

French Colonial Violence and the Policy of Subjugating Algerian Society The Frachich Massacre of 1845 as a Case Study

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Abstract:

This study examines the Frachich Cave Massacre of 1845 within the context of the French occupation of Algeria and local resistance in the Dahra region. It analyzes the massacre as an episode of colonial violence during the period of French military expansion. The study investigates the setting of the massacre and the circumstances in which it was carried out. Particular attention is given to the enfumade technique and to the targeting of people who had taken refuge in caves. It also considers the military and political significance of this practice within attempts to subjugate Algerian society. The study is guided by the following central question: How was French colonial violence manifested in the Frachich Cave Massacre of 1845, and what do its events reveal about the methods used to subjugate Algerian society?

The study adopts a historical-analytical approach. It examines the political and military context of the massacre and analyzes the practices of French forces and the discourse surrounding them. The analysis draws on historical sources and relevant studies.

The study concludes that the Frachich Cave Massacre cannot be understood as an isolated event or a temporary reaction. It formed part of a colonial system in which violence was used as a means of subjugating Algerian society. This violence targeted people, their means of subsistence, and their geographical space. The findings also show that, despite the scale of violence involved, the massacre did not eliminate Algerian resistance. The expansion of repression and scorched-earth policies deepened opposition to colonial rule and contributed to the emergence of new forms of resistance. This illustrates the limited capacity of violence alone to secure submission. It also reflects the continuing attachment of Algerian society to its land and its determination to resist occupation.

Keywords: colonial violence; France; policy of subjugation; Algerian society; Frachich Cave Massacre; 1845.

Introduction

From 1830 onward, the French occupation of Algeria was accompanied by extensive military expansion. It faced continuous local resistance in different regions. Consolidating French control therefore depended on subduing areas that rejected the occupation and reducing their ability to continue resisting. French military operations were not limited to direct clashes with fighters. In many cases, they also affected civilians and the areas in which they lived. Burning, destruction, displacement, and other practices became prominent features of colonial expansion during the nineteenth century.

The Dahra region is particularly important in this context because resistance there continued during the first half of the nineteenth century. This led to an intensification of French military operations. These operations reached a tragic peak in June 1845, when a number of local inhabitants sought refuge in caves to escape French forces. Large numbers of them were suffocated after fires were lit at the cave entrances. The event became known as the "Frachich Cave Massacre."

The importance of this event is not limited to the scale of the human losses. It also provides an opportunity to examine the nature of colonial violence during the early phase of French expansion, the ways in which that violence was practiced on the ground, and its effects on Algerian society and resistance. It further allows an examination of how the incident was treated in official French discourse and in contemporary sources. Studying the Frachich Cave Massacre therefore makes it possible to place the event within its military and social context. It also allows its events and consequences to be linked to the positions and narratives that addressed it. This contributes to a deeper understanding of colonial violence and its effects during the early period of French occupation.

The Frachich Cave Massacre of 1845 has been discussed in several historical works. Much of this literature, however, has focused on documenting the military events and human losses. It has not always connected the forms of colonial violence used during the operation with its consequences, its wider repercussions, and the French response. This study therefore rereads the massacre as a model of colonial violence and of the policy used to subjugate Algerian society. It does so by analyzing the events, comparing them with historical sources, and critically examining official French discourse.

The study is therefore centered on the following question: How was French colonial violence manifested in the Frachich Cave Massacre of 1845, and what do its events reveal about the methods used to subjugate Algerian society?

To answer this question, the study is organized around the following themes:

1. Colonial violence in Algeria and resistance in the Dahra region
2. The Frachich Cave Massacre of 1845: events and circumstances of implementation
3. The consequences of the massacre for Algerian society and resistance
4. The official French position on the Frachich Cave Massacre and a critical reading of that position
5. Manifestations and meanings of colonial violence in the Frachich Massacre

The study uses a historical-analytical approach. It situates the Frachich Cave Massacre within its political, military, and social context and examines its different dimensions through historical sources, references, and relevant testimonies. It also compares available accounts and evaluates them critically. This makes it possible to understand the nature and forms of colonial violence during the early period of French occupation and to identify its effects on Algerian society and resistance.

First: Colonial Violence in Algeria and Resistance in the Dahra Region

French expansion in Algeria during the first half of the nineteenth century followed a gradual military and political course. It encountered local resistance in several regions, including the Dahra, where opposition to French expansion persisted. The confrontation between French forces and Algerian communities took several forms. Some were directly military. Others involved settlement measures, control over land, and attempts to weaken the population's capacity to continue resisting. Understanding the Frachich Cave Massacre therefore requires first examining the colonial context

that preceded it and then tracing the development of resistance in the Dahra region and the confrontation with French forces.

1. Colonial Context and French Violence in Algeria

The French state in Algeria was founded on Crusader and racist foundations and on two legal and political systems. One system applied to the settlers and included the fundamental human rights proclaimed by the French Revolution of 1789. The second was imposed by force on the Algerian indigenous population. It was devoid of human rights and human dignity. It was an exceptional, racist, and discriminatory system that entrenched the authority of the master over the dominated. Historical events show that this was, in the fullest sense, the outcome of a religious and racial war.¹

After deliberate killing and destruction driven by hatred, French colonialism acted in the name of Western civilization and civility, which it sought to spread in Algeria and to which it wanted the Algerian people to adhere. It developed a colonial strategy that enabled it to pursue its political, economic, social, cultural, and educational objectives and ambitions.² The French occupation administration implemented an unjust policy toward Algerians. It impoverished them and confiscated their agricultural lands, either by force or through laws, before granting those lands to incoming European settlers. Algerians became khammes sharecroppers and strangers in their own country, without the most basic rights. General Clauzel, one of the strongest advocates of settlement in Algeria, told Europeans in 1836: "You may establish as many farms as you wish, and you may take possession of them in the areas we occupy. Be certain that we will protect you with all the force at our disposal. With patience and perseverance, a new people will live here and will grow and increase more rapidly than the people who crossed the Atlantic and settled in America several centuries ago." In the same context, General Bugeaud declared before Parliament on 14 May 1840: "Wherever there is suitable water and fertile land, Europeans have the right to settle without seeking out its owner. Since the Algerians will defend their lands with all their strength and will not surrender them easily to European settlers, we must drive them by force into the desert. There, either they will be unable to live and will return in submission to work as servants for Europeans for a low wage, or they will remain there, and we will then be able to place the land freely at the disposal of the settlers³."

