

Murder in the Desert: Soldiers, Settlers and the Flatters Expedition in the Politics and Historical Memory of European Colonial Algeria, 1830-1881

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A colonial culture is one which has no memory. The discontinuities of colonial experience make it almost inevitable that this should be so. A political entity brought into existence by the actions of an external power; a population consisting of the descendents of conquerors, of slaves and indentured labourers, and of dispossessed aboriginals; a language in the courts and schools which has been imported like an item of heavy machinery; a prolonged economic and psychological subservience to a metropolitan centre a great distance away.... One hardly needs to labour the point that such conditions make it extremely difficult for any section of the population to develop a vital, effective belief in the past as a present concern, and in the present as a consequence of the past's concerns.

Dan Jacobson¹

On the southern fringes of Paris, in the Parc Montsouris of the fourteenth *arrondissement*, there is an inconspicuous and evidently long-forgotten memorial to the Flatters Expedition of 1880-1881. Surrounded on three sides by dense foliage and on the fourth by a children's playground, this marble column and bronze plaque are hard to find and harder still to locate in the long and seemingly distant history of

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¹ Dan Jacobson, introduction to Olive Schreiner, *The Story of an African Farm* (1883, reprinted London, 1995), 7.

France overseas.² A second memorial was erected at Ouargla – the southern Algerian city from which Lieutenant-Colonel Paul Flatters led his men into the Sahara in December 1880 in search of a suitable route for a railroad across the desert – on the initiative of the Algerian caucus in the National Assembly.³ Like its Parisian counterpart, the Ouargla memorial evidences many of the complexities and ambivalences of colonial history and colonial remembering. Located in this small (if strategically important) oasis-city, hundreds of kilometres south of the main centres of colonisation, the marginality of the Ouargla memorial to the colonial Algeria of the late nineteenth century echoes the marginality of the Parc Montsouris memorial to the Paris of the early twenty-first.

This paper uses the Flatters Expedition as a means of introducing and investigating the politics of late nineteenth-century colonial Algeria. It asks whether colonial society really had failed, as Jacobson argues, “to develop a vital, effective belief in the past as a present concern, and in the present as a consequence of the past’s concerns,” and explores the reasons for the apparent marginality of Flatters to the politics and historical memory of the Algerian settler community. Rather than focussing on the Expedition and its memorialisation, it makes a broader, historical case for *Algérie militaire* – the idea that French soldiers like Flatters influenced (and continued to influence) the development of Algerian colonialism in important ways. Because of the deep-rooted and historical animosity between the military and the civilian settlers (*colons*), this influence was most often felt indirectly, and at the interstices of metropole and colony, and military and civilian administration. Nonetheless, I argue that it is precisely this relationship between the military and the civilian *colons* that is the key to understanding the remembering and forgetting of the Flatters Expedition. Put another way, contemporary attitudes to Flatters and other military figures offer vital insight into the complexities of Algerian settler colonialism in particular, and the dynamics of colonial memory in general.

Flatters and the Algerian Sahara

The story of Flatters is relatively well known and will be rehearsed here only briefly and insofar as it informs and intersects the fundamental characteristics of early colonial Algerian history.⁴ Colonial soldiering offered considerable opportunities to

² The Flatters monument is discussed briefly in June Hargrove, *The Statues of Paris: An Open-air Pantheon* (New York, 1989), 150; Robert Aldrich, *Vestiges of the Colonial Empire in France: Monuments, Museums and Colonial Memories* (Basingstoke, 2005), 160; George Trumbull IV, *An Empire of Facts: Colonial Power, Cultural Knowledge, and Islam in Algeria, 1870 – 1914* (Cambridge, 2009), 222-23.

³ Sadi Carnot et. al., *Projet de loi, adopté par la Chambre des députés, ayant pour objet d'autoriser l'érection en Algérie d'un monument commémoratif de la mission Flatters et l'allocation de subsides aux familles des membres de la mission* (Paris, 1881).

⁴ Contemporary accounts of the expedition include M. Bernard, ed., *Deuxième mission Flatters. Historique et rapport rédigés au service central des affaires indigènes* (Paris, 1882); V. Derrécagaix, *Les Deux missions du lieutenant-colonel Flatters* (Paris, 1882); Henri Brosselard-Faidherbe, *Voyage de la mission Flatters au pays des Touareg Azdjers* (Paris, 1883). Flatters and the Trans-Saharan project continued to elicit interest in the twentieth century. See, for instance, C. Longobardi, *L'Agonie d'une mission. Deuxième mission Flatters. Récit saharien* (Paris, 1938); Jean Méliá, *Les Pionniers du Méditerranée-Niger. Le Drame de la mission Flatters* (Paris, 1942); René Pottier, *Flatters* (Paris, 1948). More recently, see Daniel Grévoz, *Sahara 1830-1881: Les mirages français et la tragédie Flatters* (Paris, 1989); Marcel Cassou, *Le Transsaharien: L'échec sanglant des missions Flatters, 1881* (Paris, 2004); Benjamin Brower, *A Desert Named Peace: The Violence of France's Empire in the Algerian Sahara, 1844-1902* (New York, 2009); Trumbull, *An Empire of Facts*. The most accessible

