An Algerian Genocide?

On n’a jamais dit, en Afrique, que tout était fini.

Bugeaud

Algeria would have been an extremely unusual settler colony had it experienced no genocidal moment. As Herman Merivale, professor of political economy at Oxford from 1837 until 1842, remarked:

The history of the European settlements in America, Africa, and Australia presents everywhere the same general features – a wide and sweeping destruction of native races by controlled violence of individuals, if not of colonial authorities, followed by tardy attempts on the part of governments to repair the acknowledged crime.¹

Indeed it has been more generally argued that since the colonial encounter pitted industrial and commercial agriculture against pre-modern forms of farming, there was an inevitability to the manner in which the advanced sought to displace the regressive, just as pastoral societies had displaced ‘nomadic ones on the Eurasian continent’.² As Donald Denoon has remarked, ‘The coexistence of commercial farming and nomadism was impossible everywhere in the long run’, while Patrick Wolfe has suggested that ‘settlers’ interest in the land rather than labor of the nomads means that a logic of elimination characterizes settler colonialism: the nomads connection to the land needed to be vitiated by their absorption into or expulsion from the new society’.³

The question as to whether there was some form of genocide in nineteenth-century Algeria is evidently a loaded one, but it warrants an answer, not so as to place French imperialism in the dock, but simply because the experiences of the colony merit comparison with other settler colonies. Histories of Australia, the Americas and colonial violence more generally have coalesced around the question of genocide and

W. Gallois, *A History of Violence in the Early Algerian Colony*
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those debates offer new ways of describing the particularities of Algeria’s cultures of violence. Importantly, just as close readings of the massacres of the tribes of Namibia and the aboriginal peoples of Queensland and Tasmania have come to change our more general understanding of the history of genocide, it may be that the Algerian story has much to add to that discussion.

Algeria was, after all, different in the sense that it was originally not just a settler colony but a military settler colony, populated by more than a hundred thousand soldiers at its peak. It played a key role in establishing a new form of colonial template for France and, arguably, the ‘new’ European imperialism of the later nineteenth century. It is, however, almost wholly ignored in the genocide literature, which has focused on the anglophone world and its imperium, in striking contrast to the way in which Algeria played a central role in studies of twentieth-century colonial violence and decolonisation.4

French writers of the 1830s and ‘40s certainly compared the nascent Algerian colony with the experiences of other settler colonies. As the French Deputy Amédée Desjobert noted in 1838, it was commonly believed that ‘the first step towards colonisation was the extermination of indigenous peoples’.5 In the case of Algeria, if ‘the complete extermination of the Algerian population’ was not possible, then at the very least the British example in America should be followed, ‘with partial extermination and the complete dispersal [refoulement]’ of local populations.

Desjobert called for honesty in admitting that France wanted to exterminate Algerians, observing that this was a predictable outcome in colonial situations and that it needed to be acknowledged that an exterminatory ‘système’ had already been established in Algeria.6 This was partly founded on a racialised view of Algeria in which the presence of other races militated against the potential success of the French: the ‘Arabs would never change their ways’,7 the Kabyles ‘were still more intractable’8 and the Moors and Jews were incapable of working the land.9 Desjobert admitted, nonetheless, that the significance of these categorisations was predicated on the French desire to take land, to exploit it and to export settlers from the metropole. None of these things had been countenanced by Algeria’s previous imperial masters, the Ottomans, who had not therefore needed to follow the French path of ‘l’extermination des indigènes’.10

Interestingly, one of the very few instances of a colonial text which imagined the effects of French rule upon Algerians came from this same moment when, in 1837, the French General Baudrand (writing anonymously) asserted that: