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Alsace in Algeria and the Notion of ‘Failure’ in Settler Political Culture, c. 1870–1960

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Abstract

This article explores a key trope in the history of French colonial Algeria: the idea of the colony as a failure. The focus is on the resettlement of Alsatians and Lorrainers in Algeria in the aftermath of the Franco-Prussian War. What started as a wave of nationalist élan that sought to rebuild the lost provinces in France’s largest colony soon became the object of criticism and controversy, depicted by contemporaries from early on as failure. While this perceived failure was itself a colonial category – the failure to recruit settlers, expulse Algerians, and seize land – it tells us a great deal about the political culture of the colony. How was this resettlement project conceived? What visions of colonization and colonial settlement were projected upon it? And what mechanisms of coercion, dispossession, and violence did different colonial players seek to deploy? Through these questions, this article seeks to demonstrate that the verdict of ‘failure’ by settlers and lobbyists did not emerge in hindsight but was rather the product of the inherent tension between the sheer force that was necessary to seize the land and the metropolitan attempt to establish in the colony a form of unequal yet standardized civilian governance.

I

In *The first man* (1994), Albert Camus’s unfinished autobiographical novel, the protagonist Jacques Cormery asks his mother during a visit to war-torn Algiers about the ancestors of his fallen father, the First World War hero he had never met. ‘They were Alsatians’, the illiterate mother replies laconically, leaving Jacques to imagine the rest.¹ Written during the Algerian War, *The first man* is a masterly dance between past and present, facts and fiction, private and

¹ Albert Camus, *The first man*, trans. David Hapgood (New York, NY, 1995), p. 64. For the French original, see Albert Camus, *Le premier homme* (Paris, 1994), p. 63.

public – a passionate appeal of a *Français d'Algérie* to the sympathy of readers in the metropole amid a crumbling consensus over the colony's future. With the brief reference to Alsace, Camus invoked the persistent and deeply ambivalent memory of hundreds of families from Alsace-Lorraine who had settled in Algeria following the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–1.

This settlement project, the following pages argue, was a formative moment of political culture in colonial Algeria. 'Alsace and Lorraine formed for decades a unity in the national memory. The drama of defeat and territorial amputation led French nationalism to reaffirm its fundamentals. Alsace became the heart of France', as the 'Alsace' entry in the monumental *Realms of memory* asserts.² The weeks and months following the French defeat at the hands of Prussia witnessed a wave of political and civic mobilization in favour of the 'war victims', as emigrants from Alsace and Lorraine were referred to.³ Passionate appeals and solemn promises proclaimed the nation's debt to the c. 125,000 people who chose to leave their homes to avoid German rule, and considerable resources were deployed to facilitate the resettlement of at least some of them in the colony. 'Out of the grief over the lost provinces was born the dream to reconstruct vaster, more French ones', wrote the chief colonization official in Algeria in 1906.⁴

'Dream' was no coincidental choice of words. As we shall see, by the late nineteenth century, the Alsace-Lorraine settlement project had gone down as a failure in French colonial thought. With less than 1,200 families from Alsace-Lorraine settling in Algeria, about a third of which had returned to France by 1900, little remained of the patriotic mood that in the early 1870s bound the nation's fate with the colony's future.⁵ Yet, the verdict of 'failure' did not emerge in hindsight. Settlers and settler lobbyists depicted the colonization scheme as a missed opportunity from its earliest stages. Of course, this 'failure' was itself a colonial trope – the failure to utilize emigration towards land seizure and dispossession in Algeria. But taken as an object of inquiry rather than analytical category, failure as impression, verdict, and narrative appears as a crucial factor in shaping settler political culture in Algeria.

Recent scholarship places significant explanatory value on the history of emotions when exploring settler societies. Martin Evans notes the 'constant emotional presence' of fear amongst settlers in Algeria – not least the fear of being abandoned by the metropole.⁶ Thomas Dodman shows that fears of

² Jean-Marie Mayeur, 'Une mémoire-frontière: L'Alsace', in Pierre Nora, ed., *Les lieux de mémoire II: La nation* (Paris, 1986), p. 86. As the entry mentions, after 1870 'Alsace' was increasingly used as *para con toto* for 'Alsace-Lorraine'.

³ The part of Lorraine annexed by Prussia was Moselle. For the sake of simplicity and consistency, this article follows the conventional terminology in the literature in using the term 'Alsace-Lorraine'.

⁴ Henri de Peyerimhoff de Fontenelle, *Enquête sur les résultats de la colonisation officielle de 1871 à 1895* (1 vol., Algiers, 1906), p. 41.

⁵ For numbers of settlers, see Fabienne Fischer, *Alsaciens et Lorrains en Algérie: histoire d'une migration, 1830–1914* (Nice, 1999), p. 94.

⁶ Martin Evans, 'Towards an emotional history of settler decolonisation: De Gaulle, political masculinity and the end of French Algeria 1958–1962', *Settler Colonial Studies*, 8 (2018), pp. 213–43, at

decline permeated French colonial culture – not least in the Alsace-Lorraine project.⁷ Charlotte Ann Legg adds the emotions of pride over presumed achievements, excitement over the prospect of a new beginning, and frustration over the slow pace of colonization.⁸ Fears and notions of decline were a stark contrast to the energetic, forward-looking image that was central to the culture of the emerging settler community – from the idea of the rural settler in the 1840s, as explored by Jennifer Sessions, to the notion of a new, ‘Latin’ or ‘Mediterranean’ race emerging on the southern shore of the Mediterranean in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as discussed by Peter Dunwoodie, Patricia Lorcin, David Prochaska, Paul Siblot, and more recently Charlotte Ann Legg.⁹ Studies of the Alsace-Lorraine project, by contrast, largely sought to refute rather than explore the notion that the scheme was a failure.¹⁰

The attempt to rebuild Alsace in Algeria is an illuminating episode through which to explore the notions of failure and betrayal in settler political culture in Algeria and beyond. As the following pages demonstrate, such sentiments, which, as Claire Eldridge shows, were pivotal in the moment of 1962, had defined relations between settlers and the French state from early on.¹¹ Rather than a late product of decolonization, they stemmed from tensions that shaped French colonialism in Algeria for decades. Most important for our purposes was the increasingly evident tension that resulted from the shift from lawlessness to governance – from the unlimited state violence that facilitated colonization in the 1830s and 1840s to the attempt to establish a standardized legal regime in the following decades. Struggles over settlers’ position, role, and rights within the colonial order were central to this protracted, conflictual shift.¹²

pp. 213–14. Beyond Algeria, see e.g. Derek Penslar, *Zionism: an emotional state* (New Brunswick, NJ, 2023).

⁷ Thomas Dodman, *What nostalgia was: war, empire, and the time of a deadly emotion* (Chicago, IL, 2018), pp. 8–10, 185–7.

⁸ Charlotte Ann Legg, *The new white race: settler colonialism and the press in French Algeria, 1860–1914* (London, 2021), p. 15.

⁹ Jennifer E. Sessions, *By sword and plow: France and the conquest of Algeria* (Ithaca, NY, 2011), ch. 4; Jennifer E. Sessions, ‘Colonizing revolutionary politics: Algeria and the French Revolution of 1848’, *French Politics, Culture & Society*, 1 (2015), pp. 75–100; Peter Dunwoodie, *Writing French Algeria* (Oxford, 1999), pp. 83–8; David Prochaska, ‘History as literature, literature as history: Cagayous of Algiers’, *American History Review*, 101 (1996), pp. 671–711, at pp. 694–9; Patricia Lorcin, *Imperial identities: stereotyping, prejudice and race in colonial Algeria* (London, 2014), pp. 198–214; Paul Siblot, ‘“Cagayous antijuiif”. Un discours colonial en proie à la racisation’, *Mots*, 15 (1987), pp. 59–75.

¹⁰ Fischer, *Alsaciens et Lorrains en Algérie*, p. 105; Alfred Wahl, *L’option et l’émigration des Alsaciens-Lorrains: 1871–1872* (Paris, 1974), pp. 201–8; Charles-Robert Ageron, *Histoire de l’Algérie contemporaine: de l’insurrection de 1871 au déclenchement de la guerre de libération* (Paris, 1979), pp. 72–6. An introduction to a special issue on Algeria in *Settler Colonial Studies* even refers to settlers from Alsace-Lorraine as situated ‘at the apex of a system of social privilege’. See Fiona Barclay et al., ‘Introduction: settler colonialism and French Algeria’, *Settler Colonial Studies*, 8 (2018), pp. 115–30, at p. 117.

¹¹ Claire Eldridge, *From empire to exile: history and memory within the pied-noir and harki communities, 1962–2012* (Manchester, 2016), p. 20.

¹² On the shift to legalism, see Avner Ofrath, *Colonial Algeria and the politics of citizenship* (London, 2023), pp. 41–4.

Conceived at a crucial moment of the shift to legalism, when a civilian administration replaced the military one and settler parliamentary representation was reintroduced, the Alsace-Lorraine scheme rendered visible controversies over the limits of force and the place of law in the colony. As we shall see, the political constellation of the early 1870s engendered strong and clearly articulated tensions between ‘planners’ (*aménageurs*) on the one hand and ‘users’ or cultivators (*usagers*) on the other, to borrow Christine Mussard’s characterization of historical actors in the colony.¹³ Settlers and lobbyists turned legal limitations on land seizure into allegations of incompetence and betrayal against the colonial administration. Colonial officials, for their part, accused settlers of seeking easy profit by relying on Algerian labour rather than fulfilling the ideal of the autarkic rural farmer.

Such controversies reflected a broader frustration over the demographic and economic weakness of settler communities, both in Algeria and further afield. As Caroline Elkins and Susan Pedersen note, various settler societies across the globe relied increasingly on local, indigenous labour in the late nineteenth century.¹⁴ And whilst settlers and colonial lobbyists in Algeria often contrasted their case with the supposedly unlimited possibilities of North America or Australia, the resentments they expressed were by no means unique. As Jane Haggis writes about the case of Australia, a ‘sense of victimhood, of being exiled...and of having struggled too hard to earn the land’ helps explain a certain contempt for law and state institutions that is characteristic of settler societies.¹⁵ It is for this reason that the Alsace-Lorraine episode surfaced time and again in the twentieth century as a story of a promise unfulfilled, of the metropole betraying its devoted children at its frontiers. By exploring the lobbying, implementing, and remembering of Alsace in Algeria, we may trace a stance of settler self-perceptions that was at least as crucial as triumphalism and pioneer romanticism: that of perceived betrayal and decline.¹⁶

II

The Franco-Prussian War was still raging when, in January 1871, Auguste Warnier published his pamphlet *Algeria and the war victims*. A prominent

¹³ Christine Mussard, *L’obsession communale: la Calle, un territoire de colonisation dans l’Est algérien 1884–1957* (Aix-en-Provence, 2021), pp. 15–16.

¹⁴ Caroline Elkins and Susan Pedersen, ‘Introduction: settler colonialism – a concept and its uses’, in Susan Pedersen and Caroline Elkins, eds., *Settler colonialism in the twentieth century: projects, practices, legacies* (London, 2005), pp. 3–4.

¹⁵ Jane Haggis, ‘White Australia and otherness: the limits of hospitality’, in Anna Hayes and Robert Mason, eds., *Cultures in refuge: seeking sanctuary in modern Australia* (Farnham, 2012), p. 19. For other settler societies, see e.g. Christoph Kalter, ‘Rückkehr oder Flucht? Dekolonisierung, Zwangsmigration und Portugals Retornados’, *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, 44 (2018), pp. 250–84; Josiah Brownell, ‘Out of time: global settlerism, nostalgia, and the selling of the Rhodesian rebellion overseas’, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 43 (2017), pp. 805–24; Patricia Lorcin, *Historicizing colonial nostalgia: European women’s narratives of Algeria and Kenya, 1900–present* (New York, NY, 2012), pp. 143–94.

¹⁶ On pioneer romanticism, see e.g. Robert Gildea, *Empires of the mind: the colonial past and the politics of the present* (Cambridge, 2019), pp. 22–5.

advocate of settler interests, Warnier had voiced during the 1860s some of the harshest criticism of the now deposed Second Empire's policy of containing settler purchase of Algerian land, demanding unrestricted access to the colony's natural resources. Elected as Algiers's deputy to the National Assembly of the recently proclaimed Third Republic in January 1871, he was now making the case for a new colonization scheme that would be at once 'patriotic, colonial, and republican'. Hundreds of thousands of settlers from the lost territories of Alsace-Lorraine, Warnier argued, could double the French population in Algeria within six months. 'The Third Republic', he hoped, 'will give us new settlements...that would be Algeria's reward after forty years of perseverance in a difficult enterprise.'¹⁷

With his pamphlet, Warnier shaped much of the terminology that would dominate debates around the new colonization scheme in the following years – first and foremost by framing emigrants from the German-annexed territories as 'war victims'. The 1871 Treaty of Frankfurt gave the residents of Alsace and Moselle (the part of Lorraine occupied by Prussia) the choice between staying put under German rule and legal status or leaving for France to remain French nationals. By referring to those who chose to leave and who would soon colonize Algeria as 'war victims', Warnier created a narrative that implied both victimhood and patriotism. By so doing, he reframed much of the imagery and terminology that had shaped the French colonization of Algeria since the early 1840s. Rather than a way of diverting to the colony paupers, convicts, workers, and dissidents, colonization was now depicted as a heroic national cause.¹⁸

Warnier was soon joined by prominent public figures who had previously shown little interest in colonial affairs. A host of new associations, led and endorsed by prominent figures from the high bourgeoisie, the aristocracy, and the clergy, organized exhibitions, lotteries, and auctions, established schools and clinics, and engaged private companies to finance the emigrants' journeys to Algeria.¹⁹ The most important of these new associations was founded by the Alsatian aristocrat Joseph-Othenin Bernard de Cléron, comte d'Haussonville, a bitter opponent of Napoleon III. Back in Paris from his Belgian exile following the fall of the Second Empire, d'Haussonville first sought to buy back from Germany the occupied territory. When the project

¹⁷ Auguste Warnier, *L'Algérie et les victimes de la guerre* (Algiers, 1871), p. 4. For Warnier's lobbying, see e.g. Warnier to ministre de l'intérieur, 27 Jan. 1871, Aix-en-Provence, Archives nationales d'outre-mer (ANOM), F80/1798. For Warnier's critique of Napoleon III, see Auguste Warnier, *L'Algérie devant l'empereur* (Paris, 1865), pp. 5–29. On Warnier's career, see Osama Abi-Mershed, *Apostles of modernity: Saint-Simonians and the civilizing mission in Algeria* (Stanford, CA, 2010), p. 237; Vincent Wright, *Les préfets de Gambetta* (Paris, 2007), pp. 420–1.

¹⁸ On siphoning off to Algeria 'undesirable' elements, see Sessions, *By sword and plow*, pp. 202–6, 219–32, 264–7.

¹⁹ See e.g. Comité des Dames, *Compte rendu des opérations du comité du 1^{er} Octobre 1872 au 15 Juin 1874* (Paris, 1874), pp. 1–4; Commission des Alsaciens-Lorrains instituée en exécution de la loi du 20 décembre 1872, *Rapport présenté le 31 Juillet 1875 à la commission générale par M. Bouteron* (Paris, 1875), pp. 3–6, 13–14; secrétaire de la commission des Alsaciens-Lorrains to chef du bureau de l'Algérie to ministère de l'intérieur, 26 Jan. 1874, ANOM, F80/1798.

fell through, he diverted his funds to create the Société de protection des Alsaciens-Lorrains demeurés français (henceforth: Société de protection). It soon became the most important driving force of the project, managing the allotments granted to settlers, raising donations, constructing villages, and inspecting their progress.²⁰

If figures like Warnier or d'Haussonville harnessed their political influence and wealth towards the new colonization scheme, the archbishop of Algiers, Charles Lavigerie, gave it his religious authority and esteem. Having previously served as bishop of Nancy in Lorraine, where thousands of emigrants now gathered, Lavigerie was well placed to mobilize the conservative Catholic circles in France.²¹ Lavigerie had long portrayed Islam as anathema to 'civilization' and promoted missionary work in Kabylia. Somewhat isolated amidst the mostly anti-clerical settlers who had arrived in Algeria in the previous decades, he now hoped for a wave of religious revival. In an open appeal to Alsatians and Lorrainers to settle in the colony from March 1871, Lavigerie wrote: 'Christian populations of Alsace and Lorraine, wandering at this moment on the roads of France, Switzerland and Belgium: By my authority as bishop (*par ma voix d'évêque*), Algeria, the African France, opens its doors and reaches its hand to you.'²²

It was in this political climate that the newly constituted National Assembly declared the settlement project to be an official policy in a resolution from early March 1871:

Firmly attached to the patriotic populations of Alsace and Lorraine, whose natal land it had to concede with great sorrow under circumstances beyond its control, and wishing to save the souls and strength of such resilient races, the National Assembly hereby pledges 100,000 hectares of the best land in Algeria to those Alsatians and Lorrainers wishing to retain their French nationality and build a new home in Algeria.²³

The resolution's contention that the French state should and could use 'the best land in Algeria' for Europeans' settlement represented a broader, significant shift in colonial policies: from contained to unrestricted colonization.