These statements should not be read outside their historical context, nor should they alone be treated as proof of the nature of every later colonial practice. They nevertheless show a clear connection between consolidating the French presence, controlling agricultural land, and settling Europeans on it. They also help explain the political and settler-colonial framework within which French military operations were conducted during the first half of the nineteenth century, especially in regions that resisted French expansion.

After French colonialism had planted large numbers of French settlers in the country and they had become its masters, supported by legislation used as a pretext for organizing Algeria as a part of

¹ Abdelaziz Filali, *Crimes of the French Army in the Provinces of Algiers and Constantine, 1830-1850* (Algiers: Dar al-Huda, 2011), p. 22.

² Ahmed Mohamed Ashouraks, *Enduring Historical Pages from the Algerian Armed Struggle against French Settler Colonial Domination, 1500-1962*, 1st ed. (Libya: General Authority for Culture, 2009), p. 147.

³ Ammar Amoura, *A Brief History of Algeria*, 1st ed. (Algiers: Dar Rayhana for Publishing and Distribution, 2002), p. 118.

France, it began to sow division among the struggling Algerian people, who had given outstanding examples of defending their country during the French occupation¹.

Some French military leaders spoke of the need to exterminate Algerians. Others proposed displacement, exile, gradual removal of the indigenous population under the idea of an expanding "oil stain," or their mass transfer to the desert. The French army therefore used inhumane methods in order to secure the occupation of Algeria. These included mass killing and the extermination of the Arab population, as reflected in contemporary statements and writings².

Historical events show that, as French colonialism set foot on Algerian soil, it adopted a policy of total war and the elimination of the Algerian national element. Entire villages were burned with their inhabitants and animals. Men were crucified and beheaded, bodies were mutilated, and the bellies of pregnant women were ripped open. Entire tribal groups were exterminated. Families were displaced, exiled, and forcibly deported to other parts of the world, including Cayenne, New Caledonia, and French colonies in the Pacific³. The French Minister of War, Mr. Gerard, stated: "All the Arab population must be exterminated. Massacres, fires, and the destruction of agriculture are, in my view, the only means of establishing our domination⁴."

In the same context, Hamdan Khodja states in *The Mirror* that most of the generals who served in Algeria did not hesitate to propose the extermination of the entire Algerian nation. They based their proposal on the small size of Algeria's population, on the one hand, and what they regarded as its extreme savagery, on the other. They estimated the population of Algeria at the time at between two and three million. Hamdan Khodja commented: "Even if we assume that this small number does not exceed two million, as some writers have stated, would the extermination of two million people not be a crime in the eyes of civilized peoples and of humanity as a whole?"⁵

Marshal Bugeaud was appointed Governor-General of Algeria by a royal order issued on 29 December 1840. The colonial administration selected him because of his bloodthirsty reputation and assigned him two tasks: eliminating armed resistance and promoting the settlement movement. The means by which these objectives were to be achieved can be inferred from the choice itself. When the new Governor-General arrived in Algeria on 22 February 1841, he summarized his mission in two proclamations posted on the walls of Algiers on the day of his arrival. One stated: "...the Arabs must submit, and only the French flag will remain standing on this African soil...." This was a message to the settlers in Algeria and France alike that he was the man for the situation⁶.

Following the course of the extermination to which the Algerian people were subjected by the French occupation authorities reveals an important phenomenon for understanding the realities of an extermination plan that affected Algerians across their different groups and social entities. It cannot

¹ Ashouraks, *Op.Cit.*, p. 147.

² Filali, *Op.Cit.*, p. 28.

³ Saadi Beziane, *France's Crimes in Algeria from General Bugeaud to General Aussaresses: Dark Pages in the History of French Colonialism in Algeria from the Occupation of 1830 to Independence in 1962* (Algiers: Dar Houma, 2005), pp. 21-22.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

⁵ Hamdan Ben Othman Khodja, *The Mirror*, ed. Mohamed Larbi Zbiri (Algiers: ANEP Publications, 2005), p. 271.

⁶ Larbi Belaazouz, 'Colonial Penetration in the Middle Chelif Basin and the Position of the Region's Inhabitants, 1842-1846,' *Usur al-Jadida Journal*, vol. 6, no. 25 (10 October 2016), University of Oran 1, Algeria, pp. 277-301, at p. 278.

be reduced only to an attempt to eliminate as much of the Algerian population as possible. Those who remained were subjected to restrictions and absorbed into exceptional rules and procedures that, over time, reduced their numbers and their role in managing the country's affairs and benefiting from its resources. They were thereby exposed to marginalization, exclusion, and, ultimately, the confiscation of identity. The purpose was not to grant them the identity of the colonizer, as some believe. Rather, it was to leave the Algerian people without an identity, or as an anonymous society, so that the fundamental condition of survival would not endure: a people's shared sense of belonging to an independent entity, which gives it the desire and motivation to defend its autonomous identity against attempts to eliminate it throughout history¹.

2. Algerian Resistance in the Dahra Region before the Frachich Massacre

As noted above, Marshal Bugeaud governed Algeria from 1841 until the summer of 1847. He was among the most violent, harsh, and brutal French governors-general. He believed in the need to consolidate French colonialism in Algeria, replace Arabs with Europeans on seized lands, and destroy the foundations of Algerian society. He expanded the powers of the Arab Bureaux and made them instruments for implementing his policy. He ordered the use of fires and the destruction of food supplies in order to force Algerians into submission and isolate them from the resistance. He pursued a policy of violence and a war of extermination against the Algerian resistance, represented at that time by Emir Abdelkader. He expelled opinion leaders and suspected persons, stripped tribes of their agricultural crops and livestock, committed massacres, and imposed collective punishments, including collective fines².

The period between 1845 and 1846 was among the most difficult years of the occupation. Had command not been in the hands of Marshal Bugeaud, who compelled his soldiers to move rapidly in attack, retreat, and flanking maneuvers, and had it not been for the large number of French fighters under his command, their training and armament, and their superiority in firepower, tactics, logistics, and supplies, France would not have been able to remain in Algeria. French forces left Algiers in new clothes, active and fully supplied, and returned months later in worn clothes and with exhausted faces. Their harshness exhausted the strength of Algerian resistance³.

