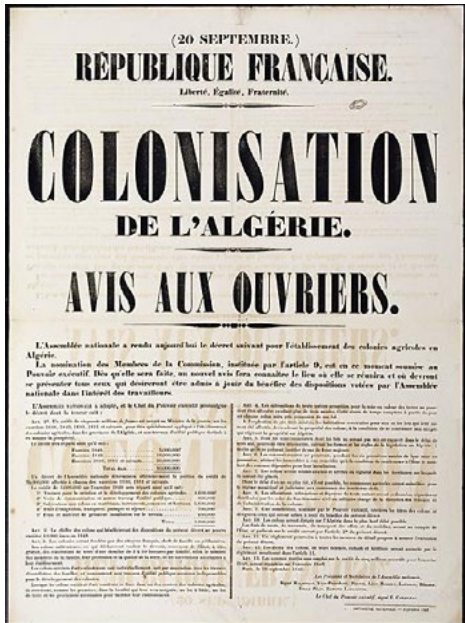


Primary Source: Alexis de Tocqueville's Settler Paradise



Key Facts

- French colonial officers believed that sending Europeans to live in Algeria would help end the war and make the colony a permanent part of France by creating a “settler paradise”
- In 1841 the French government started to offer free arable land to immigrants
- As a result, the European population in Algeria rose exponentially: soaring from 37,000 individuals on 20,000 acres in 1841 to almost 300,000 people occupying 750,000 acres by 1872

Primary Source

Key Facts

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What Did Tocqueville Believe and Say About Algerian People?

Total War

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Who Was Alexis de Tocqueville?



Portrait of Alexis de Tocqueville, 1850

Tocqueville was a French intellectual with a lot of influence in 19th-century colonial politics. He had traveled to America in 1831, where he was amazed and inspired by the westward expansion of settlers. He became obsessed with the idea of sending settlers to Algeria and making it the “America” of France.

Like Thomas Jefferson, he believed that creating a society of free land-owning colonists would lead to a new era of democracy and prosperity. Also like Thomas Jefferson, Tocqueville imagined Algeria as “empty” and ripe for the taking. In his vision, the land was richly fertile but being wasted by what he called “primitive” inhabitants. He believed it was the “destiny” of Europe to revitalize and modernize the land through the energetic activity of virile, strong, pioneer-

ing settlers. Tocqueville did not know, or chose to ignore, the fact that Algeria in fact had a long and rich history of agricultural civilization, as we discovered last class.

In the spring of 1841, Tocqueville traveled to Algeria for the first time and was blown away by what he saw: “I have never seen anything like it . . . Everywhere we see . . . ancient ruins and new skyscrapers . . . all we hear is the sound of the hammer. It’s Cincinnati transported to the land of Africa.”

Tocqueville fell ill after only one month in Algeria and returned to France. Nonetheless, he felt he had seen enough to publish a major report, which was widely read by policymakers and settlers.

Tocqueville’s report on Algeria embodies the myths and contradictions of settler colonialism as it evolved in the context of French Algeria. Tocqueville was mostly interested in the land and European settlement.



Cover of Almanac of the Little Algerian Colonist (The Little Algerian Colonist) by Alphonse Birck, 1893

What Did Tocqueville Believe and Say About Algerian People?

Total War

Tocqueville wrote that he personally disliked violence. Nonetheless, he believed that the very existence of indigenous tribes was an existential threat lurking at the edges of the colony:

“We will never have either security or a future on the coast unless we make our authority respected, for better or for worse, in the interior; at the very least, we must prevent the different tribes from uniting under a common leader . . .

We cannot cede [to the Arabs] any position along the coast, and they cannot [survive] without it; [therefore] we can never have a solid and durable peace between us . . .”

Unfortunately, he admitted, this policy would force the tribes into poverty and would lead to further warfare. Thus, he argued, it was necessary to carry out a program of total war against native populations who stood in the way of colonization.

He recommended that the French army use all available methods of violence, including burning harvests, taking women and children prisoner, blockading trade routes, and burning ancient cities. “[These are] disagreeable necessities, but ones to which any people who desires to fight the Arabs must submit.”