men like Flatters, whose ability to secure choice appointments in the metropole was limited by modest family background. Evidently ambitious, Flatters was quick to curry favour with potential metropolitan benefactors – military and civilian – and to associate himself with the *causes célèbres* of the day – colonial history and ethnology, military reform under the Second Empire and, from the 1870s, the groundswell of opinion in favour of constructing a Trans-Saharan railroad that would represent a vital strategic and economic link between France's colonies in north and west Africa. Serving far from the urban centres of colonisation on the Mediterranean coast – eventually as commander of the *cercle* at Laghouat – Flatters would very likely have experienced the physical and psychological pressures of distance and isolation and the sense of empowerment that was their corollary.⁵ He was also, no doubt, inspired by the writings of Saharan explorers such as Henri Duveyrier, whose career represented the dovetailing of the interests of the military and scholarly societies like the Société de Géographie de Paris.⁶ The vogue of railway imperialism was already sweeping British North Africa and the broader relationship between engineering and empire had only recently been reaffirmed by the completion of the Suez Canal. Flatters capitalised on what Douglas Porch has described as the “railway fever” that was sweeping Paris following the publication in 1878 of the Montpellier engineer Alphonse Duponchel's *Le Chemin de fer transsaharien* and on the support of the Minister of Public Works, Charles de Freycinet.⁷ In late 1879, Flatters presented himself in Paris as the preferred candidate to lead a major survey mission in preparation for the construction of the Trans-Saharan railroad.

Flatters left Constantine in January 1880 with a retinue that included a dozen Europeans and a much larger number of Algerian auxiliaries – *tirailleurs* and locally-recruited cameleers and guides. The caravan headed south through Touggourt, Ouargla and Ain Taïba. Beset by what Porch describes as logistical difficulties, conflicts between the French and their Chaamba guides, and the visible withering of his authority to command, Flatters ordered a retreat to the north on 21 April having met with the opposition – though not the forceful resistance – of a party of Ajjer Tuareg. Undeterred, Flatters returned swiftly to Paris to present an upbeat report and to begin the process of securing financing for a second expedition. This he did, though with less enthusiastic support than in the previous year, and now, revealingly, he was abandoned by a number of the officers that had accompanied him on the first expedition. The second Flatters Expedition departed Ouargla in December 1880 and, having been met, shadowed and harassed by a party of Ahaggar Tuareg, was routed decisively on 16 February 1881 with the loss of Flatters, his second-in-command, and a good number of the expedition's officers and men. The survivors, now led by

account in the English language remains Douglas Porch, *The Conquest of the Sahara* (1984, reprinted New York, 2005).

⁵ Recent studies of these phenomena include Herman Lebovics, *Imperialism and the Corruption of Democracies* (Durham, N.C., 2006), ch. 1; Bertrand Taithe, *The Killer Trail: A Colonial Scandal in the Heart of Africa* (Oxford, 2009).

⁶ A discussion of the relationship between religious and military imperialism and colonial knowledge and power that addresses the influence of Duveyrier at length is Fergus Fleming, *The Sword and the Cross* (London, 2003). On ethnographic knowledge and imperial power in French North Africa see Patricia Lorcin, *Imperial Identities: Stereotyping, Prejudice and Race in Colonial Algeria* (London, 1995); Emmanuelle Sibeud, *Une Science impériale pour l'Afrique? La Construction des savoirs africanistes en France, 1878-1930* (Paris, 2002); Trumbull, *An Empire of Facts*. For a wider perspective see Felix Driver, *Geography Militant: Cultures of Exploration and Empire* (Oxford, 2001); Max Jones, *The Last Great Quest: Captain Scott's Antarctic Sacrifice* (Oxford, 2003).

⁷ Porch, *The Conquest of the Sahara*, 83-87; Alphonse Duponchel, *Le Chemin de fer transsaharien, jonction coloniale entre l'Algérie et le Soudan* (Montpellier, 1878).

Lieutenant Joseph de Dianous, headed north, but most succumbed quickly to further attacks, hunger, thirst and fatigue amidst tales of intrigue and betrayal. A handful of survivors – none of whom were European – reached Ouargla on 4 April 1881, news of the expedition's fate having just broken in metropolitan France.⁸

Immediate reaction to the deaths of Flatters and his companions included calls for the collective punishment of the Ahaggar Tuareg and redoubled efforts to colonise the Sahara and realise the Trans-Saharan “dream.” On 6 April, *Le Réveil de Blida* spoke of the unanimity of the Parisian and Algerian press in this regard, calling for the dignity of France to be restored and the security of Algeria reasserted.⁹ But, in the longer term, as Porch continues:

The effect of the Flatters massacre on the French was perfectly predictable. After a brief period of incredulity, followed by calls for revenge, most of them soon forgot the tragic episode. If Flatters had been massacred by Germans or English, then that might have been something to get upset about. But serious rivalry among the big powers in Africa was still more than a decade away....The world beyond Europe was dangerous: if one ventured into it and got butchered, *tant pis*.¹⁰