French occupation forces continued, with great brutality, to apply the scorched-earth policy and collective persecution mentioned above. This led to the emergence of further popular uprisings, especially in the Chelif basin, where people longed for a figure who could lead them to victory over the occupation forces. Under these conditions, the insurgent Muhammad ibn Abdallah, known as Bou Maza, emerged⁴. He led armed resistance in the Ouarsenis, Zaccar, Dahra, and Chelif regions for four

¹ Othman Zeghib, 'The Extermination of Algerians during the French Occupation: Between Isolated Acts and Colonial Strategy,' *Journal of Research and Studies*, vol. 10, no. 2 (1 June 2013), Hamma Lakhdar University of El Oued, pp. 307-324, at p. 308.

² Abu al-Qasim Saadallah, *The Algerian National Movement, 1830-1900*, vol. 1 (Beirut: Dar al-Gharb al-Islami, 1992), pp. 216-217.

³ Djalal Yahia, *French Policy in Algeria from 1830 to 1960* (Cairo: Dar al-Maarifa, n.d.), p. 162.

⁴ Bou Maza's real name was Si Muhammad ibn Abdallah. He belonged to a regular battalion associated with Abdelkader. After his unit was dispersed, he withdrew to the Ouarsenis to devote himself to contemplation and prayer. He shared his solitude with a goat, from which the name 'Bou Maza' was derived. See Mahfoud Kaddache, *The Algeria of the Algerians: History of Algeria, 1830-1954* (Algiers: National Publishing and Advertising Company, 2008), p. 107.

years¹. After French occupation forces had imposed control over western Algeria and pushed Emir Abdelkader toward the steppe, the French army under Marshal Bugeaud launched a campaign against the inhabitants of Dahra and Ouarsenis. It was there that Sharif Muhammad ibn Abdallah, Bou Maza, appeared and proclaimed jihad against the invaders².

Bou Maza took advantage of the situation and called on tribes to provide men and prepare for jihad through arms, fasting, and prayer. His reputation grew as he moved from one tribe to another. Even among tribes formally subject to French authority, local notables secretly wrote to him and supplied information³. Bou Maza then attacked hostile or indifferent tribes and the qaid appointed by the French. He also punished those who refused to join the jihad⁴.

Bou Maza entered the Chelif basin and was joined by the inhabitants of Sbeihat. The inhabitants south of the city of El Asnam contacted him and supplied him with armed men. Faced with the seriousness of Bou Maza's uprising, General Bugeaud personally went to the Dahra Mountains. He arrived there on 9 May and remained in the region until 12 June 1845, taking part personally in battles and confrontations with the insurgents⁵.

French sources state that, at the beginning of 1845, several marabouts appeared across the country calling for the expulsion of the French and recounting their crimes. They announced the coming of a sharif descended from al-Hasan who would appear from beyond the river and fight the French by mobilizing the people of Dahra. French accounts described this movement as an uprising of Sufi orders. The Qadiriyya, Rahmaniyya, Darqawiyya, Tayyibiyya, and their branches were particularly involved. Bou Maza belonged to the Tayyibiyya order associated with al-Tayyib al-Wazzani. He traveled among the tribes calling for holy war. As his reputation spread, he adopted the title of sharif, gathered supporters, and launched the uprising from Dahra. The movement expanded rapidly. Several military units were deployed to contain it, but they achieved little. Bou Maza withdrew into the Dahra, while military operations intensified between Tenes and the mouth of the Chelif River. His repeated disappearance and reappearance encouraged tribes and supporters to continue the uprising despite major French campaigns. These campaigns later forced him to withdraw toward the Flitta tribes, which were not fully under French authority. In spring 1845, communities in the Mostaganem region welcomed him as the man of the moment who would free the country from the Christians, and these tribes proclaimed jihad⁶.

The French account also reveals the strategic importance assigned to military operations in the Beni Hidja area during this period. Charles Richard described the area as the "main route" through which the uprising could move toward the gates of Algiers. The objective, in his account, was

¹ Yahia Bouaziz, *On the History of Algeria in National and International Conferences* (Algiers: Office of University Publications, 1999), p. 157.

² Ben Youcef Tlemcani, *French Expansion in Algeria, 1830-1870*, doctoral dissertation in Modern and Contemporary History, Department of History, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Algiers 2, Algeria, p. 46.

³ Kaddache, *Op.Cit.*, p. 107.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

⁵ Yahia Bouaziz, 'Resistance in the Ouarsenis Mountains, the Chelif Basin, and the Dahra Mountains against French Colonialism, 1840-1864,' *Al-Asala*, nos. 83-84 (Algiers: Al-Baath Press, 1980), p. 7.

⁶ Ghanem Boudin, 'From the French Policy of Extermination: The Burning of Ghar al-Frachich, 19 June 1945,' *Al-Khaldounia Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, vol. 9, no. 1 (1 June 2016), Ibn Khaldoun University, Tiaret, pp. 209-225, at pp. 212-213.

therefore to block this route and push the movement westward. Colonel Saint-Arnaud entered Beni Hidja with a plan to "subdue them" before moving toward Beni Derdjin and Beni Bached. At the same time, the uprising was expanding after the Sbehhas and other tribes joined Bou Maza.

Charles Richard likewise presented Beni Hidja and the Sbehhas as two central points of the uprising. In his view, if they remained quiet, other tribes would remain quiet; if they declared war, the other tribes would join them. He added that the expansion of the uprising raised French fears that it might reach the Mitidja and threaten the "first attempts at settlement¹."

These accounts show that French military operations in the Dahra were conducted in an effort to contain the spread of resistance, secure lines of communication and colonial posts, and protect settlement projects. This was the immediate context preceding the operations that took place in the region later in 1845.

In 1845, the colonial authorities adopted a new method toward Algerians: disarmament. Saint-Arnaud was the officer who initiated this method. On 9 June 1845, General Bugeaud came to the Ouarsenis and disarmed the different tribes of the region. Only the tribes of the Chelif valley remained outside French control. Several battles followed and ended with their disarmament².

