

**Back to the Future:  
Politics, Propaganda and the Centennial of the Conquest of Algeria**

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On April 25, 1929, French President Gaston Doumergue signed a decree forming a Propaganda Committee; the purpose of this committee was to associate “all of France with the commemoration of the Centennial of Algeria.”<sup>1</sup> Doumergue’s decree tacitly recognized the French public’s indifference toward the colonies: left to their own devices, the people of the *Métropole* might have let the anniversary pass unnoticed.<sup>2</sup> Addressing the committee’s opening meeting in June 1929, Minister of the Interior André Tardieu explicitly acknowledged this lack of interest. Even as he insisted that the “Centennial of Algeria is a great event, not only of Algerian history, but of French history,” and that the centennial “is a date that it is important that the country as a whole celebrate appropriately,” Tardieu lamented,

The French are sadly uninformed about our colonial empire. Too often they lack knowledge of its material and moral worth. It would have been a pity to have the celebration of the Centennial take place only overseas, and to have the people of the *Métropole* miss its full significance.<sup>3</sup>

Tardieu complained that the French public did not properly appreciate Algeria’s “material and moral” contribution to France.

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<sup>1</sup> Commandant P. Pollacchi, Pierre Eugène Marie Joseph Deloncle, and Paul Crouzet, *Cartes-index, glossaire, documents, annexes, rapport général, Cahiers du centenaire de l’Algérie*, vol. 12 (Alger, 1930).

<sup>2</sup> On French popular indifference to colonialism, see Raymond F. Betts, *Assimilation and Association in French Colonial Theory 1890-1914* (New York and London, 1961), 2-3; and Robert Aldrich, *Greater France: A History of French Overseas Expansion* (Basingstoke, 1996), 234-35. On another effort to overcome this indifference in the early 1930s, see Charles Robert Ageron, “Exposition coloniale de 1931. Mythe républicain ou mythe impérial?” in *Les lieux de mémoire*, ed. Pierre Nora (Paris, 1984), 561-591.

<sup>3</sup> André Tardieu, speaking to the opening session of the committee, June 5, 1929, cited in Pollacchi et al., *Cartes-index*, 53.

This paper argues that the colonies' moral contribution to France was to undermine the ideology and practice of republicanism. The conquest, establishment and exploitation of the colonies provided opponents of republicanism with the means to challenge republican ideas about the universality and perfectibility of human nature. These opponents used their long experience at the margins of Greater France to insist on the primacy of their own conservative understanding of human nature. The propaganda campaign upon which the French government embarked in 1929 suggests that by the late 1920s, opponents of universalist republicanism had used their colonial experience to move from the margins to the center of the Third Republic. The celebration of the centennial, then, was not only a celebration of France's work in the colonies; it was also—surreptitiously—a celebration of the triumph of an anti-republican ideology at the heart of the Third Republic itself.

The Propaganda Committee was an unwieldy group of more than ninety men, most of whom had lived and worked in Algeria or had held important colonial posts. It included current and former colonial officials, including the nine sitting deputies and three sitting senators from Algeria; the former Governor-General of Algeria and member of the Académie française, Jules Cambon; and the venerable old senator and former minister of the colonies, Adolphe Messimy. These men were united by the conviction that French colonization of Algeria was good for France and good for Algeria, and they accepted the goals set for them by the general secretary of the Propaganda Committee, General Féraud: to “create durable and favorable public opinion in metropolitan France for Algerian France,” and to show the colonies were “the true school where all our doctrines of humanity and progress concerning colonial matters have been formed and confirmed.”<sup>4</sup>

In its choice of committee members, the government placed its confidence in a particular kind of man: a man with “experience” in Algeria, a man who “understood” Algeria, a man who had “acted on Algeria.” (No Arabs or Berbers sat on the Committee.) At its first session, the Propaganda Committee selected a *Comité restreint* with a much more manageable membership of twenty-two. It was in this subcommittee that the nature of the propaganda to be disseminated was discussed. An even smaller committee, the *Comité d'exécution*, which carried out the work decided upon by the *Comité restreint*, was composed of thirteen members drawn from the *Comité restreint*.