Geopolitics and metropolitan insularity may well be sufficient to explain this kind of reaction in Paris, but the ambivalence is harder to explain in Algiers and the other centres of colonisation, where long-term security still appeared very much in the balance and the role of the military was at the very forefront of colonial politics. Surprisingly, perhaps, Flatters was neither extensively lionised (beyond the initial wave of outrage) in the Algerian press nor was his failure used in lobbying Paris for an enhanced role for the military. The initiative for the Parc Montsouris monument came from Flatters' widow in the face of municipal authorities reluctant to acknowledge her husband's heroic credentials.¹¹ The Ouargla monument (forming part of the southern wall of the citadel and inscribed in French and Arabic) was little more impressive than its Parisian counterpart and, given its location deep in the Sahara, suggests a memorial that was imagined in the first instance as a site of military pilgrimage.¹² In many ways, Flatters was ill-suited to the role of colonial martyr. Comparatively old (at forty-eight) and jaded by years of mundane administrative service at Laghouat, Flatters has been described variously as unsuited to military command (especially in the demanding terrain of the Sahara), ambitious, obstinate, naïve and grossly over-optimistic. On the other hand, these personal considerations are insufficient on their own to explain his marginal place in colonial politics and historical memory. Hugely important and highly visible in the early phase of colonisation after 1830, and again at the time of decolonisation in the 1950s and 1960s, the military evidently did not enjoy the same status at the time of Flatters' death in 1881. An explanation for this requires close analysis of the turbulent history of colonial Algeria and particularly of the place of the military in relation to civilian settler society.

⁸ Porch's account of the first and second expeditions can be found in his *The Conquest of the Sahara*, 97-125. Words in Arabic are given as in Porch's text.

⁹ *Le Réveil de Blida*, 6 April 1881, 1.

¹⁰ Porch, *The Conquest of the Sahara*, 126.

¹¹ Aldrich, *Vestiges of the Colonial Empire in France*, 160.

¹² A Fort Flatters was constructed at Temassinine in 1904.

Colonisation by the Sword and the Plough

The initial phase of the conquest of Algeria played out as a familiar frontier story in which the military played the leading role, supported by civilian auxiliaries of a variety of European nationalities. Early settler mythologies like the tale of the heroic Pirette – a *colon* who single-handedly resisted armed attacks on his homestead in the Mitidja valley south of Algiers – emphasised the militaristic tenor of colonisation and the importance of a rapid agricultural *mise en valeur* of the Algerian hinterland.¹³ Thomas-Robert Bugeaud, commander of the Armée d’Afrique (as the XIX corps of the French army was commonly known) and *de facto* governor-general of Algeria in the 1840s, made this relationship explicit in his calls for French soldiers to take the lead in settling and improving the land.¹⁴

In the longer term, however, tensions within this alliance of sword and plough would come to dominate the political landscape of the fledgling colony. The interests of military governors and colonial settlers soon diverged and proved ultimately irreconcilable. The second part of the nineteenth century witnessed both the establishment and consolidation of colonial settlement and the working out of European Algeria’s complex and unique political identity. First and foremost, this identity was shaped in the context of the *colons*’ fears of bonapartism and unrelenting hostility to the military establishment that governed colonial Algeria until the 1870s.

The term “colonial Algeria” is, in fact, oxymoronic. By 1848, military setbacks and the slow progress of colonisation had bequeathed an unenviable colonial inheritance to the new republican administration in Paris. Continuing the interrupted work of the Revolution, legislators sought to incorporate colonies within the administrative and lexical framework of the new Republic. Areas of Algeria considered to have been occupied, if not completely pacified, were soon re-conceived as three *départements* on the metropolitan model, centred on Algiers, Oran and Constantine. Political directives were to emanate from Paris, and Algeria was (in theory) to be administered as three *départements* of the French Republic like any other.

The policy of administrative assimilation was a clear manifestation of *colon* desires. Assimilation entailed replacing the military’s *régime du sabre* in Algeria with the democratic political institutions of the metropole. This approach had been attempted, to an extent, in 1848, and is discussed further below. Beginning in the 1870s, the *colon* press mythologised the metropole in the guise of this policy of assimilation. Espousing republican political culture, democratic and civilian-led, was a means for *colons* to challenge the legitimacy of the military government that presided over the early years of colonisation. The idea of assimilating European Algeria to France represented a powerful current of intellectual opinion in the middle of the nineteenth century. In the 1840s, Alexis de Tocqueville criticised Algeria’s military governors and called for the expansion of agricultural settlement by *colons*; a generation later, Anatole Prévost-Paradol called for the vast expansion of European colonisation, coupled to administrative assimilation.¹⁵

¹³ See Louis de Baudicour, *Histoire de la colonisation de l’Algérie* (Paris, 1860).

¹⁴ Thomas-Robert Bugeaud, *Par l’épée et par la charrue, écrits et discours de Bugeaud*, Charles-André Julien, ed. (Paris, 1948).

¹⁵ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Sur l’Algérie* (1837-1847, repr. Paris, 2003); *ibid.*, *Writings on Empire and Slavery*, Jennifer Pitts, ed. (Baltimore, Md., 2001); Anatole Prévost-Paradol, *La France nouvelle*, Pierre Guiral, ed. (Paris, 1981); P. Guiral, *Prévost-Paradol: pensée et action d’un libéral sous le second empire* (Paris, 1955), 370-77.

