

# Northern Africa

By [Thomas Patrick DeGeorges](#)

**The Ottoman and European colonial contexts are the necessary background for understanding northern Africa's unique history with both Allied and Central powers. The impact of European state-building, imperialist ideology, and industrialization upon northern African societies all affected wartime events in this region. During the war itself, mobilization, fighting in various theaters, exigencies of the war economy, imperial strategy, tribal revolts, and the peace process all decisively shaped the lives of northern Africa's peoples. The war contributed to mass nationalist parties in the region following the armistice, as well as policies toward returning soldiers.**

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## Introduction

In 2006, the Franco-Algerian director, Rachid Bouchareb, released his critically acclaimed film, *Days of Glory (Indigènes)* profiling the wartime service of four North African soldiers during the Second World War. Although much of the film focuses on the daring wartime exploits of this unit, the final scene portrays one of its survivors (now old and alone) in a European city (likely Paris). Perhaps intentionally at this moment, Bouchareb's film captures the deep ambiguity felt by Europeans and North Africans alike towards the wartime service of tens of thousands of colonial troops in the First and Second World Wars. Their peripatetic travels across the Mediterranean and back, as well as their first-hand encounters with European life made them difficult to insert into the wave of anti-colonial [nationalism](#) that led to independence in the 1950s and 1960s. Similarly, the European Union has had difficulty inserting them into its own post-war historic revisionism. This article will explore the complex and controversial history of these men in the case of the First World War. It will illustrate just how important their experiences and sacrifices are to understanding North African and European societies today.

## Precursors: Ottoman North Africa (1516-1830)

It is important to reflect upon the legacy of the [Ottoman Empire](#), as well as that of European colonialism when considering the impact of North Africa during the First World War. Mamluk [Egypt](#) fell to the forces of the Ottoman sultan [Süleyman I, Sultan of](#)

[the Turks \(1494-1566\)](#) in 1516, while Ottoman control of much of the North African coastline resulted from the Ottoman-Habsburg power struggle in the Mediterranean in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Many historians cite the Ottoman loss at the battle of Lepanto in 1571 as signaling an effective end to this maritime rivalry. Unlike previous Islamic dynasties in the Middle Ages, Ottoman governance in northern Africa was characterized by control over key coastal cities (Oran, Algiers, Tunis and Tripoli) rather than an extensive *hinterland*. Another important distinction between Ottoman rule and that of earlier North African dynasties was the independence of what is now Morocco from Ottoman authority.

The Ottomans governed North African provinces through a coalition of elites drawn from Anatolia and southeastern Europe, as well as Arab and Berber notable families. The intermarriage of Ottoman elites with the local population also provided personnel for the military and bureaucratic structures. According to an old Islamic adage, Muslim rulers were often compared to the “shepherds” watching over their “flock” of subjects.<sup>[1]</sup> In the case of North Africa, these subjects were linguistically and ethnically diverse, descended from Arab conquerors and the indigenous Berber population of Roman times. A small Jewish population was present throughout North Africa having grown from successive waves of immigration from Punic times to the more recent expulsions from Spain in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>[2]</sup> Without the formidable bureaucracies that would develop under the modern nation state, extracting resources from this population (whether conscripts or taxes) was difficult. It often required the concentrated application of military force, which inevitably inspired brief, yet intense, periods of rebellion. Historians of the late Ottoman Empire in Tunisia have focused upon the uprising of 1864 in Tunisia as an example of this phenomenon. Tribal affiliation was more important in northern Africa in this period than it is today. Tribal confederations spanned the territory of several of today’s nation states in northern Africa. Relying on agriculture and livestock for their livelihood, tribal groups often shared a large portion of land to take advantage of scarce water resources and protect their resources from the ever-present threat of drought.

