

**Reading**

## Jewish Resistance in Algeria

Algeria was colonized by France in 1830, and, in 1870, the Jews of Algeria were granted French citizenship with the Cremieux Decree. This change in the status of Jews infuriated many non-Jewish European settlers in Algeria and there followed a period of media incitement and street violence against the Jews by non-Jewish European settlers who felt that Jews had no right to be French. By 1900, there was a period of relative calm, but the incitement against Jews continued, and the ubiquity of antisemitic ideas in the European-controlled press had an influence on the Muslim population in the region. In 1934, the spread of hate was linked to a violent attack against the Jewish community in the Algerian city of Constantine. According to historian Gitta Amipaz-Silber:

On August 5, 1934, a Jew was accused of having profaned a mosque. The slander resulted in atrocities as thousands of excited Muslims . . . plundered and burned Jewish shops and houses for an entire day, destroyed much property, killed twenty-five Jews—men, women and children—and wounded tens more. The rioters were encouraged during the rampage by Muslim women who ululated (rhythmic wail characteristic of North Africa) from balconies and windows. All this happened in the presence of security forces, who were in charge of law and order, yet did not lift a finger to prevent the pogrom<sup>1</sup>.

Amipaz-Silber goes on to note that:

There were many Arabs who not only refused to be influenced by the excited rioters but rushed to save their Jewish friends. Many Muslims who participated in the pogrom were arrested and tried. It should be stressed that Constantine's Muslim leadership condemned the pogrom and worked with the Jewish leadership to calm passions and restore order.

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<sup>1</sup> A violent attack targeting Jews.

Following the pogrom, an interfaith organization called the Union of Monotheistic Believers was established to cultivate positive relationships between members of the dominant religions.

The antisemitic attacks in the press continued. In March of 1937, the Governor-General of Algeria said, "The abominable press really enjoys deplorable impunity and is taking advantage of it. But a law, which is being prepared, will compel the press to show respect for the beliefs, the opinions, the honor and the freedom of others." The Marchandeu law referenced in this statement was passed two years later and it prohibited racial or religious incitement by the press.

When the Vichy government came to power in France in 1940, following the surrender to Nazi Germany, the situation for the Jews of Algeria deteriorated. The Marchandeu law was annulled, and written antisemitic attacks in the press escalated further. Amipaz-Silber writes:

The annulment of [the Marchandeu law] gave formal free rein to growing anti-Semitic activities. In Algiers, posters appeared on walls holding Jews responsible for the defeat of France, the motherland, and calling for them to be expelled.

Between 1940–1942, attacks against Jews in Algeria escalated with violence in the streets, destruction of Jewish businesses, and confiscation of Jewish property. There were also extensive antisemitic racial laws passed and enforced by "A special Department for the Control of the Jewish Problem." The Cremieux Decree was revoked, taking away Jewish citizenship. Jewish students were expelled from schools, and Jews were forbidden to own businesses or work in various professions including law, medicine, banking, media, teaching, and public service. In response to this reality, an underground resistance movement began to coalesce.

In October 1940, a Jewish resistance organization called the Géo Gras group was established in Algeria, borrowing its name from the middle-weight boxing champion of France and his training center named for him in Algiers. Resistance members would meet at the training center and they would engage in sports and physical training amidst other gym members who had no idea what was being organized clandestinely in the same space. Members of the group were ready to respond to violence in the streets, and they would come to the aid of people under attack.

In 1942, the resistance group was in communication with the Allied forces, and they learned of Allied plans to strike in North Africa in "Operation Torch." The members of Géo Gras were called upon to play an active role in neutralizing Vichy forces in key cities in Algeria in advance of the Allied landing. In the city of Algiers, the Jewish resistance planned, along with other individuals and groups who opposed collaboration with the Nazis, to neutralize the city's defenses by cutting communication lines, disarming security forces, and occupying key positions.

The plans were successfully executed. Under the leadership of José Aboulker, the Jewish resistance took control of the police headquarters and radio broadcast system in Algiers. They arrested and misled Vichy forces using fake warrants and false orders to relieve them of their positions, paving the way for the Allied landing. But the Allies hesitated to enter the city, and the French official who was intended to take command in Algiers, General Henri Giraud, had yet to arrive. This left the resistance in a tenuous situation as Vichy forces began to recognize what was happening in the city. According to Amipaz-Silber:

At 1:50 a.m. Sunday, November 8, 1942, José, who set himself up at the Central Police Station, learned with satisfaction that everything had been carried out as planned; all the objectives had been taken without any problems.

Meanwhile, by 7 a.m., Vichy loyalists in Algiers recovered from the shock of the insurrection and organized themselves in order to retrieve the places occupied by the Resistance. . . "This is the first time since the beginning of the operation," says José, "that I realize the terrible responsibility I am bearing alone". The Resistance asked José what to do in two sectors that were under direct threat. José encouraged them and told them that the operation was a complete success, since the landing troops had surrounded the city and encountered no opposition from the French Algerian army. But in an effort to remove his men from their life-threatening situations, José told them to relinquish their positions "as it is not necessary any more to hold them." He said they should, however, drag out this process as long as possible. . . .

It became extremely urgent to inform the Americans of what had transpired during the night. So the Jewish insurgent, Pierre Alexandre, arrived at [Sidi-Ferruch] as a delegate of the Resistance movement. After going from group to group, he finally arrived at U.S. General Ryder's<sup>2</sup> headquarters. Alexandre asked Ryder to take action.

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<sup>2</sup> General Charles Ryder led the assault force in Algeria.

"Algiers is undefended, you must take advantage of this immediately. It may be too late this afternoon!"

Ultimately, the Allied forces took Algiers without a battle, and the success of the operation opened a new front in the fight against the Nazis, helping the Allies to move up through Southern Europe.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Gitta Amipaz-Silber, *The Role of the Jewish Underground in the American Landing in Algiers, 1940–1942* (New York: Gefen, 1992).