Under the Second Empire, the *colons* objected strongly to Napoléon III's leadership which they saw to be dictated by the dangerously "Arabophile" leanings of his principal advisor on Algerian affairs, Ismaïl Urbain.¹⁶ Napoléon's proclamation of a *royaume arabe* in Algiers in 1863 implied that France would begin to balance the interests of European *colons* with those of Muslim Algerians.¹⁷ Two *sénatus-consultes* of 1863 and 1865 (on Algerian property rights and a selective policy of naturalisation) did little to assuage *colon* fears. From this date on, as Charles-Robert Ageron has argued, *colons* took even greater interest in metropolitan politics and turned decisively toward republicanism.¹⁸

The administrative assimilation of European Algeria foundered most obviously on the institution of the governor-general, traditionally the commander of the Armée d'Afrique in Algeria, and on the broader administrative role of the military, especially under the Second Empire. Napoléon's chosen form of military administration, the *bureaux arabes*, were especially reviled for their perceived Arabophilia, and for the granting of extensive executive powers to junior officers. The organisation of the *bureaux arabes* had begun soon after the French invasion. With the submission of Constantine in 1837 and the end of Abd el-Kader's uprising of 1839-40, *colons* began to move out of the coastal towns and settle farther from the Mediterranean. The forced evacuation of the Mitidja valley left the military with serious concerns for security and communication in the colony. The *bureaux arabes* were born out of the apparent need for an artery of communication between the French military administration and Muslim Algeria. Early officers like Louis de Lamoricière and Jean-Jacques Pélassier had arrived with the intent of learning Arabic and studying indigenous culture. This language requirement and the academic-professional ethos of the officer corps provided an opportunity for young and ambitious officers – like Flatters, who arrived in Algeria in 1856 – to distinguish themselves and gain comparatively rapid promotion. Lamoricière (later governor-general) headed the first *bureau arabe* in 1833. In 1837, his successor sent a lieutenant to each tribe in the region of Algiers.¹⁹ With a ministerial decree of February 1844 and the official delineation of *territoire civil* and *territoire militaire* in 1845 the *bureaux arabes* became firmly enshrined within the aegis of military administration.

Bugeaud's conquests of the 1840s facilitated the extension and consolidation of the *bureaux arabes* system. *Bureaux arabes* now administered the *territoire militaire* (which constituted the bulk of occupied Algeria until after 1870), divided amongst three army divisions based in Algiers, Constantine and Oran. The primary mandate of the *bureaux arabes* was to conduct surveillance of local Algerians, decide on the level of tax to be levied, administer justice and inspect Islamic schools and clergy. This was all in addition to their principal military function of protecting and advancing the progress of colonisation.²⁰ The expansion of the *bureaux arabes* was a corollary of the *royaume arabe* policy. Soon after 1860, each of these *bureaux* comprised military interpreters, archivists, administrative and medical personnel and a

¹⁶ Michel Levallois, *Ismaïl Urbain: une autre conquête de l'Algérie* (Paris, 2001).

¹⁷ Charles-André Julien, *Histoire de l'Algérie contemporaine: la conquête et les débuts de la colonisation, 1827-1871* (Paris, 1964), 388-452; Daniel Rivet, "Le Rêve arabe de Napoléon III," in *L'Algérie des français*, Charles-Robert Ageron, ed. (Paris, 1993), 53-68.

¹⁸ Charles-Robert Ageron, *Histoire de l'Algérie contemporaine, 1830-1999* (Paris, 1999), 42.

¹⁹ Marcel Emerit, *Les Bureaux arabes* (Algiers, 1947), 1.

²⁰ Jacques Frémeaux, *Les Bureaux arabes dans l'Algérie de la conquête* (Paris, 1993), 17-18.

detachment of *spahis* (locally-recruited troops).²¹ Their leaders often pursued scholarly interests – by the mid-1870s, Flatters had published on aspects of colonial history, ethnology and military reform – a trait that has led some historians to describe the French military in Algeria (too generously, I would argue) as a “cultured force.” Porch offers a different take in asserting that “much of the original ethnographic research in North Africa was carried out by Arab Bureau men, and some of it, though very much of the pioneering variety, is very good indeed.”²²

For the more vocal *colons*, *bureaux arabes* officers represented the very antithesis of the colonial ideal by undermining the metropolitan principle of republican civilian government. Confronted with this undesirable manifestation of the French state, European Algeria turned increasingly to republican politics and intensified their opposition to the military. The complex administrative duties of the *bureaux arabes* (and their necessary proximity to Muslim Algeria) soon led to tensions in their relationship with the *colons*. *Bureaux arabes* officers served as the political representatives of France to indigenous Algeria. They also represented Algerian leaders to France and regularly defended Muslim Algerians in court cases involving disputes with *colons*. From these tensions emerged the mythology of the Arabophilia of *bureaux arabes* officers, now considered by the *colons* as an impediment rather than a facilitator of colonisation. Under the Second Empire and the *royaume arabe* policy, the structure of the *bureaux arabes* crystallised and *colon* discontent intensified. Buoyed by the establishment in 1858 of a Ministry of Algerian Affairs (an early form of the policy of *rattachement* – a form of administrative assimilation with metropolitan France), *colons* now hoped for the progressive rolling back of military administration.

The Ouled Sidi Cheikh uprising of 1864 has been seen as a turning point after which the *bureaux arabes* were regularly accused of fomenting insurrection and conspiring with Muslim Algerian leaders to play up the virtues of military administration.²³ Whether officers genuinely shared the Arabophile leanings of Urbain was of little consequence to the *colon* lobby. Auguste Warnier, a former *médecin militaire*, *conseiller du gouvernement* and Algerian *député*, was a key figure in this early anti-military movement. He published three tracts between 1863 and 1865 that poured scorn on Napoleon III, the French Senate, and more generally on metropolitan ignorance of Algerian affairs.²⁴ The *bureaux arabes* were roundly condemned for their role in the Ouled Sidi Cheikh uprising and for their hesitancy to fulfil their primary duty of protecting *colon* lives. Warnier juxtaposed the agricultural idyll of the *colon-proprétaire* to an image of inept and careerist *militaires*. “Arabe, bureaux arabes, affaires arabes, royaume arabe, rien qu’arabe, encore et toujours de l’arabe” was the verdict that he delivered in 1869 on the inadequacy of military

²¹ Emerit, *Les Bureaux arabes*, 2.