If there was an Ottoman identity imparted to North African populations, it was most likely strongest among the aforementioned elite groups in urban areas, not the majority of the rural populace. To this day, many North African cities bear the architectural and cultural stamp of the Ottoman rulers of yesteryear.<sup>[3]</sup> The Cairo citadel of [Muhammad Ali Pasha \(1769-1849\)](#) is one of these iconic structures. By contrast, Islamic tradition and practice was woven into the fabric of everyday life in North Africa, whether among Ottoman elites or the Arabo-Berber peasantry. Traditional centers of Islamic learning such as the universities of al-Qarawiyyin in Morocco, al-Zaytuna in Tunisia, or al-Azhar in Cairo remained linked with theological developments elsewhere in the Islamic world. For much of the rural population, strong devotion to the principles of the Islamic faith co-existed with the respect of local holy leaders whose shrines were sites of local pilgrimage. Mystical Sufi brotherhoods, such as the Senussi in Libya, derived immense legitimacy among the populace and many came to be viewed as interlocutors between the central government and the populace.<sup>[4]</sup>

## European Colonialism (1830-1914)

This then was the society that Europeans gradually penetrated during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. The first Europeans tended to be merchants who occupied segregated areas of North African towns and cities. During the Ottoman-Habsburg wars mentioned above, Spanish troops gained control over small parts of the region for a limited amount of time. The French Revolution and the Napoleonic period from 1789-1814 created the large conscript armies and bureaucracies necessary to manage European imperialist territories in Africa and the Middle East. [Napoleon III, Emperor of the French's \(1808-1873\)](#) brief expedition to Egypt in 1798 hinted at the colonial strategies to come, as French and British ambitions on the Middle East would be focused on control of key supply routes to Asia. By 1830, the French had ousted the Ottoman ruler of Algiers and started their brutal pacification of much of the coastline from Oran in the west to Constantine in the east that would last until 1848. Many Algerians contested French control during this period: the most famous was the Emir [Abd al-Qadir \(1808-1883\)](#), also known as Abdelkader. Elsewhere in North Africa, Ottoman leaders such as Muhammad Ali Pasha of Egypt and [Ahmad Bey of Tunisia \(1784-1850\)](#) experimented with the Tanzimat reforms introduced in the Ottoman heartland of Anatolia.<sup>[5]</sup>

The industrial revolutions of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries amplified the destructive power of European expeditionary forces and their desire for raw materials. The so-called “scramble for Africa” in the 1880s would increase European control over northern Africa. In 1881, French forces in Algeria invaded Tunisia to limit tribal incursions. Subsequently, they established a protectorate over the country, which entailed the preservation of the Ottoman-era government alongside a French bureaucracy. In 1882, the

British bombarded the port of Alexandria in an effort to pressure the bankrupt government of Egypt to pay its debts to European bondholders. As with Tunisia, the result of this military incursion was the establishment of a British protectorate alongside the Ottoman-era government of the khedives. The 20<sup>th</sup> century saw the emergence of German, Italian, and Spanish [imperialist](#) aims in North Africa. Future wartime leader, [Wilhelm II, German Emperor \(1859-1941\)](#), alarmed the established colonial powers in northern Africa with a provocative speech in Tangier in 1905. The [Italian government](#) established a colonial foothold in Tripoli, Libya in 1910. The Alawite sultanate of Morocco was the last northern African state to fall under colonial control. In 1912, just two years prior to the First World War, French, and Spanish forces occupied the country and divided it into two protectorate zones.

The techniques, machinery, and mindset of the industrial revolutions were applied with zeal to northern Africa by colonial administrators. These economic priorities, coupled with efforts to settle Europeans in northern Africa, would have dire consequences for traditional sectors of the economy. Tribal groups had been accustomed to dealing with harsh environmental conditions, which required large tracts of land to fully compensate for periods of drought and poor productivity. The imposition of vertical nation-state borders impeded the horizontal movements of many of these tribes to whom the concept of Algerian, Tunisian, Moroccan or Libyan nationalities remained unknown. Mechanization of agriculture in the more fertile north reduced the need for indigenous labor and favored European colonists who could more easily raise the capital necessary for investment in land and machinery. Even urban areas were not immune to the effects of integration into a broader global market. The venerable institutions of Islamic learning were slow to adapt to the economic changes, which left their graduates at a disadvantage when they sought work. Hardship in the countryside forced many to seek employment in North African cities. The growth of large urban slums (known in French as “*bidonvilles*”) dates from the colonial period.<sup>[6]</sup>