He wanted the army to invest in small mobile military units “that at any instant can fall upon [the tribes],” as well as to build a large army that could “destroy anything resembling a permanent aggregation of people . . . anything that looks like a town. I believe it is highly important for us to prevent any towns from surviving or being constructed [on enemy native territories].”



Depiction of the attack of Constantine, Algeria, 1837

As a final security measure, he also suggested building a wall around the entire territory to be occupied by settlers: “We cannot therefore deny that first and foremost, we must build a continuous obstacle surrounding the territory we designate for the settlers.”

Inevitable Decline of “Old Arab” Society

Tocqueville argued that Algeria was similar to the United States and that both cases of colonialism were moral because “native” societies were already in the throes of an inexorable and inevitable decline:

“Unfortunately, there is no link between Muslim society and Christian society . . . [we are aware] that every day this state of affairs grows worse due to causes that we cannot possibly control.

The Arab element isolates itself more and more, slowly dissolving . . . the fusion of these two populations is a chimera dreamed up by those who have never traveled [to Algeria] . . .”

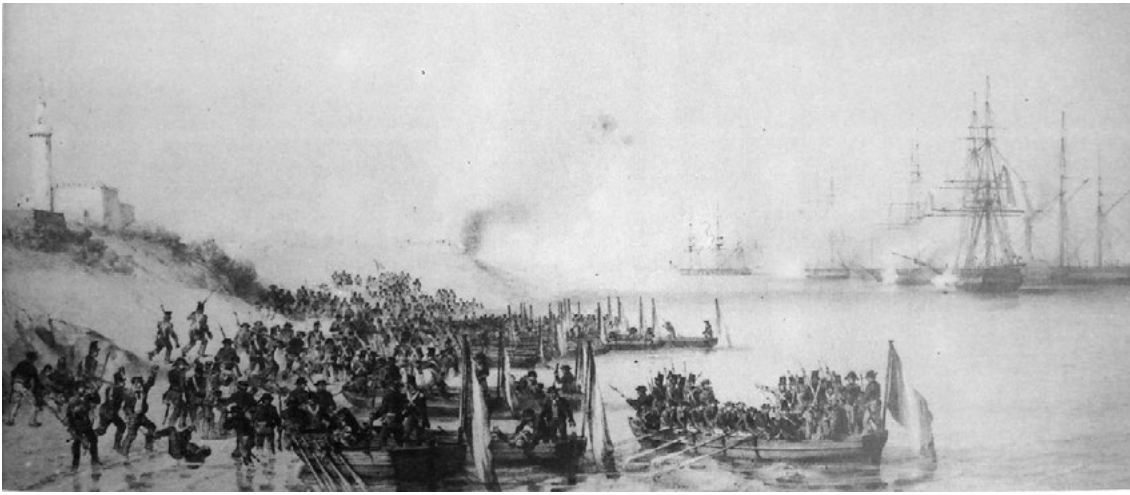


Engraving of a cafe scene in Algiers, 1857

Freedom of Settlers

Tocqueville depicted settlers as free and dignified men who deserved to be protected and respected by the government: “Settlers are not serfs, but independent and mobile men . . . [with] liberty of action.” Each colonist should “settle himself where he wishes, cultivate according to his desires . . .”

Put simply, he believed that the settlers should be able to do whatever they wanted regardless of what Algerians wanted or needed: “There is absolutely nothing to prevent us from treating European [settlers] as if they were the only ones here.”



Depiction of French troops disembarking in North Africa, 1840

The Army

Although Tocqueville believed the army must be strong to protect the colony, he was suspicious of military overreach: “From a military point of view, I admire these men; but I confess that they frighten me,” he admitted. He believed the army’s influence was bad for democracy because “there is nothing to guarantee the [rights of European] citizens.”

He complained that it was tyrannical for settlers to be forced to share their resources to feed and transport soldiers: “The right to property [is not] assured. It is constantly menaced and attacked . . . by the military authority that seizes, from time to time, either harvests or animals for the needs of the war.”

He reminded his readers that “[military] domination is nothing more than a means to the end of [settlers] colonizing [the land].”



Depiction of the city of Algiers, 1840

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