²² Barnett Singer and John Langdon, *Cultured Force: Makers and Defenders of the French Colonial Empire* (Madison, Wis., 2004). On Flatters’ publications and other ethnographic work see Porch, *The Conquest of the Sahara*, 90-91. Other historians (myself included) are more critical of the relationship between colonial knowledge and power. See John Strachan, “The Pasteurization of Algeria?,” *French History* 20: 3 (2006): 268. For a broader perspective, see Trumbull, *An Empire of Facts*; Sibeud, *Une Science impériale pour l’Afrique?*; Edward Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (New York, 1978).

²³ Frémeaux, *Les Bureaux arabes*, 269.

²⁴ Auguste Warnier, *L’Algérie devant le Sénat* (Paris, 1863); Warnier, *L’Algérie devant l’opinion publique* (Paris, 1864); Warnier, *L’Algérie devant l’empereur* (Paris, 1865).

administration.²⁵ As the Second Empire crumbled on the battlefield of Sedan, the *royaume arabe* policy had polarised European Algeria, associating the *bureaux arabes* with an idea of France that inspired fierce hostility in *colon* circles.

1870 and After: The *Refoulement* of the Military

News of Sedan reached Algiers on 2 September 1870 and was welcomed with enthusiasm and jubilation. On 4 September, however, hopes for the swift end of the *régime du sabre* were disappointed when the republicans in Paris chose another *militaire*, Louis Durieu, to head the colonial administration. Pro-republican (and, more importantly, pro-civilian) street demonstrations ensued. The following day, Romauld Vuillermoz, a republican lawyer and political *expulsé* of 1852, organised the leading *colons* of Algiers into a Committee of Defence and Public Safety. European Algiers took to the streets, demanding the expulsion of bonapartist *fonctionnaires* and electing Vuillermoz mayor on 9 October 1870. Durieu was forced to resign and his successor was prevented from disembarking. Vuillermoz wrote to Léon Gambetta on 7 November 1870 demanding the appointment of a civilian governor-general. Republican France responded by snubbing the Algiers communards but did appoint Charles Du Bouzet, a former teacher at the *lycée d'Alger*, as the *commissaire extraordinaire* of the Republic on 17 November 1870. With this broadly popular appointment, fears of a separatist insurrection in European Algeria began to abate.²⁶

On the other hand, the persistent influence of the *bureaux arabes* and the broader role of the military in Algeria now became the subject of ever more intense debate in the *colon* press. Two months after his controversial naturalisation of the Jewish community in Algeria, Adolphe Crémieux, Minister of Justice and the Interior, began to make concessions to the will of the *colons*. A decree of 24 December 1870 firmly established the principle of *territoire civil*, rolling back military authority and extending the powers of the *commissaire extraordinaire*. Crémieux envisaged the expansion of *communes de plein exercice* (administered by civilian mayors) and began the lexical republicanisation of military administration as provinces and *cercles* were replaced by *départements* and *commandants supérieurs* by *administrateurs*. The decree, Crémieux emphasised, was “destiné à rompre la hiérarchie des bureaux arabes et la politique traditionnelle et anti-nationale que cette hiérarchie avait pour but de perpétuer.”²⁷

Thus, the Republic had firmly established the link between the *bureaux arabes* and the administrative legacy of the Second Empire that it now sought to suppress. Crémieux had made a carefully judged intervention in colonial politics that favoured the *colons* and stressed the bonapartist credentials of the military administration. *Colon* opinion broadly concurred with the tone, if not the pace, of change that was being advocated. Thereafter, military administrators were identified not only with the past but as an obstacle to colonisation. Louis Rinn, a captain serving as *chef de bureau arabe* at Batna – Rinn, in a later role as *chef du service centrale des affaires indigènes*, was subsequently charged with writing a report on the failure of the Flatters Expedition – took issue with what he saw as a highly parochial take on

²⁵ J. Duval and Warnier, *Bureaux arabes et colons: réponse au Constitutionnel pour faire suite aux lettres à M. Rouher* (Paris, 1869), 115-25; 177-78.

²⁶ Jacques Marseille, ed., *France et Algérie: journal d'une passion* (Paris, 2002), 79.