The members of the Committee and its subcommittees spared little effort in their efforts to demonstrate Algeria's importance. Tardieu urged them to avail themselves of all “modern means of publicity,” including radio and newspapers. As Féraud remarked, however, “Articles pass; books remain.”<sup>5</sup> Most of the work focused on a series of books, on subjects ranging from the history of Algeria (pre- and post-conquest), the government of Algeria, art, tourism, industry, and the *œuvres indigènes de l'Algérie*. These would form the core of the propaganda effort, and, the members of the Committee believed, would not only serve to propagate the message of the importance of France's Algerian colony, but would also serve as a basis for subsequent lectures and discussions.

Because of the urgency of the task, the books were not to break new ground or produce new research. Instead, they were to be produced as quickly as possible so that they could be put to use during the centennial year. And, indeed, the books were produced speedily: they were ready for distribution by early 1930. (In a report to his

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<sup>4</sup> General Féraud, preparatory study, cited in *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

superiors at the Ministry of War, General Azan smugly noted that his contribution, *Les grands soldats de l'Algérie*, was the first to be completed.)<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless, the books, intended for a large and diverse audience, were generously illustrated with maps, engravings, and black-and-white photographs. (Volume 4, *Art Antique et Art Musulman en Algérie* contained eighty-one illustrations.) Despite the rush, the books, which ranged from forty-eight to one hundred and forty pages in length, were well written and reasonably well documented.

One hundred thousand copies were published in the first run in Paris; more were published in Algiers, to be distributed throughout Algeria. To ensure that no one in France lacked access to the *Cahiers*, the committee called upon the Ministry of Public Education, the Ministry of War, the Ministry of the Navy, the Ministry of Agriculture, the Ministry of the Colonies, and French diplomatic missions throughout the world to help disseminate its message. In January 1930, Minister of War André Maginot ordered garrison commanders to furnish lectures based on the pamphlets to officers and troops throughout the centennial year. Lecturers were to choose subjects drawn from the books that would, as he put it, “make listeners know and appreciate Algeria.” The pamphlets would then be furnished to unit libraries, to non-commissioned officers’ messes, or other military libraries.<sup>7</sup> The Ministry of the Navy issued a similar circular—but added that the books were to be carried aboard warships so they could be distributed in the countries where the ships made port calls.<sup>8</sup> Public schools—*lycées*, *collèges*, along with primary schools—were all to play a role: the Minister of Public Education instructed teachers to give talks on the “great works” accomplished in Algeria, and on the opportunities that the Mediterranean still offered for future development.<sup>9</sup>

One of the noteworthy aspects of the *Cahiers* was their unanimity on some fundamental assumptions about Algeria and its inhabitants.<sup>10</sup> Not surprisingly, all of the books declared that the conquest—in the long run—had been good for Algeria. They all accepted the premise that Algerians were incapable of ruling themselves. And they all agreed that the French presence in Algeria was a manifestation of what Féraud referred to as the “doctrines of humanity and progress concerning colonial matters.” Most significantly, the *Cahiers* revealed a remarkable unified vision of human nature.

Before we explore what Féraud and the authors of the *Cahiers* took human nature to be, we should remember that the ideas of “humanity” and “human nature” had formed the terrain on which struggles between Left and Right had been fought. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, republicans and their opponents quarreled over the duration of military service, clashed over public education, and collided over the role the Church would play in France. Yet, though each of these contests was important in its own right, each was also part of a larger confrontation over the attributes of human nature. Republicans believed that human nature was malleable; they also believed that it could be improved. Republican institutions—particularly the schools and the military—would help mold French

<sup>6</sup> General Azan, “Note pour Monsieur le Ministre de la Guerre (général chef du Cabinet) sur les résultats acquis par le Comité du Centenaire de l’Algérie,” Vincennes, Service Historique de l’Armée de Terre, 14 Jan. 1930, N° 29 8/11/C, 1 K 74 carton 2.

<sup>7</sup> Maginot circular, 25 Jan. 1930, in Pollacchi et al., *Cartes-index*, 63.

<sup>8</sup> Traub circular, 1 July 1930, in *Ibid.*, 64. The Ministries of Public Instruction.