Resistance continued from 1844 to 1847. Marshal Bugeaud ordered French forces under Colonels Saint-Arnaud, Pelissier, and Ladmirault in the Dahra region to punish the tribes that had joined the popular resistance.³ Despite the war of extermination carried out by Saint-Arnaud, Bou Maza remained beyond French reach and the uprising repeatedly re-emerged. Bugeaud therefore added two detachments to Saint-Arnaud's forces. Bou Maza established himself in the Ouarsenis, and Bugeaud charged Pelissier and Saint-Arnaud with pursuing the last resistance fighters⁴.

Second: The Frachich Cave Massacre of 1845 - Events and Circumstances of Implementation

The Ouled Riah tribe supported Bou Maza's resistance. With their assistance, he defeated the Senjas tribe, which was aligned with the French, and also eliminated the agha appointed by the French military administration in reward for earlier services. Bou Maza succeeded in expanding the uprising, which caused serious concern to General Bugeaud. Bugeaud therefore devised a specific strategy to suppress it. He sent five military columns into the region. On arrival, they were distributed across different parts of the Dahra in order to surround the area, with priority given to places where resistance had spread. Once Bugeaud believed that most of the uprisings had been suppressed, he returned to Algiers. He left the remaining task to Colonel Pelissier, the deputy chief of staff, who was to complete the occupation of the resisting Dahra region⁵.

Heinrich von Maltzan states that three hundred columns, led by Saint-Arnaud, Pelissier, and Lamoriciere, went out in pursuit of the tribes rebelling alongside Bou Maza. The rebellious tribes

¹ Charles Richard: *L'INSURRECTION DU DHARA*. (1845-1846.), Alger: Typographie A. Besancenez, 1846, pp. 49-50.

² Boudin, *Op.Cit.*, p. 213.

³ Bouazza Boudersaia et al., *French Crimes and Genocide in Algeria during the Nineteenth Century* (Algiers: Publications of the National Center for Studies and Research on the National Movement and the Revolution of 1 November 1954, 2007), p. 126.

⁴ Kaddache, *Op.Cit.*, pp. 109-110.

⁵ Mohamed Belil, 'The Burning of Ghar al-Frachich among the Ouled Riah through French Sources,' *Usur al-Jadida Journal*, vol. 2, no. 6 (10 July 2012), University of Oran 1, pp. 53-69, at pp. 57-58.

retreated before the strength of these columns toward the ravines of the Dahra. All the rebellious tribes submitted because of the large French forces. Bou Maza's uprising thereby came to an end, and only one tribe remained: the Ouled Riah, whom von Maltzan called the Beni Rama. They refused submission and refused to relinquish their freedom. Pelissier pursued them, but both arms and the art of persuasion failed to subdue this defiant tribe¹.

Colonel Pelissier advanced at the head of a large military column of 4,000 soldiers, supported by 200 goumiers. This force was sent into Ouled Riah territory with the aim of subduing the tribe and then disarming it. When Pelissier arrived, he found that the mountain population was unwilling to surrender its weapons or submit to the French. At this point, the tragedy of the tribe's confrontation with Pelissier and his force began².

When the military columns mentioned above left their barracks, a reconnaissance unit moved out on 17 June from its barracks in the city of Chlef. It crossed the left side of Wadi Jarrah and began cutting down all the fig trees. It also deliberately burned homes and agricultural crops and exterminated the Beni Zentis tribe. The Ouled Riah then realized that there was no escape from confronting these military forces, but they were unable to repel the attack.³ The Ouled Riah lived south of Tenes. Pelissier invaded their territory, destroyed their property, and burned whatever he found in accordance with the scorched-earth policy introduced by his superior, Bugeaud. Fighting as they fled, the tribe moved toward a relatively fortified cave known as Ghar al-Frachich (Frachich Cave).⁴ Members of the Ouled Riah moved children, elderly people, and livestock into the cave to protect them from French military campaigns. Those able to bear arms went out to confront the French. Forces under Saint-Arnaud and Pelissier dispersed the tribal forces that faced them, forcing the Ouled Riah fighters to rejoin their families in the cave⁵. They refused to surrender to the French army. On 17 June 1845, the men chose to join their families and hide inside the cave after failing to persuade the French army to withdraw and retreat⁶.

Ouled Riah territory resembled a maze crossed by rocks, mountains, and slopes in every direction. At its center were caves that were difficult to reach. These caves extended through two mountains almost isolated from the main range and connected by a rocky mass known as al-Qantara, or "the bridge." On 17 June, Colonel Pelissier was the first to reach the site and advanced in front of al-Qantara, where the Ouled Riah had already fortified themselves, as was their custom. He could not consider storming the caves by force because he would have lost all his men without being able to reach their narrow entrances. He therefore imposed a siege. At the same time, he sent negotiators calling on the Ouled Riah to surrender and offering them his terms. His envoys were met with gunfire. From that point, he had only two options: resort to severe measures or accept a siege that might last a long time. The Ouled Riah had sufficient quantities of provisions and water, which could also

¹ Heinrich von Maltzan, *Three Years in Western North Africa*, vol. 1, trans. Abu al-Eid Doudou (Algiers: Dar al-Umma, 2008), p. 242.

² Belil, *Op.Cit.*, p. 58.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

⁴ Saadallah, *Op.Cit.*, p. 228.

⁵ Ismail al-Arabi, *Algerian Resistance under the Leadership of Emir Abdelkader* (Algiers: National Publishing and Distribution Company, 1982), p. 286.

⁶ Belil, *Op.Cit.*, p. 62.

threaten the success of the commander-in-chief's plans. Colonel Pelissier chose the first option. He tightened the siege around the caves and informed the Ouled Riah that they would be burned in their shelters if they did not accept the terms offered¹.

Historical sources state that the cave had two entrances. The main entrance was on the southwest side of the mountain and the second on the southeast side. More than one thousand members of the tribe, including men, women, and children, took refuge in the cave with their animals on 17 June 1845. The enemy referred to the members of the tribe as "insurgents," including the children and animals. French sources also state that the cave was a natural fortress. If armed insurgents controlled its two entrances, they could easily remain masters of the position. Pelissier and his soldiers therefore surrounded the cave from all sides and demanded the tribe's surrender².