²⁰ On d'Haussonville, see Henri Tribout de Morembert, 'Haussonville (Joseph-Othenin Bernard de Cleron, comte d)', in *Dictionnaire de biographie française* (Paris, 1989), VIII, p. 737; H. Tribout de Morembert, 'Haussonville (famille de)', in *Dictionnaire de biographie française*, II, p. 741. For the earliest documentation of the association, see comte d'Haussonville to gouverneur général, Mar. 1871, ANOM, GGA 3E 73.

²¹ Emigrants from the annexed territories gathered in Nancy and Belfort in 1871–2, causing concern to local officials. See commissaire de l'émigration à Nancy to ministre de l'intérieur, 19 Oct. 1871; administrateur de Belfort to ministère d'intérieur, 20 Oct. 1871, ANOM, F80/1798.

²² 'L'appel de l'archevêque d'Alger', *Le Constitutionnel* (13 Mar. 1871), pp. 3–4. On Lavigerie and missionary work, see Raphaëlle Branche, *L'embuscade de Palestro: Algérie 1956* (Paris, 2010), p. 99. On Lavigerie and early settlers, see François Renault, *Cardinal Lavigerie: churchman, prophet and missionary*, trans. John O'Donohue (London, 1994), p. 92.

²³ *Journal officiel de la République française* (JO), 8 Mar. 1871, p. 145. The decision was adapted as law three months later. See JO, 22 June 1871, p. 1512.

Napoleon III's administration had distinguished between different types of landed property in Algeria in order to shield parts of it from colonial purchase, settlement, and cultivation. The *sénatus-consulte* (imperial law) of 1863 had provided the legal groundwork for the division of land into parcels and the creation of a private landed property market along the French model in Algeria, while retaining some remnants of the Ottoman ownership and usage ascertainment system.²⁴ It was this last protection of Algerians' access and use of agricultural land that now came under attack. In *Algeria and the war victims*, Warnier criticized the *sénatus-consulte* of 1863 for having 'granted' Algerians 700,000 hectares of land.²⁵ His quest to lift all limitations on Europeans' purchasing of land would bear fruit in 1873 with the so-called Warnier Law, which applied French property law to Algeria and facilitated settler takeover of hitherto protected land.²⁶ Within a short period, then, the civic and political mobilization in favour of the new settlement scheme helped bring about a crucial turn in colonial policies in Algeria, lifting any significant limitations on the expansion of colonial settlement.

The move to lift the remaining restrictions of settler interests was among the main causes of the major insurrection that engulfed the Algerian east in early 1871, led by the Kabyle aristocratic chief Muhammad al-Hajj al-Muqrani. 'I fought against the [government of the] civilians, not against France, nor for holy war', said one of the revolt's leaders.²⁷ Al-Muqrani himself was alarmed by the growing influence of the settlers under the new civilian administration, and saw his position as threatened by the colonial administration. Emboldened by France's defeat against Prussia, he hoped to force the French into negotiating better conditions of taxation and land use by attacking various outposts between the cities of Algiers and Constantine in March 1871. The revolt quickly spread eastwards and became the most serious threat to French rule since the surrender of Abd al-Qadir in 1847. It was only in late 1871 that French troops quelled the uprising and forced al-Muqrani to surrender.²⁸

²⁴ The *sénatus-consulte* of 1863 distinguished, first, between divisible land owned by a single individual or family vs. indivisible land owned collectively by a 'tribe' (*tribu*), and secondly, between land that could be confiscated by the state and land shielded from such measures. See Didier Guignard, 'Conservatoire ou révolutionnaire? Le sénatus-consulte de 1863 appliqué au régime foncier d'Algérie', *Revue d'histoire du XIXe siècle*, 41 (2010), pp. 81–95; James McDougall, *A history of Algeria* (Cambridge, 2017), pp. 96–7.

²⁵ Warnier, *L'Algérie et les victimes de la guerre*, p. 111. See more generally on settler hostility to the Second Empire Gavin Murray-Miller, 'Bonapartism in Algeria: empire and sovereignty before the Third Republic', *French History*, 32 (2018), pp. 249–70. On the Second Empire, see most notably Annie Rey-Goldzeiguer, *Le royaume arabe: la politique Algérienne de Napoléon III, 1861–1870* (Algiers, 2014).

²⁶ The Warnier Law created legal tools for parcelating collectively owned land or taking possession of land declared vacant or unused by the colonial administration. See Charles-Robert Ageron, *Les Algériens musulmans et la France, 1871–1919* (Paris, 1968), pp. 74–80; Sylvie Thénault, '1881–1918: l'"apogée" de l'Algérie française et les débuts de l'Algérie algérienne', in Abderrahmane Bouchène et al., eds., *Histoire de l'Algérie à la période coloniale* (Paris, 2012), p. 174.

²⁷ Cited in McDougall, *A history of Algeria*, p. 78.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 78–9.

Retaliation after the Kabylia revolt was ferocious, and the Alsace-Lorraine settlement project played a major role in it. The French administration deported several of the insurrection's leaders, imposed an indemnity of 36.5 million francs, and sequestered tens of thousands of hectares, much of which was intended for new settlers.²⁹ A key figure in this interplay of retaliation and colonization was Vice-Admiral Louis-Henri de Gueydon, a veteran of colonial warfare who was appointed as Algeria's first civilian governor during the revolt.³⁰ Disembarking in Algiers on 11 April 1871, de Gueydon made a statement to the 'Residents of Algeria', declaring colonization and public works to be the pillars of his agenda.³¹ Rooted in the long tradition of the *soldat-laboureur*, de Gueydon's support for rural settlement was part of a broader military strategy: to create in Kabylia a 'large, homogeneous French population, capable of countering (*résister*) by itself any new insurrectionist attempt'.³²

As Raphaëlle Branche notes, the scheme to resettle emigrants from Alsace-Lorraine in Algeria was a crucial part of the French attempt to 'speak their victory in the soil' in the aftermath of the Kabylia insurrection.³³ In the immediate aftermath of defeat in Europe and repression in Algeria, figures such as Warnier, d'Haussonville, Lavigerie, and de Gueydon seemed to agree that the resettlement of Alsatians and Lorrainers could mark a new era of unrestricted colonization and increasing civilian French presence in Algeria.

Yet, as solemn declarations gave way to practical considerations and a civilian administration replaced the military one, disagreements and mutual accusations soon emerged. What shape should rural settlement take and what was its function in the broader quest to consolidate civilian rule in the colony? What were the duties of rural settlers in the new colonial order? And what degrees and forms of state violence, dispossession, and expulsion were possible, legitimate, or advisable? In all these matters, the new settlement project soon yielded more conflict than agreement and more frustration than pride.

III

When in March 1871 archbishop of Algiers Lavigerie published his appeal to the 'Christian populations of Alsace and Lorraine', he promised them more than housing and livelihoods. What he envisioned was a new Alsace:

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ On de Gueydon, see the following biographical note on the website of the Assemblée nationale: www2.assemblee-nationale.fr/sycomore/fiche/%28num_dept%29/7957.

