

# Great War Transformations 1900–1920



## Core Questions

- What does it mean for colonial subjects to become citizens?
- Can Muslims become French citizens through participation in military service?
- How does the colonial experience of World War I change Algerians' identity?

## Great War Transformations 1900–1920

Core Questions

3 Quotes

Introduction

The Draft Debate

Algerians React to the Draft, 1907–1912

The First Shot

Algerians React to the War

Transformations

### 3 Quotes

**Quote 1:** “Would it really be so terrible if we were to allow the natives to send three representatives each to our Senate and our Chamber of Deputies? The blacks of Martinique and Guadeloupe have their representation, why should we refuse it to the Arabs and Kabyles of Algeria?” – Paul-Leroy Beaulieu, *De la colonisation des peuples modernes* (Guillaumin et Cie, 1882), 379.

**Quote 2:** “The natives as a whole must not receive political rights . . . In order to protect our safety and prosperity, we must ensure that the French maintain a large [electoral] majority.” – Capitaine Le Français [pseudonym], *Une erreur militaire, une faute politiques: Le service obligatoire des indigènes, une erreur militaire, une faute politique* (Berger-Levrault, 1913), 107–08.

**Quote 3:** “Vive La France, Vive l’Algérie, Vive la République!” – Young Algerians at a rally, Rapport de M le Commissaire Central de Bône au Gouverneur Général, 28–29 December 1909, Centre des Archives d’Outre Mer, 3H 58.

#### Quote Reflection Questions:

- What are the three different points of view expressed in these quotes?
- What is a question or observation they raise for you?
- Based on these quotes, what do you think you will learn about in the reading?

### Key Terms:

Ferhat Abbas

The Young Algerian Movement

The Mufti of Ain Beida

“Civilizing Mission”

# Introduction

As we learned in the previous readings, Algerian society in the 19th century was plunged into a period of cultural and economic crisis by the military conquest and the arrival of European settlers. For 40 years, from 1830 to 1870, many Algerians continued to fight, while also learning to survive alongside settlers and military occupation. It did not help that colonial policies toward Algerians shifted constantly throughout this period, as French politicians, military officials, and settlers competed with each other to enact contrasting visions for Algeria.

After 1870, the nine hundred thousand settlers living in Algeria gained the right to vote as French citizens in all elections and to be represented in the French legislature. Algerian land was legally integrated or “assimilated” into France as three provinces rather than as a colony. However, the legal status of the colonized population was divided based on religion.

The majority population of 3.5 million Muslim Algerians was given a separate legal status. They were not allowed to vote and were not considered citizens. As we learned in the last reading, Muslim Algerians were subjected to discriminatory laws known as the *Indigénat*, which caused them to suffer physical and verbal abuse as well as property destruction during this period. Becoming a French citizen was the only escape from the *Indigénat*, but the process of becoming a citizen was virtually impossible for Muslim Algerians and entailed numerous educational and financial barriers, including asking them to renounce Islam. As a result, only a few hundred Muslim Algerian people out of millions became naturalized.



Map of France showing soldiers of the empire around the border, published by Le Petit Journal, 1900



*Depiction of Jewish Algerians, 1858*

Despite having deep North African cultural and linguistic roots in common, Jewish Algerians were separated from Muslim Algerians and granted collective citizenship status by the French government. This was done in an attempt to “civilize” their culture, which was seen as “backwards,” by pushing them into French schools and assimilating them into European society. In the short term, this led to a spike in antisemitism from settler politicians and further

alienation from Muslim Algerian communities. In the long term, it has contributed to deepening religious intolerance in Algeria and the marginalization of North African Jewish history and culture.

In response to this situation, and with hopes for a better future, a new generation of urban Algerian students and intellectuals began to fight back against the constraints of the settler colonial system. They were educated professionals who had received at least some French schooling—such as teachers, pharmacists, legal assistants, clerks, and copywriters. These so-called Young Algerians began to write petitions, publish newspapers, and hold meetings, forming the roots of a new transnational human rights movement as they sought to convince French lawmakers to grant equal rights to Algerian colonial subjects.

The goal of the Young Algerian movement was not national independence—this was not considered possible at the time. In their writings and speeches, their goal was to achieve rights and representation as French citizens. They advocated for policies that would move Algerians gradually toward equality with French citizens, including expanded education, fair taxation, mandatory military service, and eventually, the right to vote.

In their newspaper articles and petitions, the Young Algerians often appealed to the “higher authority” of the French government in Paris to curb the excesses of the settlers. They used the language of French patriotism to demonstrate that they understood French culture and political values, while still practicing Islam. In doing so, they created a multicultural claim to French citizenship, arguing for religious tolerance and secular political rights in the name of the Third Republic’s values of “Liberty, Equality, Fraternity.”