²⁷ Archives nationales d'outre-mer, Aix-en-Provence (hereafter ANOM), *Bulletin officiel du gouvernement général de l'Algérie*, 25 December 1870.

events.²⁸ In a letter of 2 January 1871 addressed to the *commissaire extraordinaire* via his superiors, Rinn described Crémieux's decree as an "accusation calomnieuse" against a dedicated and hard-working officer corps. He refuted the charge of anti-national activity levelled by Crémieux and went on to oppose the Second Empire's "énorme centralisation administrative, qui d'Alger ou de Paris, écrasait l'Algérie et paralysait complètement l'initiative des Commandants Supérieurs et des chefs de bureau arabe."²⁹ Going further to establish the fundamental ideological difference between his military colleagues and the administrators of the Second Empire, Rinn spoke at length of his Parisian upbringing and natural affinity for liberalism and republicanism. He described himself as an officer "sans autorité" and reaffirmed his commitment to the *bureaux arabes* and to following the orders of his new republican masters.³⁰ Later the same year, Rinn published an anonymous text that argued for the administrative assimilation of European Algeria to France and took issue with what he saw as the scapegoating of the *bureaux arabes* for the activities of a despotic administration under the Second Empire.³¹ Between the zeal of the *colons* and the stereotypical image of the *bureaux arabes*, Rinn emphasised the legitimate contribution of skilled and devoted officers. He called for a political renewal of colonial Algeria in which *territoire militaire* would be abolished in favour of a single, civilian-controlled administration.³²

Rinn was, of course, making a rather naked case for his own legitimacy in the new political order. He was, moreover, attempting to demythologise the *bureaux arabes* in so far as they had been associated with the unpopular administrative legacy of the past. His writings, however, did little to foster the consensus that he had hoped to achieve. In November 1871, the commander of the Algiers division, General Wolff, sued four *colon* newspapers – *L'Akhbar*, *L'Algérie française*, *Le Moniteur de l'Algérie* and *Le Tell* – for defamation of the *bureaux arabes*. This followed the publication of a hostile letter in *Le Temps* and *The Evening Standard*. The case, tried in the Algiers *cour d'assises*, provided a public forum for the airing of *colon* and *militaire* grievances. The well-financed owners and editors of the four newspapers each made lengthy depositions, cataloguing uncomfortable episodes in the history of the *bureaux arabes*, most notably an incident in the Oranais in 1856 in which a band of men led by a *chef de bureau arabe* had murdered an Algerian and his French associates in *territoire civil*. The jury in the libel case, composed of *colons*, found against the plaintiff, ordering Wolff to pay costs and giving cause to celebrate in *colon* circles.³³

The aftermath of the Mokrani Rebellion that began in January 1871 was a decisive moment in the development of *colon*-republican alliances against the military. With the new impetus given to colonisation, not least by the arrival of more

²⁸ For Rinn's report on Flatters, see Bernard, ed., *Deuxième mission Flatters*, 327-44. Rinn appears in Lorcin, *Imperial Identities*, 58, 60, 142; Taithe, *The Killer Trail*, 67; and, more extensively in Trumbull, *An Empire of Facts*. Rinn's own, extensive publications include *L'Algérie assimilée: étude sur la constitution et la réorganisation de l'Algérie (par un chef de bureau arabe)* (Constantine, 1871); *ibid.*, *Marabouts et khouan: étude sur l'islam en Algérie* (Algiers, 1884); *ibid.*, *Nos frontières sahariennes* (Algiers, 1886); and *ibid.*, *Histoire de l'insurrection de 1871 en Algérie* (Algiers, 1891).

²⁹ ANOM, *Gouvernement général de l'Algérie* (hereafter GGA), 18 H 24.

³⁰ ANOM, GGA, 18 H 24.

³¹ Rinn, *L'Algérie assimilée*, v.

³² Rinn, *L'Algérie assimilée*, 10.

³³ *Les Bureaux arabes devant le jury: compte rendu in-extenso des débats du procès intenté par M. le général de division Wolf agissant au nom des Bureaux arabes contre l'Akhbar, l'Algérie Française, le Moniteur de l'Algérie et le Tell* (Algiers, 1871).

than two thousand displaced Alsace-Lorrainers in Algeria in 1871, the *razzia* (or pillaging of land as a punishment for indigenous insurrection) was soon replaced by the principle of *séquestre*. The Warnier Law of 1873 facilitated *colon* appropriation of Algerian land and *séquestre* was now envisaged as the ideal means of achieving punishment and reparation. The Constantinois, cradle of the Mokrani Rebellion, was most seriously affected, Governor-General Louis-Henri de Gueydon now declaring his intent to appropriate between four and five hundred thousand hectares of land.

Rinn, who later wrote that the Mokrani Rebellion had been an affair of Algerian elites and had little to do with either the acceptance or rejection of French authority,³⁴ saw the pronouncements of the civilian-led *commission de séquestre* as deeply misguided. Rinn's opposition to the *séquestre* must be viewed through the prism of the Constantine Trials of the Mokrani Rebellion's leaders, which meted out unprecedented punishment to Algerian *insurgés* and gave further cause for jubilation to the detractors of the *bureaux arabes*. It was here that the clash between *insurgés*, *militaires* and *colons* reached a dénouement, and the *royaume arabe* policy was brought to a decisive end.³⁵ Between January and April 1873, thirteen Algerian *insurgés* were executed at Batna. The defendants' lawyers argued in vain that their clients should be tried in metropolitan courts, complaining of the lack of objectivity of *colon* juries. Unlike the Parisian Communards, however, there would be no amnesty for the Algerian *insurgés* until decades later (1895 and 1904).³⁶ At the Constantine Trials, the familiar theme of the *bureaux arabes* fomenting insurrection as a means of perpetuating itself resurfaced in the *colon* press.³⁷ Some *insurgés* were saved from the guillotine by the advocacy of metropolitan lawyers like Jules Grévy and Jules Favre, whose strategy was to deflect blame onto the *militaires*. Both Grévy and Favre questioned the legality of the trials, spoke of complicity between military and Algerian leaders, and raised the spectre of illicit arms dealing in the Constantinois in the months preceding the insurrection.³⁸ Together with the *colon* press, Grévy and Favre constructed a republican metropolitan utopia in contrast to the perceived failings of the Second Empire in Algeria. In an uncanny evocation of Bugeaud's policy of "driving back" – *refouler* – Muslim Algerians to the south of the Atlas mountains, the talk at Constantine was of driving back the military further into the desert and restricting them to the kind of speculative and marginal role that Flatters enjoyed.