It appears that the colonel hoped his open threats, together with the display of preparations that accompanied them, would have a deterrent effect on the members of the tribe. He miscalculated. Confident in the protection provided by their caves, they responded to his calls and preparations only with gunfire. Finally, bundles of dry wood were lowered in front of the cave entrance, while calls were made to the tribe: "Surrender! Surrender, or you will be smoked out!" There was no answer. Rifle fire continued without interruption. More bundles of wood were added and set alight, with preparations to extinguish the fire at the first sign of surrender. Yet nothing moved at the cave entrance, although the interior was filled with turmoil and disorder.³ The brave colonel, bearer of the banner of civilization and humanity, then brought piles of wood, surrounded the cave with them, and began lighting them at the entrances to force the tribe to come out and surrender or die from suffocation by smoke. The first day, 17-18 June, passed without anyone coming out. When night fell, the colonel brought forward the army reinforcements he had left behind, brought more wood, tightened the siege around the cave, and intensified the fires⁴.

Pelissier ordered the wood and grass around the openings to be set on fire so that thick, suffocating smoke would spread into the cave where the entire tribe had taken refuge with its families and possessions. The suffocating smoke and deadly fire quickly did their work. The loud cries of animals rose, together with the muffled groans of men and the screams of dying children. From time to time, a gunshot came from inside the cave. Perhaps one of those condemned to die had decided to end his life by his own hand or by the hand of a friend. Gradually, calm began to spread through the place. The neighing of a noble horse was heard, followed by the gurgled curse from the lips of a dying hero. Then everything ended, and a silence like the silence of the dead settled over the Frachich caves⁵.

French accounts state that the night was moonlit and that surveillance was so easy that no one could escape from the cave without being detected. The light of the moon was joined by the flames, which the June night breeze made rise and shine more brightly. Nevertheless, an Arab man escaped

¹ A.B.: *Les grottes du Dahara : récit historique*, par un ancien capitaine de zouaves, Paris: M. Blot, Librairie militaire, 1864, p. 9.

² Saadallah, *Op.Cit.*, p. 228.

³ A.B.: *Les grottes du Dahara*, *Op.Cit.*, pp. 9-10.

⁴ Saadallah, *Op.Cit.*, p. 228.

⁵ von Maltzan, *Op.Cit.*, pp. 243-244.

from the cave through the ravine connected to it. After being struck by a bullet, he reached Qaid al-Zrīfa, Sidi al-Aribi, and told him that the tribe needed water. At daybreak, the French colonel became increasingly elaborate in piling wood at the cave entrances and made the flames burn more intensely and the smoke grow denser. This continued throughout the second day, even though Qaid Sidi al-Aribi informed the colonel that the tribe was dying of thirst. Although negotiations took place from time to time, the colonel insisted on surrender or death within fifteen minutes. When the fifteen minutes ended, he intensified the smoking at the cave entrances, or, as some described it, "the process of roasting the Arabs and grilling them over the fire in cold blood." The clouds of smoke rose higher than before until they covered the upper rocks of the mountain. The operation continued throughout the second night. Although the colonel became exhausted around midnight, he instructed that the roasting and grilling of the women and children continue. About an hour before dawn, a tremendous explosion occurred in the heart of the cave. This marked the suffocation of more than one thousand people in the cave, which had been surrounded by fire and smoke for two days and two nights and encircled by hungry wolves waiting for human prey¹.

The historian Camille Rousset described the scene as follows: "The fire had reached the belongings of the refugees. During the night, a confused sound and muffled cries were believed to have been heard from the foot of the mountain. Then nothing disturbed the silence. Long before dawn, several men, suffocating, came out and collapsed before the guards. They were immediately assisted, and men were sent to inspect the entrance to the caves. Dense and choking smoke filled them so completely that entry was initially impossible. From time to time, however, people emerged in a condition that made them almost unrecognizable, crawling on the ground. Others, driven to the point of madness by suffocation, tried to stop them by firing at them. When the enormous furnace could finally be examined after the fire had died down, more than five hundred victims were counted: men, women, and children. The magnitude of the disaster left everyone present stunned."²

The scene that appeared the following morning to the engineers who entered the cave on Pelissier's orders was utterly horrifying. At the cave entrance were two bulls that had not been completely burned. The Arabs had tied their heads with their burnouses, perhaps to prevent the two animals, driven into a frenzy by the fire, from harming them. Beside them lay the body of a woman who appeared to have been overtaken by death while trying to protect her child from the fury of a third bull. She was still gripping the bull's horns. Elsewhere were bodies terribly distorted by the convulsions of death, with streams of black blood issuing from their mouths. The faces of the dead retained expressions of terror, fear, and pain beyond description, powerfully stamped upon them by death. The ground, blackened by smoke, held men, women, sheep, children, goats, weapons, and clothing, all burned, scorched, or reduced to ash.³ Many men were found clinging to the horns of bulls while defending their children and wives. Many children were found pressed against their mothers' chests, with blood flowing from both the child's mouth and the mother's. Observers noted that the

¹ Saadallah, *Op.Cit.*, pp. 228-229.

² Camille Rousset: *La conquête de l'Algérie 1841-1857*, Tome 2, Paris: imprimeurs-éditeurs, 1889, p. 23.

³ von Maltzan, *Op.Cit.*, p. 244.

bodies were naked, evidence of the violent agitation and convulsions that had seized them before death, while blood flowed from their mouths. Only about sixty people came out of the cave. Forty died immediately, ten remained in critical condition, and only ten managed to survive. Even so, the soldiers of Pelissier and Bugeaud rushed to loot the dead. One contemporary of the crime stated that the soldiers took everything they found with those who had suffocated, including bloodstained burnouses, gold objects, and other items¹. Thus the Ouled Riah tribe came to an end and breathed its brave last in these terrifying caves, enduring a painful torment that words cannot describe².

Third: Consequences of the Massacre for Algerian Society and Resistance

Nothing embarrasses the French more than discussion of their country's colonial past and the crimes of their military leaders. The French have always tried to shelter beneath the image of "France, the country of human rights" and the France of the Enlightenment led by thinkers and philosophers such as Voltaire, Montesquieu, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. The truth is that this bright side of French history does not erase colonial France³.

It was a disgraceful and utterly horrifying battle in which not a single shot was fired. Its commander sought through it the honor of subduing the rebellious tribes.⁴ Pelissier wrote a report on his crime and sent it through his superior, Bugeaud, to the Minister of War. The latter concealed it from his colleagues and from parliamentarians for some time until the storm it had provoked subsided. Nevertheless, the news leaked out. Most writers agree that the number who died from suffocation exceeded one thousand. Some put the figure at 750, some at 1,000, and others at 800. The official report mentioned more than 500 people. When Colonel Pelissier did not believe what his counters told him about the number of those who had suffocated, he carried out the count himself, and the figure reached 600. One writer observed that this number did not take into account infants who were at their mothers' breasts or inside their clothing. It also failed to count bodies piled on top of one another. Another writer noted that the cave was not completely emptied of those who had suffocated for the purpose of counting them, and some human remains were left inside⁵.