## Northern Africa at War (The European Front)

The outbreak of war in August of 1914 put colonial administrators in a difficult position as they sought to balance the urgent requests of their European superiors for [military](#) and [economic](#) manpower from the colonies against the need to maintain peace and order among populations struggling to cope with the indignities of imperialist rule. French General [Charles Mangin \(1866-1925\)](#) was one of the first colonial officials to recognize the military potential of African troops. In his work, *La Force Noire* (1910), Mangin called for the mobilization of African troops in the event of a continental war in Europe. While Mangin’s thesis was based on his experiences in [West Africa](#), it no doubt appealed to French officials in North Africa, who had already deployed Algerian infantry in Crimea (1856) and the Franco-Prussian War (1870) prior to its publication. Although Mangin’s thesis found favor with French war leaders, selection and mobilization of potential recruits presented other challenges. Morocco did not possess laws permitting the conscription of indigenous soldiers. Crucially, Morocco fell outside of the Ottoman sphere of influence and thus its rulers may have felt less compelled to adopt aspects of Istanbul’s Tanzimat reforms (such as conscription). Algeria’s conscription law had come into force only two years before the outbreak of the war. Only in the case of Tunisia did French authorities inherit an Ottoman-era conscription law dating back to the 1860s. Thus, efforts were made to entice northern Africans to participate in the war as both conscripts and volunteers. In practice, such recruits often fell afoul of corrupt or brutal local officials who pressed them into service in return for money. Over the course of the war, over 200,000 Algerian, Tunisian, and Moroccan troops were recruited for deployment in European theaters of war.<sup>[7]</sup>

In addition to the recruitment of soldiers, both [France](#) and [Britain](#) employed tens of thousands of indigenous North Africans to reinforce the Allied economy during the war. With so many European workers conscripted to fight against the Central Powers, French leaders authorized the employment of their North African subjects in France to replace them. Thus, the war years marked the first large-scale [migration](#) (although involuntary) of North Africans to France, a trend that would intensify in the post-war era. Initially, the recruitment of laborers lagged behind the conscription of soldiers. However, by 1915 (once the hope of a short war was replaced by the grim reality of a multi-year conflict) increasing pressure was placed upon colonial authorities to increase the quotas of [laborers](#) from northern Africa.<sup>[8]</sup> Once they arrived in mainland France, the laborers had to confront many of the same challenges that their military counterparts faced: racism, unequal pay, and intrusive surveillance into both their activities and their correspondence with their families. Many colonial administrators also balked at depleting the labor force in the colonies further. As the war dragged on, northern African economies already faced inflationary pressures and shortages. Sending tens of thousands of able-bodied men to Europe as soldiers and laborers only worsened these problems in the eyes of colonial administrators.

Colonial troops from northern Africa were deployed almost exclusively to the European theater of battle. Units would arrive in southern French ports such as Bordeaux or Marseilles and then be transported to the front as part of indigenous units commanded mostly by European officers. As the war progressed, the fierce trench fighting caused heavy [losses](#) among the [infantry](#) and officer corps. Anxious about their fate, North African soldiers endeavored to contact their families while in Europe. In fact, military [censors](#) and official translators worked to heavily censor the information received by families and relatives. Although the French permitted the promotion of indigenous soldiers to the rank of officer, in practice this happened rarely and the North African officers found themselves disadvantaged in almost every way compared to their French counterparts. Historians have calculated the sobering statistic that approximately one in five North African soldiers died in Europe fighting for the Allied cause.<sup>[9]</sup> The reason that North African troops were deployed to the [Western Front](#) was that Allied commanders were wary of placing these troops against Ottoman forces in the eastern Mediterranean for fear that loyalty to Islam and the sultan would provoke desertion. The [German](#) and [Ottoman](#) governments stoked these fears during the war by enlisting North Africans critical of European control to sow anti-colonial propaganda among prisoners of war in German prison camps. For the most part, these efforts by the Central powers appear to have persuaded few North Africans to join their war effort.