³¹ Cited in L.-C. Dominique, *Un gouverneur général de l'Algérie: l'amiral de Gueydon* (Algiers, 1908), p. 22.

³² Gouverneur général, Instructions pour les commissions de séquestre, 26 June 1872, ANOM, F80/1799. On the figure of the *soldat-laboureur* in French literary and historical writing, see Gérard de Puymège, *Chauvin, le soldat-laboureur: contribution à l'étude des nationalismes* (Paris, 1994). Other officials suggested constructing fortified settlements along strategic routes. See Extrait de la délibération du comité consultatif de colonisation, 26 Oct. 1871, ANOM, GGA L10.

³³ Branche, *L'embuscade de Palestro*, p. 105.

Under a sky even softer and more beautiful than yours, in a climate that immediately passions all those who experience it, you will be able to form villages composed exclusively of inhabitants of your provinces, where you will preserve the language, the traditions, the faith of your native soil. You will find there your priests who will teach and guide you...You will be able to give the settlements built for you the names of the cities, the towns, the villages that are so dear to you.³⁴

For all their whimsical tone, these lines entailed in embryo the ambitiousness, explosiveness, and indeed ruthlessness that the new settlement scheme was about to unleash – and the fierce controversies over force and governance that would soon follow. For what was portrayed as a preservationist attempt to replicate Alsace in Algeria – a ‘transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home’, to use Svetlana Boym’s elegant definition of political nostalgia – inevitably meant an endeavour to thoroughly and forcibly reshape the infrastructure, demography, and ecology of Kabylia.³⁵ As the colonization scheme progressed, its scope grew increasingly ambitious, and the violence required to implement it grew increasingly evident.

The notion of an idyllic country life replicated in Algeria predominated the legislation, planning, and imagery of the resettlement project from early on. Altkirch, Eguisheim, Belfort, Obernai, and many other settlements founded in the early 1870s were named after villages in Alsace-Lorraine.³⁶ The 1871 legislation specified that each new village constructed for Alsatians and Lorrainers must include, alongside the individual allotments, a communal one, as well as a town hall, a school, and a church (*édifice du culte*).³⁷ A 1873 report described the new village of Bellefontaine east of Algiers in harmonious terms:

There is a school which the children visit assiduously. It is run provisionally by Monsieur Prost, former mayor of Molsheim, general councillor of Bas-Rhin who came to settle in Bellefontaine and fulfils this task with devotion and intelligence...The town hall and the church are not built yet, but the administration will construct a provisional building for religious celebrations very soon³⁸

Replicating as much as possible of the architecture and social structures of Alsace-Lorraine was deemed the foremost consideration by most actors involved. Most notably, Jean Dollfus, an important textile manufacturer, former mayor of the Alsatian industrial town of Mulhouse, and champion of workers’ housing, sought to repeat in Algeria the model he had developed in

³⁴ ‘L’appel de l’archevêque d’Alger’, pp. 3–4.

³⁵ Svetlana Boym, *The future of nostalgia* (New York, NY, 2001), p. xvii.

³⁶ ANOM, Base géographique (<http://anom.archivesnationales.culture.gouv.fr/geo.php?ir=>), s.v. Altkirch, Eguisheim, Belfort, Obernai.

³⁷ *JO*, 22 Sept. 1871, p. 3615.

³⁸ Auguste Guynemer, *Situation des Alsaciens-Lorrains en Algérie* (Paris, 1873), p. 27.

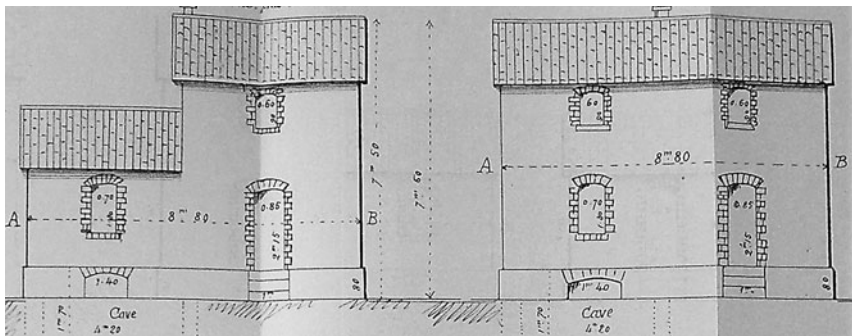


Figure 1. Planned houses in Azib-Zamoun.

Source: Société de protection des Alsaciens-Lorrains demeurés français, *Rapport sur les opérations de la société* (Paris, 1874).

Mulhouse. In 1873, he wrote to governor de Gueydon to request land for a settlement of up to forty Alsatian families in northern Kabylia. Within a year, the first families were on their way and settled in the village of Bou Khalfa.³⁹ In the new villages, houses were planned to resemble the Alsatian architecture and included cellars and steeply tiled roofs (Figure 1) – the former feature unsuitable for the humid climate in the coastal area, as de Gueydon himself noted, the latter originating from northern climate zones covered with snow during winter.⁴⁰

An illuminating example of this imagery was a leaflet printed by the Société de protection in 1878, featuring a drawing of the village of Azib Zamoun/Haussonvillier (Figure 2). Set between labouring settlers in the foreground and Kabylia's mountains in the background, the village houses connote a sense of harmony between labour, the built environment, and the surrounding countryside. Stretching from the lower right-hand corner to the centre is the road to Algiers, curving behind the village. A crossing is clearly visible and is marked by a road sign – an ordinary, unspectacular, and yet clear marker of a sovereign, confident presence. The centre of the picture is occupied by an older construction, depicted in blurred lines and a scale of greys. Juxtaposed with the sharp lines and black-and-white contrast of the village, this almost unnoticeably focal building connotes a ghostly presence of an earlier era – low

³⁹ Gouverneur général to préfet d'Alger, 24 Feb. 1873; ministre de l'intérieur, Autorisation de passage, 14 Apr. 1874; bureau de Dollfus-Mieg & Cie to chef du service de l'Algérie to ministère de l'intérieur, 21 Apr. 1874, ANOM, F80/1802. On Dollfus's project in Mulhouse, see Will Clement, 'The "unrealizable chimera": workers' housing in nineteenth-century Mulhouse', *French History*, 32 (2018), pp. 66–85, at pp. 66–70. Dollfus's nephew, the industrialist Alfred Koechlin-Schwartz, suggested financing the settlement of 200 Alsatian families in Algeria, but the project was rejected by de Gueydon, who refused to rely on private capital. See 'Informations', *Le Courrier du Gard*, 3 Dec. 1872, pp. 1–2.

⁴⁰ Gouverneur général à l'ingénieur civil C. Tallot, 11 Apr. 1873, ANOM, GGA L22. See also plans for other villages in ANOM, GGA L10: Dossiers 'l'Alma 1871–1878' and 'Village de Belle-Fontaine 1871–1885'.

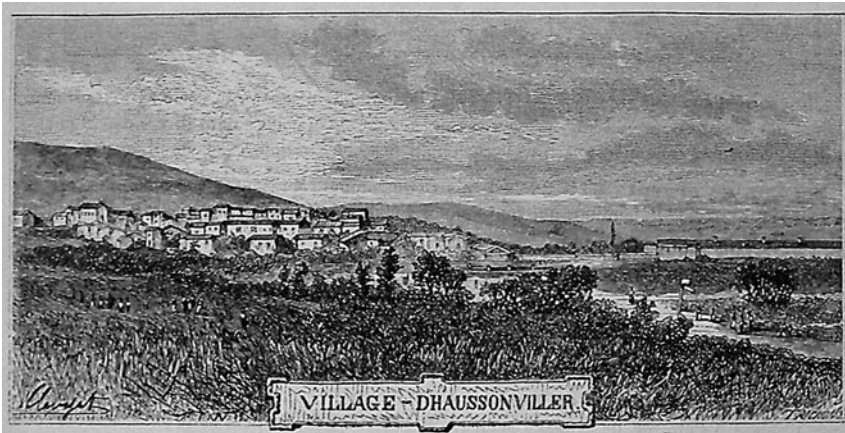


Figure 2. Drawing of Azib-Zamoun/Haussonvillier.