*Ferhat Abbas, an initial influential member of the Young Algerians*



# The Draft Debate

In 1907, the Young Algerians knew that French politicians were worried about stability and security as tensions built between European nations. They knew that some political and military leaders wanted to start drafting Muslim North Africans because of recruitment shortages. They jumped on the issue as an opportunity to make their voices heard in the French government and to gain a voice for Algerian rights by asking for political representation in exchange for military service.

The Young Algerians started by building alliances with politicians in the French colonial reform movement, a group who was critical of exploitation and violence in the colonies and who wanted to improve the French Empire by making better colonial policies. These reformists believed in a form of imperialism called the “civilizing mission,” which was based on the idea of transforming “backwards” subjects into ideal citizens by teaching them modern industrial and secular ideals and values. Between 1907 and 1912, colonial reformists started advocating repeatedly for Muslim military service in the French parliament.

This alliance culminated in 1912, when a delegation of Young Algerians traveled to Paris in order to discuss mandatory military service in person with French representatives. They agreed to support the draft but asked in return for improvements in education, a more equitable division of taxes, and the right for indigenous Algerians to elect representatives. These demands were the same as those the Young Algerians had been making since the 1880s and 1890s in newspapers such as *El Hack* and *L'Islam*.

Products of the French education system, but unable to participate fully in the civilization they had been taught to admire, the young Algerians found themselves awkwardly positioned halfway between two cultures. This intermediary position enabled them to articulate the grievances of a disenfranchised people in the language of the French civilizational ideal, the very language that French colonialists had used to justify their domination.



The February 1894 edition of the Algerian Arab political and literary journal *El Hack* (*La Vérité*)

## Algerians React to the Draft, 1907–1912

The Young Algerians saw military service as a way to generate a movement for equal rights. They worked to persuade other Algerians, holding rallies and meetings, publishing articles, and going door-to-door to convince others that the draft could help them achieve political representation. In areas where the Young Algerians were active, administrators reported a significant change in attitude as colonial subjects began to openly discuss the need for political rights in exchange for the “blood tax.”

For many rural Algerians, however, the rumor of the draft came quietly, in the form of a few European administrators with clipboards. French legislators tried to sidestep the question of political rights by ordering administrators to be vague and avoid making any promises. However, this did not stop Algerians from discussing it in cafes, shops, and fields, writing about it in newspapers, holding public meetings to debate it, plotting ways to thwart it, and even composing songs about it.



*View of Algiers showing Military Field, early 20th century*

The debate over military service galvanized the political awareness of Muslim communities across Algeria by raising the question: Can Muslim colonial subjects become French citizens? Not surprisingly, historical records show that there was a broad range of responses to this question. As the War Ministry went about conducting its investigations, communities all across Algeria responded in a variety of ways to the spreading rumor of the “Muslim draft.”

**Pause here to reflect:** How do you think other groups of Algerians may have responded to the idea of a draft? Do you think they would agree or disagree with the idea that military service would lead to equal rights?

Some Algerian communities panicked, believing that the government was calling up their men immediately. Others dismissed the lists as merely more French paperwork. Rumors whispered that the draft was a secret attack on North African culture with nefarious effects: the forced de-veiling of women, taxes on pious objects and amulets, the outlaw of public prayer, a ban on circumcisions, and even idol worship.

In response to these rumors, a number of wealthy religious families with connections in Syria and Turkey abandoned their belongings and emigrated in the deeply-rooted protest tradition known as *hijra*. In 1908 a group of wealthy de-

scendants of the old Ottoman elite wrote a lengthy petition with seventeen pages of signatures, declaring that they would rather leave Algeria than accept French military service. Around the same time, the Mufti of Ain Beida, a respected leader from Constantine, wrote a letter warning that Muslims would leave rather than accept the draft because they were “certain that our children will not have the same rights, or the same treatment as French conscripts.”

Interestingly, settlers were even more strongly opposed to the Muslim draft. They didn’t want to arm potential “rebels” and thought it was dangerous to blur the lines between “subjects” and



*Constantine, Algeria, 1899*

“citizens.” As we learned in Lessons 2 and 3, the settler lobby had a long history of direct opposition to the “civilizing mission” of the French government. On the issue of the draft, they found a strange alliance with Algerian religious leaders, who also opposed the French “civilizing mission” but for very different reasons.

Nonetheless, in 1912 The French military was authorized to draft Algerian Muslims. They began slowly, calling up twelve hundred young men per year. The Young Algerians were disappointed with the decree, for it treated colonial soldiers as mercenaries and did not provide them a path to citizenship.