From the *colon* perspective, however, *militaires* remained firmly entrenched at all levels of the Algerian administration. The following decade would see concerted efforts to undermine their influence. The autonomist crisis in Algiers, where Léon Gambetta had accused Vuillermoz of wanting to "faire le dictateur," contrasted sharply with the *rapprochement* between *colons* and republicans over the *séquestre* and the Constantine Trials. The climate of fear in the aftermath of the Mokrani Rebellion had failed to persuade *colons* of the utility of military administration. Between 1870 and 1873, therefore, the image of metropolitan France had improved considerably. European Algeria now perceived the metropole as a vehicle for the advancement of colonisation and saw its own republicanism as a means to convince

³⁴ Rinn, *Histoire de l'insurrection de 1871 en Algérie*.

³⁵ Bertrand Jalla, "L'autorité judiciaire dans la répression de l'insurrection de 1871," *Revue française d'histoire d'outre-mer*, 88 (2001): 390-91.

³⁶ Jalla, "L'autorité judiciaire dans la répression de l'insurrection de 1871," 389-95.

³⁷ See especially E. Thuillier, *Le Royaume arabe devant le jury de Constantine* (Constantine, 1873).

³⁸ Jalla, "L'autorité judiciaire dans la répression de l'insurrection de 1871," 397.

metropolitan politicians of the need to complete the slow death of the *régime du sabre*.

In Algeria, as in France, the 1870s represented something of a hiatus between the old and the new. The persistence of the *ancien régime* was most visible in the fact that the governors-general of the 1870s were all senior military men (in spite of their nominally civilian responsibilities). To be sure, the *colon* agitation of the early 1870s had brought a profound acceleration of colonisation. Both Gueydon and his successor, Antoine Chanzy, presided over the considerable expansion of *territoire civil*. Still, the end of Chanzy's tenure in 1879 was marked by renewed *colon* unrest and hostility to the military which contributed in no small way to the appointment in 1879 of the first genuinely civilian governor-general, Albert Grévy (brother to Jules). A climate of fear and anger prevailed in the colony by the time of Grévy's arrival in Algiers in the summer of 1879. Manelli Sonvillo's poem "L'Albertiade," published in the *Nouvelliste de l'Algérie* on 30 July 1879, was a tongue-in-cheek tirade against Algeria's military despots and an expression of hope for Grévy's success which came to the resounding climax: "Civils vous êtes tout! Toi, militaire, rien!"³⁹

A major cause of this new wave of discontent was an insurrection that began in late May 1879 in the traditionally recalcitrant Aurès mountains of the Constantinois. Parts of the Aurès had risen up against French authority (and against each other) in the 1840s and 1850s. The kind of local knowledge, linguistic ability and talent for negotiation on which the *bureaux arabes* officers prided themselves was envisaged as the best way of responding to this. Given the complexity of the terrain, however, officers based in the nearest *bureaux* in Biskra and Batna were too far removed to have had an effective impact, and, in the past, had relied almost exclusively on the pre-colonial *caïdal* system of administration.⁴⁰ Now, in 1879, military authorities sought to challenge what they saw as the radical and anti-French preaching of the religious leader Mohammed-ben-Abdallah. Two Algerian *tirailleurs*, sent from the *bureau* in Batna, chose to perform an arrest in a crowded mosque and were killed on the spot. Rumours abounded that the imam had been tipped off by a sympathetic *caïd*. Another force, comprised of a little over thirty men, was sent to confront the rebels and was repulsed. Later, at R'baa, four hundred of the imam's followers were routed by two companies of *tirailleurs* and several hundred more perished in the desert whilst fleeing an advancing French column.⁴¹

For Colonel Vincent Noëllat, commanding the *cercle* at Biskra, the maladroit actions of the *bureaux arabes* personnel in this case symbolised deep-rooted failings in the *caïdal* system.⁴² Noëllat divided the blame equally between the military authorities and the imam, supposedly aided by the agitation of religious and political leaders who had previously been expelled from the Aurès. Here was a senior *bureaux arabes* officer writing of his own over-indulgence: "Jusqu'ici nous avons respecté tant que nous l'avons pu la tribu et le Coran, et nous avons bien fait; mais ce faisant nous avons laissé debout tous les sentiments de la nationalité Arabe."⁴³ The colonial population, he went on, felt themselves to be living "sur un volcan." Now was the

³⁹ *Le Nouvelliste de l'Algérie*, 30 July 1879, ANOM, GGA 3 X 2 (fonds Louis Rinn). Rinn's extensive collection of newspaper clippings does not include the page numbers of articles.

⁴⁰ On the *caïdal* system of government, see Kenneth Perkins, *Qaids, Captains and Colons: French Military Administration in the Colonial Maghrib 1844-1934* (London, 1981).

⁴¹ Victor Noëllat, *L'Algérie en 1882* (Paris, 1882), 109-13.