<sup>9</sup> Le Ministre de l’Instruction publique et des Beaux-Arts à MM. les Inspecteurs d’Académie, 15 Apr. 1930, cited in *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>10</sup> See the Appendix for a complete listing of the titles and authors.

subjects into good and virtuous French citizens. Schools would not merely fill their pupils' heads with knowledge; they would imbue those pupils with republican virtues.<sup>11</sup> Compulsory military service would not merely train conscripts to win wars; it would transform them into mature citizen-soldiers. Good and virtuous citizens would in turn help strengthen a good and virtuous republic. If French citizens shared universal traits with the rest of humanity, it was through the republican institutions of the French Third Republic that their humanity would find its highest expression. Thus, in the eyes of republicans, the Republic was the national expression of the enlightened self-interest of the French people.

Conservative opponents of the Third Republic, by contrast, believed that human nature was fixed, unchanging. Humanity was weak, corruptible and self-interested. To many conservatives, democracy and the Third Republic represented the surrender of altruism and virtue to the politics of selfishness (or *égoïsme*). One of the functions of good institutions—the army, the Church and Catholic schools—was thus to serve as a bulwark against the vagaries of human nature and the corrosive influence of democracy.

In the 1890s, Pope Leo XIII had invited Catholics (in the encyclical *Au milieu des sollicitudes*) to accept the Republic. Leo made it clear that the form of the regime (i.e., monarchy or republic) was not the Church's concern; the defense of religious interest was. Conservatives could, Leo indicated, come to terms with the republic, but this did not mean that they had to accommodate themselves to the *ideology* of the republic. As a political movement in the 1890s, the so-called *Ralliement* failed.<sup>12</sup> Yet, by severing the cords that bound Catholicism and monarchism, the Church sought to reclaim a place in French public life independent of the dynastic ambitions of an outdated monarchy. The *Ralliement* also marked a broader ideological shift: its adherents no longer accepted that the form of regime would necessarily dictate the content of laws it would pass.

By the late 1920s, though, the staying power of the Republic's institutions was hardly in doubt. Yet the *Cahiers* implied that the proponents of the *Ralliement* had been on target: acceptance of the Third Republic did not necessarily mean acceptance of the premises that traditionally underpinned republican thought. It is in this sense that the *Cahiers* reflected the triumph of a conservative vision of human nature. While French republicanism theoretically rested on the notions of the universality and perfectibility of human nature, the *Cahiers* suggested the un-republican idea that Algerians were incapable of change.

In *L'Algérie jusqu'à la pénétration saharienne*, the first of the *Cahiers*, Jean Marie Bourget, the military editor of the influential *Journal des débats*, pointed out that before the French arrived, ethnic and political divisions in the region had not fallen along the lines that marked what were now Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia. Since there had been no "Algeria" as such, "Algerian patriots" could literally not exist.<sup>13</sup> More to the point, although Phoenicia, Rome, and Islam had for a time unified the peoples of North Africa, those attempts at unity had merely been a "perpetual beginning" because

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<sup>11</sup> Mona Ozouf, *L'école, l'église et la république (1871-1914)* (Paris, 1982).

<sup>12</sup> Jean-Marie Mayeur, *La vie politique sous la troisième République 1870-1940* (Paris, 1984), 149.

<sup>13</sup> J. M. [Jean Marie] Bourget, *L'Algérie jusqu'à la pénétration saharienne*, vol. 1, *Cahiers du centenaire de l'Algérie* (Comité national métropolitain du centenaire de l'Algérie, 1930).

the permanence of certain fundamental characteristics of the populations of North Africa has imposed a similar trajectory on all the civilizations that have taken root there.<sup>14</sup>

Bourget, consciously or not, thus undermined the central claims upon which republicans had based their vision of the state: that human nature was universal, and that human beings could be improved. Bourget refused to draw the obvious conclusion: that if these fundamental characteristics existed, they would also scuttle French ambitions in Algeria. He insisted that the French conquest was different. Why? Because the demands of modern times required that France intervene; because France was the most powerful force in the Mediterranean; and because “circumstances imposed [upon France] the civilizing mission that others had previously fulfilled.”<sup>15</sup> It apparently did not occur to Bourget that these two principles—the fundamentally recalcitrant character of the indigenous Algerian population, and the new French civilizing mission—were incompatible, or that the reasons for French intervention had applied equally to previous conquerors of North Africa.