Ferhat Abbas wrote: "We read in all schoolbooks the pledge that Marshal de Bourmont made, swearing on his honor that the freedom of all inhabitants of every class, the freedom to practice their religion, their property, and their trades would not be violated or harmed." The commander-in-chief swore on his honor that this pledge would never be broken. Yet, overnight, the pledge became ink on paper. As soon as the Marshal had drafted and proclaimed it, the Islamic religion was violated, property was looted, freedoms were strangled, lives were taken, and blood was shed. In addition to the tragedy of war, the people were afflicted by another calamity: the seizure of their land, that is, the seizure of their right to life⁶.

The terrible lesson represented by the fate of the Ouled Riah frightened all the tribes in the Dahra and Oran, and they stopped resisting. The spirit of revolt, however, had spread elsewhere in

¹ Saadallah, Op.Cit., p. 230.

² von Maltzan, Op.Cit., p. 245.

³ Beziane, Op.Cit., p. 25.

⁴ Ahmed Tawfiq al-Madani, *This Is Algeria* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Nahda al-Arabiyya), p. 91.

⁵ Saadallah, Op.Cit., pp. 229-230.

⁶ Ferhat Abbas, *The Night of Colonialism*, trans. Abu Bakr Rahal (Algiers: Casbah Publishing, 2005), p. 55.

the east. A "fanatic," as the historian Rousset described him, named Boucharb led an uprising in the Djurdjura Mountains. Because this mountainous region lay on the border between the provinces of Algiers and Constantine, General Marey hurried there from Medea and General d'Arbouville from Setif. Caught between two fires, the uprising did not last long in that area. It moved to the southern slope of the Djurdjura and found supporters among the Ouled Bouaziz. The two generals pursued and struck them. On 10 June, a severe punishment was imposed: eleven villages of the Ouled Bouaziz were burned in a single day¹.

Despite the severe punishment inflicted on the Ouled Riah, France did not succeed in ending the uprising. Colonel Saint-Arnaud had to organize closely spaced military columns and used similarly harsh methods. When the Mechaia tribes took refuge in caves and refused to surrender, he used a mine that killed about fifty insurgents and forced the remaining people to submit².

France suppressed all the uprisings with a brutality of which history tells us few parallels. It appears that this brutal repression was what consolidated the national spirit among the Algerian masses. The seizure of the lands and private property of Algerian resistance fighters also led Algerians to hold their land sacred, to the point of dying in order to preserve it.³

The massacre appears to have occupied the French and international press at the time and was discussed by writers and authors. Public opinion regarded it with horror, and it caused an uproar in the French Parliament. It shook Algerians deeply, increasing their resentment toward the French occupier and leading them to rally more strongly behind the unified resistance then led by the Emir⁴.

Although the uprisings did not achieve military success, they achieved a national moral success by entrenching the revolutionary spirit and sustaining a way of thinking that rejected the occupation and the French presence in all its forms⁵.

Fourth: The Official French Position on the Frachich Cave Massacre and a Critical Reading

The French Minister of War, Soult, under whose administrative authority Algeria fell, attempted to conceal the scale of the crime. He withheld the report he received from Pelissier and did not publish it in *Le Moniteur Universel*, as was customary. He praised his representative in Algeria, Bugeaud, for what he had done. Bugeaud, in turn, praised Colonel Pelissier for what he had done to the Ouled Riah tribe. The *Journal des Debats* praised army officers for their work in Algeria. *L'Algerie francaise*, a newspaper published by Bugeaud in Algeria, described the crime and praised its perpetrators. Opposition newspapers, by contrast, blamed Bugeaud and Pelissier and held them responsible. Some stated that Pelissier could have waited because the tribe would inevitably have come out as long as it needed water. They argued that he acted in cold blood and with clear deliberation because the smoking operation was conducted regularly and with calculated care⁶.

¹ Rousset, *Op.Cit.*, p. 25.

² Paul Azan, *L'Armée d'Afrique (1830-1852)*, Paris, Librairie Plon, Les Petits-Fils de Plon et Nourrit, Imprimeurs-Éditeurs, 8 rue Garancière, 6e arrondissement, p. 385.

³ Mohamed Tayeb Al-Alawi, *Manifestations of Algerian Resistance from 1830 to the November 1954 Revolution*, 1st ed. (Constantine, Algeria: Dar al-Baath for Printing and Publishing, 1985), p. 67.

⁴ Saadallah, *Op.Cit.*, p. 228.

⁵ Al-Alawi, *Op.Cit.*, p. 71.

⁶ Saadallah, *Op.Cit.*, pp. 230-231.

When news reached the French Chamber of Deputies, members expressed concern and asked Marshal Soult, the Minister of War, for explanations. Bugeaud responded in a manner consistent with the military doctrine he had taught his officers and soldiers. He protested to the minister and wrote: "I regret to see you condemn Colonel Pelissier's conduct without reservation. I must consider the words spoken by the deputies in the session of 11 July to be inappropriate, because they will have a harmful effect on the army. In my view, observing humanitarian rules would make the war in Africa last indefinitely, and the uprising there would never be extinguished...."¹

Bugeaud's response to criticism in the French Chamber of Deputies went beyond the defense of a single officer. It reflected a broader military conception of the war in Algeria. He argued that adherence to humanitarian rules would prolong the conflict and allow resistance to continue. Military decisiveness was therefore placed above humanitarian considerations. His objection to parliamentary criticism, on the grounds that it would damage army morale, also shows an effort to protect the military institution from political accountability. This raises a wider question about the relationship between military responsibility and parliamentary oversight. The importance of Bugeaud's statement thus lies not only in his defense of Pelissier's operation. It also reveals the tension between humanitarian discourse and French military practice in Algeria, as well as the difficulty of holding military commanders accountable for the methods used in war.