## Northern Africa at War (The Home Front)

The impact of the First World War on the home front varied from country to country in northern Africa. Morocco, which had recently become a French Protectorate in 1912, provided fewer troops and laborers to the colonial war effort than did Algeria and Tunisia. In addition, the northern part of Morocco was under the rule of [Spain](#), which remained [neutral](#) during the conflict. The recruitment of so many young men on behalf of the Allied cause created unique difficulties for North African families. In Algeria and Tunisia, agricultural production for small farmers often depended on having able-bodied men to assist with the different stages of the crop cycles. Death on the battlefield caused legal dilemmas when multiple wives sought pensions. Even [widows](#) found it difficult to claim benefits on behalf of a dead husband. These problems were compounded if the soldier came from one of the more remote areas of northern Africa, such as the Algerian Sahara or the rural areas of Tunisia. While Britain decided not to actively recruit soldiers in Egypt, it did employ similar techniques to create the Egyptian Labour Corps. British officials deployed this contingent of thousands of native Egyptians to bolster colonial infrastructure critical to the defense of the Suez Canal and Egypt's front with Ottoman Palestine.<sup>[10]</sup> Aggressive attempts by the Ottoman leader, [Ahmed Cemal Pasha \(1872-1922\)](#) to attack Egypt early in the war no doubt influenced British policy in this regard. As mentioned earlier, inflation became more of a problem in the later years of the war as the Allies desperately resorted to printing money to cover mounting costs. In the southern areas of Tunisia and Libya, these problems were magnified by the onerous border control policies enacted by the French and the British. Designed to insulate Tunisia and Egypt from potential Ottoman sympathizers in Libya, border control evolved into a virtual blockade of normal agricultural and livestock activities. Unable to move freely, their grievances nourished two significant rebellions in Libya during the war: the Senussi *jihad* (1915-1917) in the eastern province of Cyrenaica (now Benghazi), and a Tripolitanian (western Libyan) uprising. While historians have debated the extent of Ottoman influence in the two revolts, it appears likely that Ottoman wartime leader, [Ismail Enver Pasha \(1881-1922\)](#), did attempt to organize Libyan opposition to European rule. In both cases, Libyans rallied around pre-colonial social groups, such as Sufi brotherhoods and tribal confederations as they challenged European control. The Senussi rebellion was indicative of the power of revolutionary messages cloaked in Islamic terminology to inspire and mobilize opposition to French and British colonial rule. The Emir Abd al-Qadir represented an earlier example of religiously inspired opposition to colonial rule. Elsewhere in Africa, the Mahdiyya uprising (1885-1899) in what is now Sudan, prompted a savage British response led by [Horatio Herbert Kitchener \(1850-1916\)](#) in 1895. Although ultimately unsuccessful, the Senussi rebellion and its Tripolitanian counterpart heralded a more contested post-war environment in which many indigenous social classes would contest the foundations of colonial rule.

## The End of the War and Peace Conference

By 1918, the Allied strategy in northern Africa succeeded in containing local [rebellion](#) as well as defending against an Ottoman invasion of Egypt and the Suez Canal. Furthermore, the British forces in Egypt (assisted by colonial troops from [India](#)) were able to invade and conquer what would become the [mandate of Palestine](#). British war leaders, such as [David Lloyd George \(1863-1945\)](#) and Lord [Arthur James Balfour \(1848-1930\)](#), came to see in Palestine a buffer zone that would shield the vital Suez Canal zone from invasion from the north. The peace negotiations at the [Versailles conference](#) in 1919, and the [Fourteen Point program](#) of U.S. President [Woodrow Wilson \(1856-1924\)](#), led to significant changes in the colonial system in the Middle East. [Wilsonian principles](#) of self-determination for subjugated populations inspired many nationalists from the colonial world to press for greater

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freedom for those living under British and French rule.<sup>[11]</sup> One of Egypt's most venerated political parties, the Wafd, assumed its name from the Arabic word "delegation," which in this case referred to a group of Egyptian nationalist leaders, led by a lawyer from Alexandria, [Saad Zaghloul \(1859-1927\)](#), who were imprisoned by British authorities in 1919 before they could travel to the peace negotiations. The detention of these nationalist leaders provoked the most serious uprising in Egypt since the 1881 Urabi revolt. One of the founders of Tunisia's "Destour" or "Constitution" party (1920), [Abdalaziz al-Thaalbi \(1876-1944\)](#) traveled to Paris to press his case for Tunisian independence. Thaalbi's insistence on the "blood debt" that France owed Tunisia for its wartime contribution framed the Destour party's demands for constitutional reform and political autonomy for the country.