Bourget’s observation that Algeria had not existed in its modern form helped justify the French presence in North Africa. It was echoed and even amplified in other volumes in the series. In Volume 5, *Le gouvernement de l’Algérie*, Louis Milliot asserted that it was a “primordial fact” that, before the conquest, Algeria had been in a “quasi-inorganic state.”<sup>16</sup> Thus, the French conquest had freed the *indigènes* from the yoke of Turkish oppressors, but also from the more fundamental problem of anarchy. In his account of the “pacification” of the Sahara, General Octave Meynier explained, “the *indigènes* of the Tell and of the remotest Sahara, liberated from anarchic tyranny and endemic misery by our intervention, will be able to gauge the good that French intervention has brought them—by the peace, the justice, and the well-being that it has introduced everywhere.”<sup>17</sup>

How could the “well-being” be assessed? In his *Evolution de l’Algérie de 1830 à 1930*, M. E. F. Gautier declared it could be quantified: the population of *indigènes* had grown far more rapidly under the tutelage of the French Third Republic than ever before:

This growth alone provides more eloquent testimony than would any long essay. It should be better known than it is. It is decisive. From 1872 to 1930 the indigenous population more than doubled; this is a brute fact, perfectly undeniable.<sup>18</sup>

The notion of stable government provided an obvious justification for the French presence in North Africa, but a justification that did not require the French to impose the stamp of “civilization” on the indigenous populations themselves.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Louis Milliot, *Le gouvernement de l’Algérie*, vol. 5, *Cahiers du centenaire de l’Algérie* (Comité national métropolitain du centenaire de l’Algérie, 1930), 6.

<sup>17</sup> Général Octave Frédéric François Meynier, *La pacification du Sahara et la pénétration saharienne (1852-1930)*, vol. 2, *Cahiers du centenaire de l’Algérie* (Comité national métropolitain du centenaire de l’Algérie, 1930), 5.

<sup>18</sup> M. E. F. Gautier, *L’évolution de l’Algérie de 1830 à 1930*, vol. 3, *Cahiers du centenaire de l’Algérie* (Comité national métropolitain du centenaire de l’Algérie, 1930), 29.

<sup>19</sup> The *Cahiers*, it should be noted, did not whitewash the origins of the 1830 invasion; Bourget acknowledged that the conquest might have been the result of a government trying to distract attention

Even the last volume in the series, Jean Mirante's *La France et les oeuvres indigènes en Algérie*, which one might have assumed would tout the values France had brought to Algeria, focused heavily on the material and demographic benefits Algerians had gained from the French presence. Mirante devoted ten of his ninety-five pages to statistics and tables showing that the rate of *indigène* population growth had soared under French administration. And while he devoted more than twenty pages to the schools the French had created, Mirante accepted the notion that for French civilization to take root would be a glacially slow process. The shaping of *indigène* minds "could not be improvised in a day."<sup>20</sup> The best way to affect the *esprit* of the *indigènes*, Mirante advised, was to adapt schooling to local needs. But those local needs, in his reading, were overwhelmingly technical and practical: how to fertilize fields, plants trees and build.<sup>21</sup> The higher intellectual aspirations of the *indigènes* warranted little mention, perhaps because, in keeping with the views expressed in the other *Cahiers*, the *indigènes* were not collectively ready to assume the full weight of French civilization.

In this sense, the *Cahiers* were yet another mark of the profound evolution of the French justification of colonial policy under the Third Republic. Critics of colonialism asked how a nation that officially subscribed to the principles of human equality and freedom could nonetheless build up an enormous colonial empire. They asked how French republicans could reconcile their universalist and liberal views with the practice of colonialism. One answer was that French colonialists saw colonialism, not as the subjection of the weaker by the stronger, but as the submission of the less advanced to the more advanced. In other words, French colonialism could be justified with a doctrine called—unblushingly—the *mission civilisatrice*, or the civilizing mission. The principles of the "Rights of Man and Citizen" were indeed "universal"—but the people in France's colonies were not ready, were not mature enough, to exercise these rights. Colonial subjects could, the theory went, demonstrate their maturity by embracing the superior laws, language, culture, and political ideology of France. This justification for French colonialism, as Alice Conklin has pointed out, "rested upon certain fundamental assumptions about the superiority of French culture and the perfectibility of humankind."<sup>22</sup> By 1895, this civilizing mission had become, Conklin tells us, "the official ideology of the Third Republic's vast new empire."<sup>23</sup> Up until the Great War, the form that this civilizing mission took was a policy of *assimilation*. Briefly put, assimilation was the idea that colonial subjects could be "made into Frenchmen."<sup>24</sup> By its nature, assimilation implied uniformity and centralization; local customs were to be replaced by standardized French practices, and local elites by French officials.

By contrast, *association*, the policy that displaced assimilation after the Great War, did not seek to make the colony in the image of France or its subjects in the

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from its domestic politics, and other contributors to the *Cahiers*—while lauding the results of Charles X's invasion—also conceded that Charles X's difficulties at home prompted him to launch the invasion. Bourget, *Pénétration saharienne*, 30; General Paul Azan, *Les grands soldats de l'Algérie*, vol. 4, *Cahiers du centenaire de l'Algérie* (Comité national métropolitain du centenaire de l'Algérie, 1930), 7.

<sup>20</sup> Jean Mirante, *La France et les oeuvres indigènes en Algérie*, vol. 11, *Cahiers du centenaire de l'Algérie* (Comité national métropolitain du centenaire de l'Algérie, 1930), 66.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 91-92.

<sup>22</sup> Alice L. Conklin, *A Mission to Civilize: The Republican Idea of Empire in France and West Africa, 1895-1930* (Stanford, Calif., 1997), 1.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>24</sup> Betts, *Assimilation and Association*, 8.

image of Frenchmen. Instead, proponents of association “emphasized the need for variation in colonial practice.”<sup>25</sup> By the 1920s, the logic of association had replaced assimilation throughout the French colonial empire. Of course the change in colonial doctrines was not isolated from changes in metropolitan France. Conklin argues that the study of French colonial policy not only helps us understand French colonial practices, but that the colonies act as a kind of mirror for changes in the Third Republic as a whole. Conklin, looking at the French experience in West Africa, suggests that the shift from assimilation to association “reveals the fate of the Third Republic.” “The Third Republic,” she notes, “had acquired a decidedly illiberal orientation, which only became more pronounced in the 1930s.”<sup>26</sup>

The illiberal message of the *Cahiers* was that the great triumph of the conquest of Algeria had been to create a space in which *European* settlers could create a new and prosperous society. France and the European settlers it brought with it had, quite literally, *created* Algeria. The French conquest did offer benefits to the indigenous populations: it provided stable borders, a unified political identity, and, above all, an antidote to anarchy and tyranny. While the original inhabitants of the Sahara were the fortunate recipients of this *pax gallica*, it was the hard work of the European settlers that had made the gift of peace, justice, and wellbeing possible. “The sons of the first *colons*,” Meynier declared, “and, next to them, the European emigrants from different countries, will proudly show off the fruits of labor that is already one hundred years old.”<sup>27</sup> As Gautier giddily put it, “A new European race is born.”<sup>28</sup> And, he continued, “It is clear that Algeria has its own power of assimilation. No cleavages can be detected among the bloc of European *colons*.”<sup>29</sup> Ironically, it was on these *European* settlers that the real power of assimilation could be felt—not on the *indigènes*, who remained stubbornly apart.

If these views, expressed in a government-sponsored publication, seem to confirm the demise of assimilation (at least as far as the *indigènes* were concerned) of the Third Republic, the work of General Paul Azan, author of *Les grands soldats de l'Algérie*, suggests that this illiberalism was not merely a reflection of changes within the *Métropole*. Indeed, the colonial experience and its celebration in 1930 and 1931 provided a means to disseminate a message that ran counter to the universalist ideas dear to earlier republicans. How this worked can be understood by examining not only Azan’s contribution to the written corpus of the Committee, but his previous writings and his role on the *Comité restreint*.