After some delay, Marshal Soult, President of the Council of Ministers and Minister of War, used his authority to shield the massacre committed by Colonel Pelissier in the Dahra region. He defended Pelissier and, through him, the Army of Africa and Bugeaud, who commanded it. The head of government thus sent a clear message to soldiers and officers: they could continue to act as they wished without being subjected to criticism or accountability by the highest political authorities in the country. Those authorities had thereby granted them absolute authorization².

Soult's position on the Dahra massacre and his defense of Colonel Pelissier illustrate an important aspect of the French political authorities' response to abuses committed by their forces in Algeria. Rather than limiting the government's response to an inquiry into responsibility for the incident, the authorities moved toward supporting the military leadership. This highlights the interaction between political and military considerations in the handling of the case.

This position also helps explain the continuation of the war through exceptional methods that were known to civilian and military officials. They were aware of what was taking place, yet they protected and, at times, encouraged those conducting the war. When Bugeaud learned of the attacks directed at Pelissier, he defended him and threatened to resign if sanctions were imposed. Soult is also quoted as saying: "I am patient like anyone else, but I admit that, had I been in Colonel Pelissier's position, I might have set a severe example. In Africa, such an act is war itself."³

Thus, the massacres committed in Algeria did not harm the professional careers of their perpetrators. Pelissier was not punished. He was later promoted to Marshal of France. Under the Second Empire, he became Vice-President of the Senate and then French ambassador to London. He

¹Mostefa Lacheraf, *Algeria: Nation and Society*, trans. Hanafi Ben Issa (Algiers: Casbah Publishing, 2007), p. 113.

² Olivier Le Cour Grandmaison: *Coloniser Exterminer Sur La guerre et l'état colonial*, Fayard, p. 138.

³ Le Cour Grandmaison, *Op.Cit.*, p. 138.

was appointed Governor-General of Algeria in 1860 and also served as Grand Chancellor of the Legion of Honour¹.

Pelissier's later career shows that criticism of the methods used in the Dahra did not obstruct his military or political advancement. He continued to hold senior positions within the French state. In this case, political accountability had only a limited effect, while military considerations retained priority in the treatment of practices used by French commanders during the subjugation of Algeria.

Fifth: Manifestations and Meanings of Colonial Violence in the Frachich Massacre

1. Enfumade as a Method of Colonial Violence

What is known as the enfumade (Enfumades) was one of the most prominent manifestations of colonial violence practiced by France in Algeria during the nineteenth century. It cannot be regarded as merely a circumstantial military technique. Rather, it was a practice that reflected the nature of a colonial system based on comprehensive subjugation. The method consisted of suffocating people inside caves through smoke, revealing the interaction of several forms of violence within a single coherent mechanism.

In this context, the act is reinterpreted within a justificatory colonial discourse that places responsibility for the results of military operations on the victims. The means used to eliminate their resistance are presented as having been imposed by that resistance itself, which is claimed to have left no other option than recourse to the enfumade. The term itself is not explicitly mentioned, nor is the massacre that resulted from it. Instead, both are referred to through the euphemistic phrase "harsh necessity." This expression lessens the impact of the act and absolves its perpetrator, who is portrayed as having done no more than submit to a chain of events said to have been inevitable. In this way, the exceptional character of an operation directed against unarmed civilians is reduced to an event stripped of condemnation. Within this logic, the enfumade is presented as the logical outcome of a conflict whose particular characteristics are linked to the nature of the targeted population and to the military necessities arising from it².

The massacre committed by Colonel Pelissier angered journalists and humanitarians. To satisfy them, emotional measures had to be used! Montagnac brazenly declared: "What a pack of pigs! If I found myself in the same situation, I would give them something to make them howl!" The enfumade was therefore not a spontaneous act, nor was there any haste or improvisation in it. It was not a reaction imposed by an emergency or a desperate situation in which these officers and their soldiers found themselves. On the contrary, this "massacre" was carried out after easy victories over enemies who were fewer in number and less well equipped³.

2. Intellectual and Military Backgrounds of Colonial Violence

Many deputies and ministers sought to present the incident as an isolated, even accidental, act linked to an individual initiative and a particular context. The truth, however, is that Pelissier did not act alone and did not hastily improvise the enfumade. Others had adopted this method before him, and others would use it after him. All were carried out in a similar manner. There was no coincidence here; the recorded similarities resulted from applying the same rules. In his instructions to officers

¹Ibid., pp. 138-139.

² Le Cour Grandmaison, Op.Cit., pp. 139-140.

³ Ibid., pp. 140-141.

responsible for operations against populations suspected of supporting Emir Abdelkader's resistance, Bugeaud told subordinates he was about to send on a mission: "If those scoundrels retreat into their caves, smoke them out to the end, as one does with foxes." This recommendation was accompanied by detailed considerations on how to carry it out with the greatest possible effectiveness¹.

Bugeaud's idea appears strange only on the surface, because it reveals the desire that dominated the military: to attain glory and subjugate the country. It was war for the sake of war. There is no doubt that this military mentality was dominated by a brutal aggressive tendency. It reached such a degree that one is not surprised by the semi-official name the murderous commander Montagnac gave his soldiers: "the infantry of death." Nor is it surprising that senior officers and historians gave the destructive columns that Bugeaud unleashed on Algeria the semi-official name "the infernal columns"².

They described the Algerian as a "predatory animal," an enemy of civilization whose extermination was necessary. They compared him to a dangerous wild animal that had to be hunted and killed. These were the same descriptions the Romans had used for the inhabitants of the Maghreb. Hain said: "Let us drive them out and show them no mercy, for mercy toward them is beyond our concern." Sucklier described the Algerian inhabitants as "birds of prey." Captain La Bassette likewise described them as "animals resembling jackals" that could never be domesticated. General Bugeaud, for his part, said that the people of Algeria were a group of "jackals" who should be burned in the caves where they hid. He also considered the destruction of Arab nationality necessary so that absolute domination could be imposed and Algerians could be subjugated³.

Such descriptions, used by some French military officers and writers, reveal the presence of a colonial discourse marked by contempt and the dehumanization of the local population. Their significance was not limited to their racial content. They also provided a language through which violence could be justified. Algerians were represented as a danger to be eliminated rather than as a society resisting occupation in defense of its land.