Source: Leaflet of the Société de protection des Alsaciens-Lorrains demeurés français, 1878, archived in ANOM, GGA L10.

and blurred enough so as not to overshadow the village to its left, and yet sufficiently present to remind the viewer of events preceding the construction of the village, adding a subtle dimension of triumphalism to an overall impression of idyll.

Such serene depictions were not confined to colonial publications. In 1887, the children's author Augustine Fouillé published a sequel to her immensely successful textbook from 1877 *La tour de France par deux enfants*. In the new book, titled *Les enfants de Marcel* (1887), a widowed Alsatian soldier wanders with his mother and four children through France and Switzerland in the aftermath of the Franco-Prussian War before finally setting sail to Algeria and settling in the Constantine region. Fouillé's depiction of the protagonists' arrival at the colonial farm amplified the tropes that had accompanied the settlement project from its inception – a sense of loss and new beginning, the promise of plenty, and a mission of pioneering in an allegedly empty land:

After an hour and a half along the road, they saw a group of houses in the countryside. One of these houses had a gate made of solid wood with a plaque above it. 'Grandmother', said Robert, who ran ahead of them and had the best eyesight, 'here is Petite Alsace! It's written above the gate.' Upon hearing the name Alsace, the grandmother felt deeply moved, as if she returned to her native country, of which she was so far away now.⁴¹

But *Les enfants de Marcel* also offers a glimpse into the close connection between the serene depictions of pioneer romanticism and the ambitious

⁴¹ G. Bruno (Augustine Fouillé), *Les enfants de Marcel* (Paris, 1894 [1887]), pp. 255–6.

attempt to reshape the Kabylia landscape. 'Isn't it a beautiful property?' the Alsatian domestic asks Marcel and his children as they arrive at the Petite Alsace farm. 'If you only knew what this terrain used to be! Instead of this house, the wheatfields, the vineyards, there was nothing, nothing at all.'⁴² With its simple, didactical language, Fouillé's prose popularized the notion of Algeria as a barren, desolate land, to be salvaged by the industrious newcomers.

Other texts were even blunter. An envoy of the Société de protection deplored in 1873 the alleged degeneration of Algeria's erstwhile flourishing nature and the decline of its forestry, 'which the Arab and the goat have been destroying with their blindness'. 'Without forests, no rivers, no prairies, no combustible, no chinks or bricks for construction', he argued, and suggested a radical remedy: 'The administration through reforestation and severe repressive measures and the settlers through plantations can contribute to the improvement and future richness of the country.'⁴³ This cause would be taken up in 1881 by the Ligue du reboisement, a pressure group of c. 1,500 members, many of whom were senior officials, which played a significant role in what Charles-Robert Ageron has called the Algerian administration's 'great war' against the local population and its access to forestry resources.⁴⁴

Indeed, the quest to replicate Alsace in Algeria was rooted in a long colonial tradition of telling the history of North Africa as 'a sad tale of deforestation and desertification' since the collapse of the Roman empire, as Diana Davis has noted, and of portraying colonization as an act of restoring Roman prosperity, as Patricia Lorcin has shown.⁴⁵ Though 'environmental nostalgia' was not unique to the colonial context, as Caroline Ford stresses, it provided settler and colonial lobbyists with a powerful argument.⁴⁶ Auguste Warnier, for instance, who combined his campaign for the resettlement project with his lobbying for unlimited settler access to landed property in Algeria, claimed that his proposals would restore Algeria's 'ancient productive capacity'.⁴⁷

Ultimately, the solemn pledges and wistful narratives of an Alsace reborn in Algeria meant erasing Kabylia and its inhabitants. In 1872, Cardinal Lavigerie warned – subtly yet unmistakably – that young girls might be tempted to interact intimately with Algerians: 'It is easy to understand that in such a mixed population as that of a colony, and given the absorbing occupations of the newcomers, the children lack surveillance, and that is particularly unfortunate for the young girls, who are soon completely lost.' The cardinal

⁴² Ibid., p. 256.

⁴³ Guynemer, *Situation des Alsaciens-Lorrains*, p. 88.

⁴⁴ Ageron, *Les Algériens musulmans*, pp. 116–22. For the Ligue du reboisement, see *Bulletin de la Ligue du reboisement de l'Algérie* (Algiers, 1882). On the league and the motif of deforestation in French colonial thought, see Diana Davis, *Resurrecting the granary of Rome: environmental history and French colonial expansion in North Africa* (Athens, OH, 2007), pp. 1–8, 108–11.

⁴⁵ Davis, *Resurrecting the granary of Rome*, p. 1; Patricia Lorcin, 'Rome and France in Africa: recovering colonial Algeria's Latin past', *French Historical Studies*, 25 (2002), pp. 295–329.

⁴⁶ Caroline Ford, *Natural interests: the contest over environment in modern France* (Cambridge, MA, 2016), pp. 6–8.

⁴⁷ Cited in Ageron, *Les Algériens musulmans*, p. 78.

therefore convinced the Société de protection to build a 'maison des secours' in each of the new villages, 'to educate and support the young girls'.⁴⁸ The same year, Auguste Warnier and the Constantine deputy Marcel Lucet were furious to receive reports about Algerian families living near Bellefontaine. They deplored the slow pace of expulsion of the local population, protesting that 'nothing has been done to dispossess them'.⁴⁹ Governor de Gueydon sought to reassure them: 'There are no indigènes on the territory granted to that settlement...No indigènes dispute this land. It is completely vacant.'⁵⁰ In the village of l'Alma, settlers applied for their village to be extended to include newcomers from Alsace-Lorraine. Approving the request, the responsible officials added a recommendation concerning the Algerian population in the vicinity: 'It would be good to displace them all.'⁵¹

IV

Measured against the ambitious goal of replicating Alsace in Algeria and increasing the colony's French population by tens of thousands of new settlers, the resettlement scheme of the early 1870s was a resounding failure. Only 5,000–6,000 emigrants from Alsace-Lorraine settled in Algeria in the early 1870s, out of which only a third still resided on their allocated allotments by the end of the century, while the rest settled in the cities, migrated abroad, or returned to France.⁵² By the early 1880s, key figures behind the Alsace-Lorraine project had become disillusioned not only with that particular scheme, but with rural colonial settlement more generally. Most notably, count d'Haussonville opposed a proposal to establish 300 settlements in Algeria in 1883, citing the failure of the project he himself had led a decade earlier.⁵³ Concerns in Paris about the consequences of the sweeping dispossession of the 1870s grew in the following decade. In 1891, the Warnier Law was suspended by the National Assembly amid reports of the impoverishment it caused in Algeria.⁵⁴ In 1894, an inquiry commission presided by Jules Ferry – the foremost advocate of French expansionism and architect of the 1881 Tunisia invasion – submitted a damning report on the consequences of

⁴⁸ Cardinal Lavignerie to comte d'Haussonville, 31 Dec. 1872; Rapport de la commission des Alsaciens-Lorrains, 15 Mar. 1873, ANOM, F80/1799; Société de protection des Alsaciens-Lorrains demeurés français, *Rapport sur les opérations de la société* (Paris, 1874).

⁴⁹ Warnier and Lucet to ministre de l'intérieur, 20 Oct. 1872, ANOM, F80/1800.

⁵⁰ Gouverneur général to ministre de l'intérieur, 26 Oct. 1872, ANOM, F80/1800.

⁵¹ Extrait de la délibération du comité consultatif de colonisation, 26 Oct. 1871, ANOM, GGA L10. For the extension request, see Extrait du registre des délibérations du conseil municipal de la Commune de l'Alma, 27 Aug. 1871; La population de l'Alma to gouverneur général, no date indicated, evidently summer 1871; préfet d'Alger to gouverneur général, 12 Sept. 1871; gouverneur général to vice-président du comité consultatif de colonisation, 16 Sept. 1871, ANOM, GGA L10.

⁵² Fischer, *Alsaciens et Lorrains en Algérie*, p. 91.