Azan was a formidable figure. After his graduation from Saint Cyr in 1897, he served in Algeria for five years, and developed an abiding interest in its people and history. Beginning in 1902, he was attached to the army’s historical section, and simultaneously managed to earn a doctorate from the Sorbonne. He was a prolific writer, authoring more than twenty books during his career, many of them focused on Algeria and its relations with France. He could also boast of combat experience, not only in North Africa, but also during the Great War. (He lost partial use of his left arm after being hit by a shell burst in 1915.) He served as chief of the French Military Mission to the United States in 1917, and set up an officer training program at Harvard. (Harvard awarded him an honorary doctorate in 1917). After the war, he served

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 106.

<sup>26</sup> Conklin, *Mission to Civilize*, 250.

<sup>27</sup> Meynier, *Pacification*, 5.

<sup>28</sup> Gautier, *Evolution*, 20.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

in Turkey, Tunisia, and Algeria, before being named chief of the army's historical service in March 1928.<sup>30</sup>

In a report dated January 14, 1930, Azan wrote that his principal mission as a member of the Propaganda Committee was to make certain that the "army not be neglected, that that its role be presented in an exact way."<sup>31</sup> As far as the publications themselves were concerned, Azan declared that they provided "an important propaganda element; the Army must seek to gain a moral advantage." To make fullest use of that propaganda element, Azan used his position on the *Comité restreint* to insist that *Les grands soldats* be doubled in length from the forty-eight pages originally planned; the committee acquiesced. (As it turned out, Azan's book weighed in at 128 pages—two and a half times what had originally been planned.) Azan also repeatedly sought official backing from the Propaganda Committee for another project, a book he had written focused exclusively on the Algiers expedition of 1830. Here, however, the *Comité restreint* drew the line, worried, according to Azan, that an official reminder of the conquest itself might cause offense to the *indigènes*.<sup>32</sup>

The book that did appear with the imprimatur of the Propaganda Committee, *Les grands soldats de l'Algérie*, might just as easily been seen as a potential irritant to *indigène* sentiment. It was an unapologetic homage to the men who had made the work of the *colons* possible: the great soldiers of the Algerian conquest and pacification. Azan began his book with a blunt declaration:

Civilization, with all of its attendant disciplines, has never been imposed on backward countries except by force. It is also thanks to its armies that France, which among nations appears so particularly penetrated by sentiments of humanity and generosity, has been able to impose the reign of peace in Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco.<sup>33</sup>

Azan's formulation was new neither to him nor to the larger French colonial enterprise, nor did it differ in substance from what his fellow contributors said about the replacement of primordial anarchy with French law and order. Azan simply declared more plainly what others had long thought about France's relations with the people of its colonies. What was remarkable, though, was how long and how consistently Azan had rejected the doctrine of assimilation.

Azan had staked out his position many years earlier. In 1903—well before the advocates of assimilation had run out of steam—Azan (then a mere lieutenant) fulminated against the doctrine of assimilation. Assimilationists had got Algeria all wrong, Azan insisted. Assimilation would "not provide moral uplift to the *indigène*."<sup>34</sup> He repeatedly insisted that the *indigènes* were essentially different from Europeans in general and the French in particular. Those who wanted to impose an egalitarian government on Algeria missed the salient point that Algeria, because of its Islamic foundations, *already* resembled a kind of "socialist collectivism," one which, he declared flatly, was "incapable of progress."<sup>35</sup> "That is why," Azan concluded,

<sup>30</sup> Vincennes, Service historique de l'Armée de Terre (SHAT), Personnel dossier: Azan, Général de division Paul Jean Louis.

<sup>31</sup> Fonds Azan, Le Général, Chef du Service historique [Paul Azan], N° 29 8/11/C, 14 Jan. 1930, SHAT: 1 K 74.

<sup>32</sup> Fonds Azan, Le Général, Chef du Service historique [Paul Azan], Service historique, N° 29 8/11/C, 14 Jan. 1930, SHAT: 1 K 74. Azan's book on the Expedition was published, but by Plon, not the Committee, as *L'Expédition d'Alger 1830* (Paris, 1930).

<sup>33</sup> Azan, *Grands soldats*, 5.

<sup>34</sup> Paul Azan, *Recherche d'une solution de la question indigène en Algérie* (Paris, 1903), 19.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.