⁴² Noëllat, *L'Algérie en 1882*, 104-16.

⁴³ Noëllat, *L'Algérie en 1882*, 116.

time to reverse traditional attitudes and give a new impulse to colonisation through *séquestre* and the further simplification (and erosion) of indigenous property rights.⁴⁴

These events in the Aurès were a stark reminder of how far the military continued to influence the government of Algeria in spite of the supposed advances of 1870-1873. Grévy soon experienced the indignation of the European Algerian press, intensified this time because of frustrated *colon* hopes that he, as a civilian, would act as an organ of their opinion. Soon, the institution of governor-general became the target of fierce criticism, framed in the language of republican nationalism and of complete administrative *rapprochement* with metropolitan France. *L'Akhbar* was one of the more hostile newspapers. It celebrated the fact that Grévy was at least restrained in his actions by the supervision of metropolitan ministers and reminded its readers that “le régime républicain...place intelligence et la connaissance des intérêts de la nation dans la nation elle-même et nullement dans les conceptions d'un homme.”⁴⁵ The editor of *Le Tell*, writing in *La Vigie Algérienne*, now called for the end of military administration and the curtailment of the powers of the governor-general, identified as the *régime des décrets* and inseparably linked to the failures of the *régime du sabre* – “Algériens ne veulent pas d'autre législation que la législation française.”⁴⁶ At the end of August 1879, *L'Akhbar* and *La Vigie Algérienne* launched a campaign against the official report into the events in the Aurès that had represented the insurrection as an indigenous Algerian uprising against the malpractice of their own *caïds*. The failure to publish the deliberations of the commission of inquiry appointed by Grévy left journalists in no doubt that the report was a whitewash designed to absolve the *bureaux arabes*. Metropolitan journals like the *Revue britannique* were similarly lambasted for their efforts to point out that the insurrection had been caused by the mistreatment of Algerians by local civilian authorities.⁴⁷ Now, and continuing well into the 1880s, the governor-general frequently joined the military as the subject of the *colons'* indignation.

The Aurès and its aftermath soon came to symbolise and reinvigorate the broader battle between *colons* and *militaires*. *Le Tell* called upon Grévy to go further than his predecessors in expanding the amount of Algerian land that was under civilian administration. *L'Akhbar* echoed this attitude, calling for more *communes de plein exercice* and lamenting that the new governor-general seemed to favour what it saw as the hesitant approach of Chanzy.⁴⁸ Grévy's failings included his unwillingness to reform the entire system of colonial administration rather than simply replacing *bureaux arabes* officers with equally unqualified civilian administrators. According to the *colon* press, Grévy's own plan for administrative reform, supposedly the doing of “perfides conseillers” in his *conseil du gouvernement*, would have little, if any, impact.⁴⁹

In March 1881, shortly after Flatters' death but before the news had broken, Gaston Thomson, a young *député* for the Constantinois and soon to be co-sponsor of the Flatters memorial at Ouargla, described the military's actions in the Aurès as having jeopardised “l'établissement solide et définitive du régime civil en Algérie.”⁵⁰ Grévy was replaced as governor-general in November 1881. That same year – the

⁴⁴ Noëllat, *L'Algérie en 1882*, 118-20.

⁴⁵ *L'Akhbar*, 10 August 1879, ANOM, GGA 3 X 2.

⁴⁶ *La Vigie Algérienne*, 18 August 1879, ANOM, GGA 3 X 2.

⁴⁷ *L'Akhbar*, 31 August 1879; *La Vigie Algérienne*, 25 August 1879, ANOM, GGA 3 X 2.

⁴⁸ *L'Akhbar*, 31 August 1879, ANOM, GGA 3 X 2.

⁴⁹ *La Vigie Algérienne*, 20 October 1879, ANOM, GGA 3 X 2.

⁵⁰ *Le Mobacher*, 30 March 1881, ANOM, GGA 3 X 2.

year of Flatters' death – Grévy's successor, Louis Tirman, gave the administrative *rattachement* of Algeria to metropolitan France a decisive boost. Nonetheless, Rinn, now serving as *chef du service central des affaires indigènes* in Algiers, continued to be attacked in the *colon* press for his alleged proximity to the civilian administration; the wider debates over the role of the military would continue at least until the autonomist crisis of the late 1890s.

Any account of the ways in which the Flatters Expedition was remembered – visible though clearly understated in the *colon* imaginary – requires an understanding of the history of this frequently-inflamed relationship between Algeria's military and civilian colonists. Though not intended as an explicit riposte to the *colons*, the Flatters Expedition and the Trans-Saharan project should be viewed in the context of wider efforts to underscore and renew the role of the military in the life of what was an increasingly settler-led colony. After 1870, and especially after the Constantine Trials of 1873, the military were progressively *refoulés* in the political, geographical and even, perhaps, in the Freudian sense. This is the key, I have argued, to making sense of the remembering and forgetting of the Flatters Expedition. To remember Flatters in an emphatic way in 1881 would have risked exposing the tensions and conflicts of the past half-century of colonisation. Instead, colonial authorities – even fellow *militaires* like Louis Rinn – chose not to make a *cause célèbre* of his death. In Algeria, the colonial past was indeed a vital and effective concern to the colonial present, but, in the case of Flatters, the absences and ambivalences in the historical record reveal far more of the story than the memorials themselves.