As for the young men who were called up in 1912 and 1913, they responded in a variety of ways. The official reports of the proceedings emphasized the “submission,” “docility,” and “resignation” of the conscripts: “Only a few minor incidents occurred, without any real gravity,” boasted the Governor General in his 1913 plenary speech. “Our subjects submitted to their new obligations with goodwill and even with a certain degree of enthusiasm . . . everywhere the Commissions were able to function in a perfect calm, amidst deferent and submissive populations . . .”

Nonetheless there were several exceptions. In the region of Nedroma, several hundred young men took a striking collective action and hid rather than appear at the town hall on the appointed day. The administration responded with force, employing “*des mesures spéciales*” to chase down each of the young men individually. The Young Algerian newspaper *El Hack* praised the actions of two men



who stood like statues, refusing to get dressed in uniform, and a group of fathers were arrested for declaring that “we prefer to die than to give you our sons.” Elsewhere, as the young men marched off, mothers followed the young recruits, *you-youing* and asking them to desert, or pleading with the local administrator on their sons’ behalf. Some communities said prayers for the departing men as if they were already dead.



*Press image of Algerian troops en route to the front, 1914*

## The First Shot

This fact is not well known, but Algeria was actually the very first place to be attacked by Germany in the First World War. Only hours after Germany’s war declaration on August 3, 1914, two German battleships opened fire on the port cities of Bône and Phillipeville, killing fourteen French soldiers and three civilians.

French military officials were convinced that the German attack was part of a sinister plot to spark a massive “Muslim uprising” in North Africa.

**Pause here to reflect:** How do you think Algerian colonial subjects reacted and responded during the war?



*Algerian Soldiers boarding a train for transport in Europe during World War I, ca. 1914-1915*



# Algerians React to the War



*Algerian soldiers departing for the front from Champigny-su-Marne, France, ca. 1914-1915*

Despite the fears of settlers, Algerian Muslims did not immediately revolt. In fact, they volunteered at high rates in the first year of the war. Algerian religious leaders led pro-French ceremonies, prayed publicly for Allied victory, and condemned the Ottoman Empire for joining the war on the opposing side. In an unexpected outpouring of support, a number

of official chiefs and notables as well as leaders of historically rebellious Sufi orders sent letters affirming the unity of Europeans and Muslims in the war effort.

However, as devastating news from the front trickled back to Algeria, this initial enthusiasm began to wane. The Muslim population was deeply shocked by the sight of mutilated men returning from the Dardanelles and frightened by descriptions of trench warfare. At least one tribe petitioned the government, saying that they were not afraid to fight but were deeply dismayed by stories of “the blows which rain down and decimate [the soldiers], before they can even glimpse the enemy.”

Kabyle workers returning from the Nord shortly after the German invasion similarly shared stories of hopelessness and atrocity.



*Drawing of Algerian Spahis in Artois, a region of northern France, November 1914*

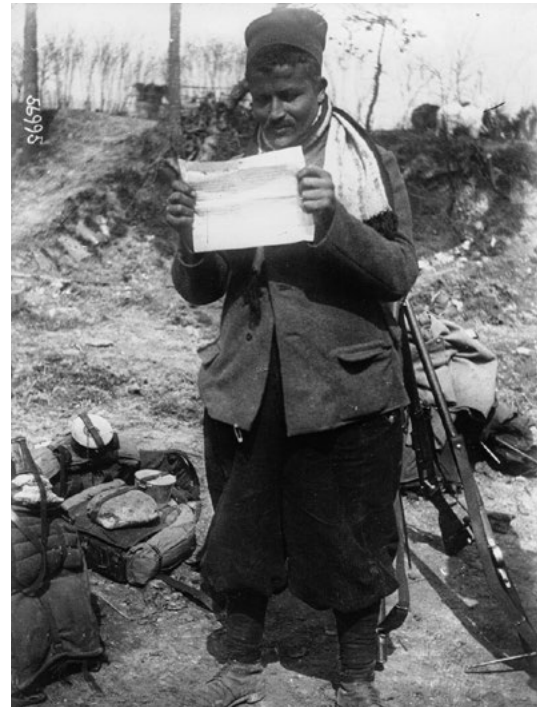
# Transformations

War is an experience that transforms individuals and societies. Once recruited, what did Algerian soldiers and workers experience in the trenches, hospitals, and barracks of France? What happened to their wives, children, families, and homes?

**Predict in your notes:** Reflect and consider what you think Algerians' answers to these questions might have been, and consider the following: What do you think Algerians might have expected or hoped for should France end up on the winning side of the war? What do you think Algerians might have felt they would be owed as a result of their participation in the war?

How do you think the war will transform Algerians' ideas about themselves? How will it alter their relationship with settlers and with France?