It would be inhuman to bring to these people, who have achieved their ideal and rejoice in an astonishing tranquility of the soul, the unwholesome and corrupting seeds of our unhealthy *inquiétude*.<sup>36</sup>

If the policy of assimilation posed a threat to the tranquility of the Algerian soul, it also posed a deadly threat to France itself. The Algerians, he declared, reproduced far more rapidly than the French. Azan thus painted a doomsday scenario in which hordes of Arabs overran France:

Imagine them with the same level of education as we have. They live in our cities, they attend our schools, they possess factories, they produce engineers, historians, scientists, they think and act as we do, they pay the same taxes. Isn't it then legitimate to give them the same rights? Then we would have to make them voters, they would elect representatives of the country in the way we do, whom they would naturally choose from amongst their own race; then it would come to pass that it is no longer Arabs who are governed by the French, but the French governed by the Arabs.<sup>37</sup>

For Azan—as for the *colons*, and, indeed, many of his military colleagues serving in Algeria—the specter of this potential reversal of roles relegated assimilation to the ash-heap of history. Ironically for someone who insisted that Arabs could not be assimilated, it was the *similarity* between Arabs and French, the common quest for power, that made Arabs such a threat to France. To avoid the role reversal Azan dreaded, the French had to govern their Algerian subjects with an iron hand: “There is one principle that one must absorb to administer the *indigènes*, which is that they only like and only respect force; they *want* to be governed.”<sup>38</sup>

This justification of force was linked to Azan's forceful (and precocious) rejection of assimilation, and provided a theme to which Azan would remain faithful in all of his writings about the Algerian colony henceforth. In 1925, in a piece arguing for the conscription of North African soldiers, Azan rejected the idea that North African conscripts should be treated in the same way as French conscripts. Again, he declared that those who thought the *indigène* and the French conscript were similar were wrongheaded. The reason he gave, though, was astonishing:

The mistake is a very generous one and a very French one: it has already been committed by those who drafted the “Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen,” rather than more modestly drafting a “Declaration of the rights of the French citizen.” It is not possible to mold humanity according to a single formula, even an excellent one, because the races do not change with the sound of a few phrases, but take many centuries to evolve.<sup>39</sup>

In 1930, in his homage to the great soldiers of Algeria, Azan warned that “races” evolve slowly. But this time, he did so not as a mere writer of military history, but as a key figure in the celebration of the conquest of Algeria. He devoted chapters to General de Bourmont; Bourmont's successor, Marshal Clauzel; the sons of Louis Philippe (the dukes of Orléans and Nemours; the prince of Joinville; and the duke of

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 50. [Emphasis in original.]

<sup>39</sup> Paul Azan, *L'armée indigène nord-Africaine* (Paris, 1925), 38. For a discussion of Azan's proposals, see James J. Cooke, “Paul Azan and l'armée indigène Nord-Africaine,” *Military Affairs* 45.3 (1981): 133-38.

Aumale); to Marshal Bugeaud; and to Bugeaud's lieutenants, the generals la Moricière, Changarnier, Cavaignac, and Bedeau. His treatment of these soldiers—in keeping with his declared aim of making certain that the army's role was not neglected—was hagiographical. He praised Bugeaud for adopting new methods of warfare (the notorious “flying columns”) better suited to the conditions in Algeria, and though Azan noted that the “razzia” consisted of pillaging “dissident tribes,” destroying herds and crops, and taking hostages, he explained that these methods had been merely been “borrowed from local practice” and were, besides, necessary to reach an enemy who went into hiding. And, he declared, they were “much more humane than those of the Turks or of Abd el Kader.”<sup>40</sup>

Azan's comparison of Bugeaud's methods to Abd el Kader's did not imply a lack of respect for *indigènes* military leaders. Azan devoted a chapter to three of these: Mustapha ben Ismaël and Yusuf, who had served the French, and Abd el Kader. Azan praised the fighting abilities of all three, and pointed out that in defeat and after years of imprisonment in France, even Abd el Kader had come to describe himself as a French patriot. Yet Azan also noted that Abd el Kader's eventual conversion to the French cause could not be a model for other *indigènes*: “Men belonging to the *indigène* elite may, if they are well guided, gain great profit for themselves and for their country from a stay in France. But, for men lacking sufficient preparation, such a stay will only cause them to lose to lose their innate qualities and suffer disastrous moral deformations.”<sup>41</sup> Azan approvingly cited Abd el Kader's assessment of the effects of premature education: “Science may be compared to rain from the sky. When one drop falls into an open oyster, it produces a pearl; when it falls into the mouth of a viper, it produces poison.” Azan emphatically added, “This truth is applicable to all countries and to all races.”<sup>42</sup>