⁵³ Comte d'Haussonville, 'La colonisation officielle en Algérie – II', *Revue des Deux Mondes*, 58 (1883), p. 102. The new proposal was fiercely criticized in the French press and blocked by the National Assembly. See *ibid.*, p. 80.

⁵⁴ Jean-Pierre Peyroulou et al., '1830–1880: la conquête coloniale et la résistance des Algériens – chronologie', in Bouchène et al., eds., *Histoire de l'Algérie*, p. 51.

sequestration and colonization in Algeria, particularly in Kabylia and the Constantine region.⁵⁵

However, the verdict of 'failure' did not emerge in hindsight as an assessment of results versus expectations. Long before the anti-Semitic and autonomist crises of the 1890s, the Alsace-Lorraine project brought to the surface increasing tensions between settler lobbyists and state officials concerning the administration of the colony. Notions of a promise unfulfilled and allegations of incompetence and even betrayal by the colonial authorities permeated the advocacy and commentary around the colonization scheme from its very beginning. Nothing in the campaigning of the early 1870s resembled the enthusiasm of the previous major colonization scheme in 1848, when thousands of French workers set sail to Algeria to the sound of chants and slogans such as 'To the shores of Algeria, workers!' or 'Let us colonize!'⁵⁶ Rather, accounts of the Alsace-Lorraine project were tinged with pessimism and fears of decline from early on.

As we now turn to see, the verdict of 'failure' was an inherent product of the increasing tension between the extreme violence that had been deployed by the French from the Algiers expedition in 1830 to Abd al-Qadir's surrender in 1847 – and which was replayed in the suppression of the Kabyle revolt – and the attempt to establish standardized civilian governance since the 1860s. More substantially, the notion of failure was the product of the gap between the myth of salvaging a desolate, empty land that shaped much of the European pioneer romanticism of the nineteenth century and the reality of the intricate ecologies and complex land ownership and usage customary rights that evolved in the Maghrib over centuries.

The limits of force and the rule of law were a matter of controversy between settler lobbyists and the administration from early on. 'The view of the military authorities is that we should take what we need', wrote Warnier to governor de Gueydon in late 1871 when it appeared that there were legal restrictions on using confiscated land for settlement. 'That is what the Turks did. The indigenes...are used to it.' The governor was quick to reply: 'As a Frenchman, I cannot act as the Turks did, however accustomed the indigenes may be to procedures contrary to our practices and laws.'⁵⁷

Beyond sarcasm, this exchange entailed the crux of the disagreement on the nature of French sovereignty in Algeria in a nutshell. For Warnier's 'Turks' did not simply connote the now deposed deys of Algiers and Constantine. In much (though not all) of the French political thought of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, 'Turkish', 'Persian', 'Mohammedan', or 'oriental' implied

⁵⁵ Henri Pensa, *L'Algérie: organisation politique et administrative, justice, sécurité, instruction publique, travaux publics...Voyage de la délégation de la commission sénatoriale d'études des questions algériennes présidée par Jules Ferry* (Paris, 1894), pp. 335–408.

⁵⁶ For 'To the shores of Algeria, workers!', see Bibliothèque nationale de France: Charles Bailly, 'Le départ pour l'Algérie' (Paris, 1848), reference: YE-55471-92. For 'Let us colonize!', see *Projet de colonisation en Algérie, adressé aux citoyens Représentants du Peuple, par le citoyen Faure-Daniels* (Riom, 1848), p. 7.

⁵⁷ Dominique, *Un gouverneur général de l'Algérie*, pp. 116–17.

arbitrariness and despotism.⁵⁸ Like generations of settler and planter representatives before him, Warnier's appeal was, in the end, an appeal to govern Algeria – or better: Algerians – as an extraterritorial realm of French law.⁵⁹ De Gueydon's response expressed the contrary attempt: to establish civilian sovereignty and a certain version of a standardized rule of law – though by no means equality before the law.

However, de Gueydon himself soon acknowledged that the project at stake could not possibly be carried out within law. Facing fierce criticism from settler lobbyists concerning his administration's lack of engagement in fulfilling the patriotic promise, de Gueydon pointed to the crux of the issue, the inherent tension between the confines of law and the impulse of pushing the frontier, so crucial to the making of settler societies.⁶⁰ The solemn pledges of 1870–1, he argued, could not be carried out within the legal framework of the time:

A law had pledged 100,000 hectares to the Alsatians and Lorrainers...*These 100,000 hectares did not exist or were at least not in a state available to us...* On the other hand, the large swathes of land [available for settlement] were far away from access roads, in the area where the revolt had taken place, surrounded by agitated populations in the middle of which it would have been imprudent to settle small groups of settlers without first guaranteeing their security.⁶¹

Thus, much of the administration's attention in 1871–2 was dedicated to circumventing legal restrictions. An ordinance from 1845, issued during the French war against Abd al-Qadir, limited the use of sequestered land for civilian purposes – most notably for settlement. After lengthy deliberations in June 1872, the Algerian administration agreed that this ordinance was binding.⁶² The governor's solution lay in the grey zone between legislation and administrative praxis. In late 1871 and early 1872, de Gueydon ordered his officials to circumvent the 1845 ordinance and expel local populations from territories allocated for the settlement of Alsatians and Lorrainers.⁶³ Officials were instructed to 'negotiate' with notables the immediate evacuation of territories

⁵⁸ Ian Coller, *Muslims and citizens: Islam, politics and the French Revolution* (New Haven, CT, 2020), pp. 2–7, 15–17.

⁵⁹ See e.g. debate in the National Assembly in 1848 on the legal regime in Algeria as reproduced in *Journal des débats politiques et littéraires*, 16 June 1848, pp. 1–2; 17 June 1848, pp. 1–4. See also similar debate on Saint-Domingue in 1791: *Archives parlementaires de 1787 à 1860* (Paris, 1862–96), vol. 25, pp. 638–45; vol. 26, pp. 2–9.

⁶⁰ On the centrality of land seizure in settler societies (albeit only in the British empire and its successor states), see most notably John Weaver, *The great land rush and the making of the modern world, 1650–1900* (London, 2003); James Belich, *Replenishing the earth: the settler revolution and the rise of the Anglo-World, 1783–1939* (Oxford, 2009).

⁶¹ Gouverneur général to général commandant la division à Constantine, 25 Feb. 1873, ANOM F80/1810. Emphasis added.

⁶² Extrait du procès-verbal du conseil du gouvernement, séance du 22 juin 1872, ANOM F80/1810.

⁶³ Direction générale des affaires civiles et financières: rapport sur la colonisation, 4 July 1873, ANOM, GGA 14L/1.

designated for settlement in return for other, more remote territories. In reality, local populations were not given any choice. The governor instructed that any population who refused to leave immediately would lose their right for compensation.⁶⁴

Although the colonial administration did not shy away from deploying force and displacing local populations to implement the Alsace-Lorraine project, severe allegations against the authorities were made by aspiring settlers from early on. In 1872, a civilian engineer from Metz waiting to be given land in the Algerian east published a fierce attack on governor de Gueydon, accusing him of missing an opportune moment and claiming that hundreds of Alsatians and Lorrainers were leaving for the Americas instead of Algeria:

*Comment! Part of the French population is obliged by patriotism to leave its home...On the other side, part of France...insistently demands settlers to populate it, and you do not find the means to benefit from this unique circumstance?...It would have been glorious for us to plant our tent on the African soil...We would have rebuilt, piece for piece, the towns so dear to our memory. We could have had Metz, Strasbourg, Phalsbourg, Colmar!*⁶⁵

A recurrent motif of such allegations was the concern that Algeria was losing potential settlers to North America. In April 1872, Victor Rehm, an industrialist and former deputy from Moselle, wrote to none other than the president of the Republic to request a concession of land in Algeria, where he wished to move his factory and employees. When legal restrictions seemed to frustrate his project, he wrote to the minister of the interior, threatening to withdraw his settlement plan altogether: 'The deputies of Algeria will have to explain in the [National] Assembly the flaws (*les riens*) of a system which, despite the goodwill of the metropolitan administration, lets [Algeria] lose in favour of America a perhaps unique occasion of settlement.'⁶⁶ Thereupon, the highest ranks of the government and administration acted to satisfy Rehm, who left for Algeria to realize his plan in late 1872.⁶⁷

In the summer of 1873, such anxieties even led to a small scandal to which officials and politicians referred as the 'Canada Affair.' A settler named Schott, residing in the colonial settlement of Aïn Fekan in the western province of Oran, pretending to write on behalf of the entire settler population in the village, sought to obtain information from an agency in Paris concerning the possibility of leaving Algeria for Canada. The letter was published in the local press and was cited by a deputy in the National Assembly as evidence of the failure of the resettlement project. Alarmed by this development, the entire

⁶⁴ Circulaire du gouverneur général aux préfets, no date indicated, evidently late 1871 or early 1872, ANOM, GGA 3E 38. Gouverneur général, Instructions pour les commissions de séquestre, 26 June 1872, ANOM, F80/1799.