We will explore this in class tomorrow!



*Press photo of an Algerian tirailleur (rifleman) reading news from his family, 1915*



*The 7th Régiments de tirailleurs algériens and its flag in 1917*

## Further Reading

Aissaoui, Rabah. “Between Two Worlds: Emir Khaled and the Young Algerians at the Beginning of the Twentieth Century.” In *Algeria Revisited: History, Culture and Identity*, edited by Rabah Aissaoui and C. Eldridge. Bloomsbury, 2017.

Bennoune, Mahfoud. *The Making of Modern Algeria: Colonial Upheavals and Post-independence Development*. Cambridge University Press, 1988.

Fogarty, Rochard. *Race and War in France: Colonial Subjects in the French Army, 1914–1918*. The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008.

Hassett, Donal. *Mobilizing Memory: The Great War and the Language of Politics in Colonial Algeria, 1918–1939*. Oxford University Press, 2019.

Mann, Michelle. “Not Quite Citizens: Assimilation, World War One, and the Question Indigene in Colonial Algeria, 1870–1920.” PhD diss., Brandeis University, 2017.

Mann, Michelle. “The Young Algerians and the Question of the Muslim Draft, 1900–14.” In *Algeria Revisited: History, Culture and Identity*, edited by R. Aissaoui and Claire Eldridge. Bloomsbury, 2017.

McDougall, James. *History and the Culture of Nationalism in Algeria*. Cambridge University Press, 2006.

Ofrath, Avner. “‘We Shall Become French’: Reconsidering Algerian Jews’ Citizenship, c.1860–1900.” *French History* 35, no. 2 (2021): 243–65.



# Image Citations

## Page 1:

Algerian Soldiers in Europe during World War I, ca. 1914-1915, Bain News Service, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, Public Domain, <https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2014697672/>

## Page 3:

A. Tribal, Carte de France, Le Petit Journal, 1900, Public Domain, <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bt-v1b531213174#>

## Page 4:

Janet-Lange, "Juif et Juive d'Algérie," Lowcountry Digital Library, College of Charleston Libraries, 1858, Fair Use, <https://lcdl.library.cofc.edu/lcdl/catalog/lcdl:66257>  
Ferhat Abbas, Public Domain, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ferhat\\_Abbas\\_-\\_algerischer\\_Staatspr%C3%A4sident.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ferhat_Abbas_-_algerischer_Staatspr%C3%A4sident.jpg)

## Page 5:

El Hack (La Vérité), February 18, 1894, Public Domain, <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k62622316.r=el%20hack%20la%20v%C3%A9rit%C3%A9?rk=21459;2#>

## Page 6:

Z.F., Algiers: Mustapha and the Military Field, Postcard of Algiers, early 20th century, Getty Research Institute Library special collections, Public Domain, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Algiers,\\_Mustapha\\_and\\_the\\_Military\\_Field\\_\(GRI\)\\_-\\_Flickr\\_-\\_Getty\\_Research\\_Institute.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Algiers,_Mustapha_and_the_Military_Field_(GRI)_-_Flickr_-_Getty_Research_Institute.jpg)

## Page 7:

General view, Constantine, Algeria, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, Public Domain, <https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2001697860/>

## Page 8:

Troupes d'Algérie en route pour le front, Photographies de l'Agence Rol, 1914, <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bt-v1b6932022w.r=alg%C3%A9rie%20guerre?rk=557942;4>  
Algerian Soldiers in Europe During World War I, ca. 1914-1915, Bain News Service, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Public Domain, <https://www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/ggbain/item/2014697646/>

## Page 9:

At Champigny -- giving wine to Algerian troops, ca. 1914-1915, Bain News Service, Library of Congress Prints and

Photographs Division, Public Domain, <https://www.loc.gov/item/2014697198/>

Drawing of Algerian Spahis in Artois, a region of norther France, November 1914 Charles Huard, Algerian Spahis in Artois, November 1914, The National WWI Museum and Memorial, Fair Use, <https://collections.theworldwar.org/argus/final/Portal/Default.aspx?component=AAAS&record=994387e0-7bd3-480e-8cc0-24f08c594449>

## Page 10:

Un tirailleur algérien lit avec plaisir des nouvelles de sa famille, Agence Meurisse, 1915, Public Domain, <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b9043644k.r=alg%C3%A9rie%20guerre?rk=879832;4>

Le 7e RTA et son drapeau en 1917, Album de la guerre 1914-1919, 1927, Public Domain, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:7e\\_RTA\\_est\\_son\\_drapeau\\_en\\_1917.jpg?uselang=fr](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:7e_RTA_est_son_drapeau_en_1917.jpg?uselang=fr)