Racial thinking also formed part of the intellectual background to colonial violence. During the nineteenth century, some French intellectuals and writers promoted ideas of European racial superiority over the populations of Algeria and Africa. The physician and republican Bodichon defended the disappearance of what he regarded as an "inferior race" incapable of civilization and linked this to a struggle between races. Gaspin viewed extermination as one of the instruments of colonialism. Michelet shared some conceptions that treated local populations as obstacles to the settlement project. Bodichon further argued that the destruction of populations should not be confined to punishing resisting tribes but should be connected to racial belonging. In his view, the approach extended more broadly to the population of Algeria and would allow society to be reshaped on racial and religious foundations. These ideas reveal one aspect of the intellectual background that accompanied the colonial project and its violent practices⁴.

¹ Ibid., p. 140.

² Lacheraf, Op.Cit., p. 114.

³ Filali, Op.Cit., p. 25.

⁴ Ibid., pp. 24-25.

The Roman reference point is also evident in Saint-Arnaud's conception of war in Algeria. His letters did more than invoke the Romans as a historical model. They directly linked Roman conquest to French military practice. In one letter he wrote, "We shall march like the Romans," while discussing road building and the penetration of mountainous territory. He also viewed Algerian space as territory that could be recovered within a Roman model of conquest. This perspective is particularly significant when compared with his participation in military operations in the Dahra in 1845. These included the suffocation of members of the Ouled Riah in caves and, shortly afterward, the use of a similar method against the Sbaa tribe, which supported Bou Maza. The combination of a discourse that invoked the Roman model and military practices that targeted populations and destroyed their capacity to seek shelter reflects a conception of war that extended beyond direct military confrontation toward the violent subjugation of both territory and population¹.

Saint-Arnaud's writings therefore provide important evidence of the interaction between historical conceptions of war and colonial military practice in Algeria. This does not necessarily establish a direct causal relationship between his reading of Roman history and every violent practice carried out by French forces.

3. The Frachich Massacre within the Policy of Subjugating Algerian Society

From 1830 onward, the objective and overriding concern of French military and civilian officers was "submission." The word appears repeatedly at the bottom of proclamations and warnings issued by the French army's high command and in the many correspondences of governors-general. It was also used by officers of different ranks, journalists, Christian writers, and settlers, from the beginning of the military conquest to its end, during the uprisings that followed, and in both war and peace. It was rarely said, "The Arabs must be subjugated." Rather, it was said, "They must submit, because nothing can be done in this country without the submission of its inhabitants." Among settlers, the word had a broad meaning. It was synonymous with acquiescence to the *fait accompli*, blind obedience, and final and absolute dependence, because this was regarded as the only guarantee of the happiness of Europeans².

France worked to weaken Algerian national resistance by depriving it of its human element through a policy of genocide, which formed its backbone. In parallel, it sought to strengthen the European settler element by creating a demographic balance between the indigenous population and the European population and, if possible, making the latter numerically superior to the former. It must also be remembered that European settlers in Algeria were fully aware that the demographic balance of human power favored Algerians. They knew that their present was fraught with risks and that their future was uncertain and open to every possibility. They therefore believed it necessary to reduce the demographic gap between themselves and Algerians. The closest path to this goal was the extermination of Algerians and the removal of the nightmare that haunted them and threatened their continued presence in Algeria. Settlers would also assist the French army operating in Algeria by reducing the burden of military operations and the burden of defending the lands and properties they had forcibly seized from Algerians. This was done by forming militias to support the army, unless

¹ Kyle Khellaf: *More Roman than the Romans: neoclassical genocide in French Numidia*, *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies*, Volume 68, Issue 2, September 2025, Oxford University Press (OUP), Pages 235–253, p. 244.

² Lacheraf, *Op.Cit.*, pp. 314-315.

those militias were themselves entrusted with protecting the lands distributed to their members. The so-called National Guard was indeed created. It consisted of four infantry units and one cavalry unit to terrorize Algerians¹.

Thus, in many respects, the violence inflicted on Algerians formed part of a deliberate strategy that moved from limited war to total war. It made no distinction between military personnel and civilians, nor between men, elderly people, women, and children. It violated all the prohibitions of conventional warfare. This barbaric violence and repression could not have occurred without protection from any form of prosecution. In this battle against Algerian civilians, most of whom were unarmed, French military leaders celebrated their heroism and glory. Many parties helped drive the machinery of war and destruction, from politicians to philosophers, not to mention the thinkers of that period, especially during the nineteenth century².

This policy is clearly manifested in the mass killing that occurred at the Frachich Cave. France sought to confront the people's resistance and the peasants' unflagging patriotism. This harsh war, the brutality of French officers, the destruction of peaceful villages, and the cutting down of olive trees were all acts driven by a deliberate will. Terror had to be cast into the hearts of the inhabitants as long as they refused to surrender. General Changarnier was explicit when he said that the army "seizes people's provisions and property in order to force them to submit." Yet, despite the devastation that had befallen their country, the peasants repeatedly frustrated the hopes of military officers and resumed the struggle³.

Conclusion: In light of the discussion of the Frachich Massacre of 1845 as one of the major episodes of violence during the French occupation of Algeria, the study reaches the following conclusions:

- The Frachich Cave Massacre cannot be read as an isolated event or a temporary reaction. It was part of a colonial system based on systematic violence. What occurred was not the result of military improvisation or an individual initiative. It was an extension of a colonial policy based on the principle that Algerian society had to be subjugated by targeting both people and land.
- The consequences of the massacre extended beyond the military operation itself into the political and media spheres in France. Mechanisms of justification, concealment, and defense of colonial action operated alongside limited protests in Parliament and the opposition press. The controversy did not lead to effective accountability. Instead, it contributed to an implicit legitimization of the continued use of similar methods elsewhere in Algeria.
- Despite its brutality, the massacre did not eliminate resistance. It deepened rejection of colonial rule and reinforced national feeling. The expansion of repression and scorched-earth policies contributed to the emergence of new forms of resistance. Colonial violence, rather than securing submission, often generated further national resistance and strengthened attachment to the land.
- This violence was not detached from its intellectual and political context. It relied on justificatory discourse within the French military administration and political elite. Mass killing

¹ Saadallah, Op.Cit., p. 47.

² Zeghib, Op.Cit., p. 309.

³ Lacheraf, Op.Cit., p. 114.

was legitimized under the claim of "military necessity." This supports the argument that colonial violence formed part of a deliberate strategy rather than merely a series of individual excesses.

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