For Azan, the central tenets of French republicanism were fatally flawed. Human nature was not, after all, universal; and if it could be changed, as he seemed to concede, that change could only be observed over the course of centuries. The promise of French republicanism, and of the policy of assimilation, had been that the introduction of French civilization would shepherd subject peoples into the dawn of a new, liberal age. That promise was one neither Azan nor the other writers of the *Cahiers* were willing to make.

In 1903, Azan's blistering attack on assimilation, though not unique, was still on the margins of French colonial thought. By 1930, the same critique, though still subject to controversy, was no longer marginal. The evidence presented by experienced colonial officers like Azan did seem to demonstrate that the population of the colonies was fundamentally different from that of the *Métropole*. Azan and his fellow contributors to the *Cahiers*, like other “expert” writers on Algeria, could assert that Arabs and Berbers resisted change; that civilization had to be imposed by force; and that France's mission was not to make Arabs into Frenchmen, but, on the contrary, to contain and harness the power and the threat that the Arabs represented.

The publication of the *Cahiers* in 1930 may be understood, not just as an effort to inform the French public about the virtues of the colonies, nor as an expression of colonial sentiment, but as the manifestation of the transformation of the Third Republic. Men with ideas like Paul Azan's found confirmation for their ideas and shelter from radical republicans in the colonies. Over the years stretching from the turn of the century to the 1930s, they learned that the institutions of Third Republic

<sup>40</sup> Azan, *Grands soldats*, 66.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 57-58.

and the universalist, liberal ideology of republicanism were not coterminous. The anti-universalist critique of liberal republicanism gradually insinuated itself within the institutions of the Republic itself. By the 1920s, Azan's startling declaration that the "Declaration of the Rights of Man and of Citizen" had been a mistake caused hardly a ripple. The inclusion of Azan's work in the official commemoration of the centennial of the conquest of Algeria was thus not only the reflection of a growing illiberalism in French political thought in the 1920s and 1930s; it was the triumph of a long-standing attack on the core of republican ideology.

### **Appendix: The *Cahiers du Centenaire de l'Algérie***

- Vol. 1: Bourget, J. M. [Jean Marie]. *L'Algérie jusqu'à la pénétration saharienne*. 95 pp.
- Vol. 2: Meynier, Général Octave Frédéric François. *La pacification du Sahara et la pénétration saharienne (1852-1930)*. 62 pp.
- Vol. 3: Gautier, M. E. F. *L'évolution de l'Algérie de 1830 à 1930*. 95 pp.
- Vol. 4: Azan, General Paul. *Les grands soldats de l'Algérie*. 128 pp.
- Vol. 5: Milliot, Louis. *Le gouvernement de l'Algérie*. 48 pp.
- Vol. 6: Berque, A. *Art Antique et Art Musulman en Algérie*. 144 pp.
- Vol. 7: Bonneval, General de. *L'Algérie touristique*. 62 pp.
- Vol. 8: Dhé, Colonel, and Jean Denizet. *Les liaisons maritimes, aériennes et terrestres de l'Algérie*. 59 pp.
- Vol. 9: Blottière, Jean Ernest. *Les productions algériennes*. 95 pp.
- Vol. 10: Deloncle, Pierre Eugène Marie Joseph. *Le vie et les moeurs en Algérie*. 122 pp.
- Vol. 11: Mirante, Jean. *La France et les oeuvres indigènes en Algérie*. 111 pp.
- Vol. 12: Pollacchi, Commandant P., Pierre Eugène Marie Joseph Deloncle, and Paul Crouzet. *Cartes-index, glossaire, documents, annexes, rapport général*. 71 pp.
- Published by the *Comité national métropolitain du centenaire de l'Algérie*, 1930.