## The Legacy of the War: Veterans and Nationalism

Zaghloul and Thaalbi's activities marked a departure from earlier forms of nationalism in northern Africa in that they strove to create mass movements to support the political demands of their parties. In 1926, an Algerian counterpart to the Wafd and Destour parties was formed: the North African Star, led by Messali Hadj. To counter the rising nationalist demands, the French government promised the returning veterans of World War I recognition for their service and benefits for themselves and their families. Benefits promised ranged from expedited licenses to set up small businesses to the promise of French citizenship. Although veterans' policies in northern Africa mirrored parallel initiatives in Europe, French officials also hoped to create a reservoir of "loyalist" support among veterans' groups. These efforts failed despite highly publicized efforts by Algeria's Governor-General [Charles Jonnart \(1857-1927\)](#) to provide veterans with employment in key economic sectors, as well as the creation of veterans' centers known as "Dar al-Askeri" throughout French North Africa.<sup>[12]</sup> Given the symbolic acceptance of French colonialism that naturalization implied, it is no surprise that very few Algerians, Moroccans, or Tunisians availed themselves of this policy. Those that did often faced withering criticism from nationalist parties after the war. Due to economic inflation after the war and the limited network of veterans' bureaus set up in northern Africa, most veterans found it difficult to claim medical or social benefits as a result of their wartime service.

## Conclusion

The First World War and its aftermath brought significant and irreversible change to North African societies. Older forms of nationalist protest led by elite elements of the society gradually gave way to parties based on mass mobilization of all strata of society. The reintegration of thousands of veterans into northern Africa informed even the most isolated populations of the ways and customs of their European rulers. The experiences of soldiers and laborers from northern Africa popularized the idea of travelling to Europe for study and work. Within a decade of the war's end, Algerian, Tunisian, and Moroccan middle- and upper-classes could be found in Paris and elsewhere pursuing degrees in medicine and law. Prominent writers such as [Tayeb Salih \(1929-2009\)](#), [Tawfiq al-Hakim \(1898-1987\)](#), and [Kateb Yacine \(1929-1989\)](#) pursued post-war studies and careers in Europe and integrated their experiences in their novels. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, perhaps the most poignant legacy of the transnational migrations begun in 1914 is the recent exodus of migrants from North Africa and the Middle East yearning for a more prosperous life in the European Union. Where their forefathers reluctantly left the shores of northern Africa for the perils of a Europe riven by conflict, these recent migrants risk life and limb to seek the relative safety of a Europe whose peace and prosperity was achieved in no small part due to the efforts of their ancestors.

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## Notes

1. ↑ Readers interested in how early Islamic societies conceptualized the political and rhetorical relationship between ruler and subject may wish to consult the following works: Kennedy, Hugh N.: *The Islamic Near East from the Sixth to the Eleventh Centuries*, London 2016; and Mottahedeh, Roy: *Loyalty and Leadership in an Early Islamic Society*, London 2004.

2. ↑ For those interested in a comprehensive review of recent scholarship on the origins of Judaism in North Africa, please consult Stern, Karen: *Inscribing Devotion and Death: Archaeological Evidence for Jewish Populations of North Africa*, Leiden 2007.
3. ↑ An excellent review of scholarly work involving the Ottoman city in North Africa may be found in the following publication: Slyomovics, Susan (ed.): *The Walled Arab City in Literature, Architecture and History: The Living Medina in the Maghrib*, *Journal of North African Studies* 5/4 (2000).
4. ↑ James McDougall provides an engaging discussion of the importance of Sufism and popular Islamic tradition during the French colonial period in Algeria in his work: *History and the Culture of Nationalism in Algeria*, Cambridge 2008.
5. ↑ Leon Carl Brown's review of this reform period in Tunisia is especially interesting for those wishing to contextualize the constitutional situation in Tunisia following the Arab Spring: *The Tunisia of Ahmed Bey: 1837-1855*, Princeton 1975.
6. ↑ Philip C. Naylor provides a good review of this period in Chapter 6 of his work: *North Africa: A History from Antiquity to the Present*, Austin 2015.
7. ↑ Fogarty, Richard S.: *Race and War in France: Colonial Subjects in the French Army, 1914-1918*, Baltimore 2008, p. 27.
8. ↑ Stovall, Tyler: *Colour-blind France? Colonial workers during the First World War*, *Race & Class* 35/2 (1993).
9. ↑ Fogarty, *Race and War in France* 2008, p. 82.
10. ↑ Rogan, Eugene: *The Fall of the Ottomans: The Great War in the Middle East*, New York 2015, p. 313.
11. ↑ Manela, Erez: *The Wilsonian Moment (Self-Determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism)*, Oxford 2009.
12. ↑ Cannon, Byron: *Irreconcilability of Reconciliation: Employment of Algerian Veterans under the Plan Jonnart, 1919-1926*, *Maghreb Review* 24/1-2 (1999).

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