⁶⁵ J. Fiévé, *Lettre d'Algérie à monsieur l'amiral comte de Gueydon, gouverneur de l'Algérie* (Algiers, 1872), p. 5.

⁶⁶ Victor Rehm to ministre de l'intérieur, 1 Aug. 1872, ANOM, F80/1800.

⁶⁷ Correspondence between Rehm and the president of the Republic, the minister of the interior, and the governor general, 10 Apr. to 18 Nov. 1872, ANOM, F80/1800.

settler population in Aïn Fekan addressed a letter at the colonial administration, distancing themselves from the falsified letter. It was only after senior generals and officials intervened and the settler behind the falsified letter renounced his intention to leave Algeria that the 'Canada Affair' was closed.⁶⁸

Such comparisons to North America were politically loaded. The anglophone colonies and especially the United States had long served as a point of reference through which to discuss the given and the desired legal regime and demographic composition of Algeria. The prominent economist and colonization advocate Jules Duval, for instance, contrasted an entrepreneurial, unbureaucratic colonization of the anglophone world, where the state confined itself to keeping land available for new settlers, with the 'artificial' state-sponsored colonization in Algeria.⁶⁹ But for some French statesmen and lawmakers, North America had long been a counter-model, a land whose lawlessness yielded the inter-related extermination of the natives and the secessionism of settlers. This concern was particularly marked in the 1848 debate on integrating Algeria into the state territory under the Second Republic.⁷⁰ When settlers and lobbyists spread fears of an ailing Algeria losing out to the free, energetic, successful settlers of the 'Anglo world', they intervened in far broader controversy on colonial expansion and governance, attacking the very attempt to create binding legal norms in Algeria.⁷¹

Disillusionment with the Alsace-Lorraine project – and with rural settlement more generally – was not confined to settlers and lobbyists. Frustration over the Alsace-Lorraine scheme – albeit of a different kind – was also expressed by colonial officials. The latter often claimed that newcomers from Alsace-Lorraine were not fulfilling the ideal of the industrious, autarkic settler, but were rather seeking profit by hiring Algerian workers. Ever since the 1830s, social reformers in France advocated the idea of rural settlement – at first in Europe, then in the colonies – as the solution to the social ailments of modern, urban, increasingly industrial life.⁷² In the 1840s, various individuals drafted proposals for Algeria to be colonized by co-operative associations of the French rural settlers.⁷³ That was also the model for the Alsace-Lorraine project. To examine the 'morality' of those wishing to settle in the colony and their 'aptitude' for agricultural settlement, special committees were set in

⁶⁸ Correspondence between the settlers of Aïn Fekan, the generals commanding the subdivision in Mascara and the division in Oran, the chief of the *section des affaires indigènes de l'État-major* and the governor general, 8–20 Aug. 1873, ANOM F80/1802.

⁶⁹ Jules Duval, *Réflexions sur la politique de l'empereur en Algérie* (Paris, 1866), p. 132. On comparisons with other settler colonies and societies more broadly, see Legg, *The new white race*, ch. 4.

⁷⁰ Ofrath, *Colonial Algeria and the politics of citizenship*, pp. 32–5.

⁷¹ Belich, *Replenishing the earth*, pp. 502–6.

⁷² Sessions, *By sword and plow*, pp. 180–5, 202–6.

⁷³ See e.g. *Pétition et projet de colonisation en Algérie par associations temporaires, présentés au nom de 20,000 familles* (Paris, 1848); *Note sur la colonisation de l'Algérie, présentant les moyens d'élever nos possessions d'Afrique à un haut degré de force et de prospérité, sans grever le budget* (signé: M. Amarana. 15 décembre 1848) (Saint-Quentin, n.d.); *Pétition à l'Assemblée nationale. Projet de colonisation de l'Algérie par l'association* (signé: E. de Solms, E. de Bassano) (Paris, 1848).

Nancy and Belfort, where most emigrants concentrated.⁷⁴ Once in Algeria, the new settlers committed to residing on the land granted to them and to farming it themselves.⁷⁵

The architects of the Alsace-Lorraine project, then, had hoped to create self-sufficient cultivators. But colonial officials and other inspectors were soon alarmed by what they found to be the reality in the new settlements. In 1873, an envoy of the Société de protection admitted that new settlers were assisted by local farmers.⁷⁶ In 1874, a special inspector appointed by the Algerian administration to assess the resettlement project spoke with harsh words about the Alsatians and Lorrainers who ‘found nothing better than renting [their lands] to the indigenes’.⁷⁷

Arguably, such criticism of settlers’ reliance on Algerians’ labour stemmed not only from disillusionment with earlier social ideals, but also from a growing realization of the demographic and economic weakness of the settler community. As Caroline Elkins and Susan Pedersen note, throughout the imperial world, the gap between early visions of rural, autarkic settlement and the reality of predominantly urban settler societies became increasingly visible in the late nineteenth century.⁷⁸ Officials’ frustration was a product of the continued presence of Algerians on their land, their proximity, in many cases, to colonial settlement, and the administration, in many places, of the two populations in the shared unit of the *commune mixte*.⁷⁹

Perhaps the most scathing account of the Alsace-Lorraine project was written in 1884 by Guy de Maupassant. A regular traveller to North Africa, Maupassant had long been critical of the settler population, whom he accused of ‘oppressing’ Algerians.⁸⁰ In his 1884 travelogue *To the sun*, however, he drew a most dire portrait of the Alsatian settler in Algeria as a victim deluded by a futile undertaking:

The old woman, exhausted, sits down in the dust, panting in the torrid heat. She has a face wrinkled by innumerable little pleats of skin, like the gathers in fabrics, a weary appearance, overwhelmed, despairing... They had been promised land. They came, the mother and children. Now three of her sons were dead from this murdering climate. Only one remained, who was ill. Their fields, although large, did not return anything, for they hadn’t a drop of water... ‘They can’t produce a cabbage, not a cabbage, not even cabbage!’ she said, persevering with this cabbage idea which must represent for her all terrestrial happiness. I have never seen anything more distressing than the good woman of Alsace thrown on

⁷⁴ JO, 22 Sept. 1871, p. 3615. The same legislation set special committees in Algeria to allocate land to newcomers and bring them to their new homes.

⁷⁵ *Moniteur de l’Algérie*, 22 Oct. 1871, p. 1.

⁷⁶ Guynemer, *Situation des Alsaciens-Lorrains*, p. 53.

⁷⁷ Rapport du Colonel Renoux sur les Alsaciens-Lorrains...dans les villages de l’Est de la province d’Alger, 10 Feb. 1874, ANOM, GGA L29.

⁷⁸ Elkins and Pedersen, ‘Introduction: settler colonialism – a concept and its uses’, pp. 3–4.

⁷⁹ Mussard, *L’obsession communale*, pp. 12–14 and ch. 1.

⁸⁰ See e.g. Guy de Maupassant, ‘Lettre d’Afrique’, *Le Gaulois*, 20 Aug. 1881, p. 1.

to a soil of fire where not even cabbage grows. How she must often think of that lost country, of the green countryside of her youth, the poor old woman!⁸¹

By now, Algeria had lost much of its appeal and prestige as the land of unlimited opportunities. The Alsatian woman in Maupassant's travelogue was turning her eyes to France's new possession further east, embodying and clinging to the ever distant frontier of empire that was at the heart of the promise of a new beginning: 'Do you know if they are giving out land in Tunisia? They say it's good there. It's got to be better than here.'⁸²

V

In the early years of the twentieth century, the attempt to rebuild Alsace in Algeria was picked up and retold as an antithesis to the predominantly southern European, at times autonomist working class that had emerged in cities such as Algiers and Oran and to the growing numbers of rural settlers who were now leaving for the coastal towns of the Constantine region.⁸³ Publications, exhibitions and associations in Algeria and France revived the tale of the 'war victims' who had become hard-working farmers in the colony.⁸⁴ In a stark contrast to the 'Latin', 'Mediterranean', or 'Algerianist' character of the urban European community, the Alsace-Lorraine episode was celebrated for its purported homogeneity, traditionalism, and patriotism. In a major report from 1906 on three decades of state-sponsored settlement schemes, Henri de Peyerimhoff, head of the colonization service in Algeria wrote:

The sequestration following the 1871 insurrection added, all at once, almost 500,000 hectares of public land, while a sentiment of national reverence sought to offer a place in Algeria to the Alsations and Lorrainers determined to leave a soil now foreign to them. The colonization would no longer be cosmopolitan but would appeal to Frenchmen only: Frenchmen of yesterday and Frenchmen of today, Frenchmen of the metropole and Frenchmen of Algeria.⁸⁵

⁸¹ Guy de Maupassant, *To the sun*, trans. James Wilson (London, 2008), p. 19. For the French original, see *Au soleil* (Paris, 1884), pp. 29–32.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ For a succinct discussion of the European population in Algeria, see McDougall, *A history of Algeria*, pp. 100–18. On rural settlers leaving to towns, see Martin Evans, *Algeria: France's undeclared war* (Oxford, 2012), p. 92.

⁸⁴ Examples include a publication by the Société historique algérienne: Dominique, *Un gouverneur général de l'Algérie*, pp. 113, 130; an exhibition in Nancy in 1909 with a section on the resettlement project: Conseil Général des Vosges, *Itinéraires croisés 1830–1970, Vosges Algérie, Algérie Vosges* (Épinal, 2012); a reportage by chronicler Georges Delahache: 'Alsaciens d'Algérie', *Revue de Paris*, 75 (1913); as well as societies founded by Alsations and Lorrainers in Oran (chef de la sureté départementale to préfet d'Oran, 11 Nov. 1918), Mostaganem (sous-préfet de Mostaganem to préfet d'Oran, 2 Mar. 1918), Mascara (sous-préfet de Mascara to préfet d'Oran, 1 Mar. 1918), and Sidi bel Abbès (sous-préfet de Sidi Bel Abbès to préfet d'Oran, 2 Mar. 1918), ANOM 92/2537.

⁸⁵ Peyerimhoff de Fontenelle, *Enquête sur les résultats*, p. 41.

At first glance, it was to this patriotic story that Albert Camus laid claim when writing *The first man* during the Algerian War – baselessly, as his biographer Olivier Todd notes.⁸⁶ As Camus himself implied, facts and fiction merged in this tale of loss, sacrifice, and pioneering. When the novel's protagonist Jacques Cormery asks his mother about his father's ancestors, the brief answer 'they were Alsations' is all she can say. It is for Camus's/Cormery's imagination to complete the story:

Jacques would have to imagine the rest. Not through what could be told to him by his mother, who had no idea what history and geography might be, who knew only that she lived on land near the sea, that France was on the other side of that sea which she too had never travelled, France in any case being an obscure place lost in a dim night...where there was a shining city they said was very beautiful and that was called Paris, where there was also a region named Alsace that her husband's family came from – it was a long time ago, they were fleeing enemies called Germans to settle in Algeria.⁸⁷

But the story told here is far more ambivalent than the one told by French officials like Peyrimhoff. Rather than a nation indebted to its patriotic sons, it conveys a sense of abandonment that harks decades back. Indeed, the movement in this passage is twofold: towards France as a historical land of origin, but also – and more significantly – away from the metropole in a trajectory that is deemed irreversible. There is no pride or sense of belonging to the 'obscure place' in these sentences. What emerges here is an over-riding sense of victimhood, of having lost a country 'in a dim night' and having been left to one's fate on the other side of sea. Sitting in her apartment in Algiers, terrified by the bombings of the ongoing war, the illiterate, isolated mother resembles in many ways Maupassant's portrait of the Alsatian woman seven decades earlier. With her figure, Camus brought to aesthetic perfection a trait of settler culture in Algeria that had been in the making since the early days of the Alsace-Lorraine episode: that of being left behind, of losing out to other, more prosperous countries, and indeed of having been abandoned by the metropole.

What this narrative dwelled on was of course the lack of context, the obliviousness to the political and military measures by which settling in Algeria was made possible. The beloved mother of *The first man* is unable to comprehend not only history and geography, but the raging war around her. It is precisely this lack of context that Kamel Daoud addressed in *Meursault, contre-enquête*, his 2014 rejoinder to Camus's *L'Étranger* – not least by alluding to the story of Alsace in Algeria. In a novel where French characters remain mostly faceless,

⁸⁶ The father's ancestors in fact originated from the Ardèche and Bordeaux. See Olivier Todd, *Albert Camus: a life*, trans. Benjamin Ivry (London, 1998), p. 4.

⁸⁷ Camus, *The first man*, p. 67. For the original, see *Le premier homme*, p. 68.

one reference stands out: an 'Alsatian' farmer on whose premises the family of the murdered, unnamed 'Arab' from *L'Étranger* dwells for a while.⁸⁸

At a time when metropolitan intellectuals began construing a narrative around the 'tide of history' and the purported inevitability of decolonization, as Todd Shepard has shown, Camus construed an opposite one: a story in which France as a homeland, as a place of belonging had been lost for good.⁸⁹ It is precisely this trajectory, this notion of irreversibility that Assia Djebar contested in her novel *Les nuits de Strasbourg* (1997). Algerian, French, German, and Jewish destinies overlap in this novel over ten nights and days in 1989. Through a minor character, Karl, Djebar throws a different light on the figure of the masculine, industrious *colon* and tells a multi-directional story of migration between Algeria and Alsace:

Karl was indeed Alsatian, but an Alsatian of elsewhere. His father, once a small *colon* in the west of Algeria...returned shortly after 1962 to the ancestral Alsace. He was descended from an Alsatian lineage which left in 1871 in order not to become German citizens...Some twenty families settled in that village on the coast during the last century, endogamous families who married their children amongst themselves...Shortly after 1945, when Alsace became French again, they came to look for Karl's mother, a young girl, 16 years of age who had never left her village north of Strasbourg to take her to the western coast of Algeria – Algeria having been preserved amid the tumults of the war. There, she married Karl's father, the grandson or great-grandson of Alsations – endogamy was the rule of this group, even in Algeria, and every twenty years, they returned to the villages left behind in search of Alsatian spouses!⁹⁰

Rather than a patriotic tale of loss and sacrifice or a story of abandonment and betrayal, the Alsace-Lorraine episode is depicted here as a grotesque form of nostalgia at work, as an obsession with preserving a collective identity at all costs: 'Karl's mother did not fail the mission entrusted to her. She watched from afar the families of Arab workers, prevented her son...from playing with the "indigenous" children...Thus, a piece of Alsace was reconstituted in a vacuum (*en vase clos*).'⁹¹ Published three years after *The first man* and after decades of portraying Alsace in Algeria as a failed attempt at historical restitution, these lines can be seen as a scathing riposte to a pivotal trope of settler colonial culture: an eternal return to an ever more distant past.

⁸⁸ Kamel Daoud, *Meursault, contre-enquête* (Paris, 2014), p. 38.

⁸⁹ Todd Shepard, *The invention of decolonization: the Algerian War and the remaking of France* (Ithaca, NY, 2006), esp. chs. 2–3. On changing French views and a re-embracing of the *piets-noirs* in the 1970s, see Sung-Eun Choi, *Decolonization and the French of Algeria: bringing the settler colony home* (London, 2016).

⁹⁰ Assia Djebar, *Les nuits de Strasbourg* (Arles, 1997), pp. 281–3.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 284.

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