

# Naturalization as a Colonial Tool for Entrenching French Domination in Algeria (1830-1962)

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## Abstract

*France's Algerian naturalization policy (1830-1962) strategically reshaped demographics to reinforce colonial control. Selective laws (1865, 1889) naturalized Europeans (especially Spaniards/Italians) while the Crémieux Decree (1870) collectively enfranchised Jews, contrasting sharply with Muslim marginalization under the Indigenous Code. This discriminatory system exposed colonial hypocrisy, using citizenship to establish racial hierarchies - culminating in Vichy's 1940 revocation of Jewish rights. The policy's legacy includes post-independence Jewish emigration and enduring social fractures, revealing naturalization as an instrument of division rather than unity in colonial Algeria.*

**Keywords:** *settler colonialism, European settlers, Algerian Jews, naturalization decrees, French citizenship, cultural assimilation.*

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## Introduction

The naturalization policies implemented in colonial Algeria (1830–1962) served as a key instrument of French demographic and cultural domination, reshaping the social fabric of the occupied territory. From the early years of colonization, the French administration pursued a calculated strategy of assimilation, selectively granting citizenship to European settlers and later to Algerian Jews while systematically excluding the Muslim majority. This process was central to France's settler-colonial project, which sought to transform Algeria into an extension of the metropole through forced demographic engineering.

However, these policies were far from consistent. Facing a shortage of French migrants, authorities aggressively naturalized non-French Europeans to bolster the settler population. Meanwhile, the Crémieux Decree (1870) collectively naturalized Algerian Jews only for this citizenship to be abruptly revoked under Vichy rule (1940). Such contradictions reveal the opportunistic nature of colonial governance, where naturalization served as a flexible tool of control rather than a universal right.

Within the framework of examining French colonial domination mechanisms in Algeria (1830-1962), a central research problem emerges concerning the analysis of how naturalization policies were transformed into instruments of demographic and identity control. This leads us to formulate the following key research questions:

What legal and social mechanisms did France employ to transform naturalization from a mere administrative procedure into a tool of colonial domination?

How did selective naturalization policies contribute to the formation of a new social hierarchy based on discrimination between different components of Algerian society?

To what extent were these policies successful in securing the allegiance of naturalized groups (Europeans and Jews) while systematically excluding the indigenous Muslim population?

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## European Naturalization Policies in Algeria

During the colonial era (1830–1962), Algeria underwent a radical demographic shift marked by the formation of a multi-origin, multicultural European settler population. As highlighted by French historian René Ricot in his study "Iconographic Demography of Algeria," the European settler society was not a homogeneous bloc but rather a mosaic of ethnically and culturally disparate elements.

This wave of settlement created a complex demographic landscape, drawing representatives from most European nations, though dominated by five main nationalities: the French—who held numerical and political supremacy as the "conquerors" and rulers of the colony—followed by the Spanish, then Italians, Maltese, and Germans. The remaining groups, such as the Swiss, English, and Belgians, remained marginal, categorized simply as "Others."<sup>2</sup>

### The Nature of European Settlers in Algeria (1830–1962)

Settlement in Algeria followed a systematic colonial policy, beginning with sporadic waves of migration from Southern Europe at the start of the occupation before evolving into an organized settler machine. As revealed in a report by the French Royal Commission on July 7, 1833, colonial authorities implemented a three-stage strategy: forcibly displacing the native population, systematically confiscating their lands, and then replacing them with European settlers.<sup>3</sup>

However, France soon faced a severe demographic crisis in its Algerian settlement project, confronting the harsh reality of French citizens' reluctance to migrate to the new colony. This shortfall stemmed from two key factors: fierce competition from the New World (America), which attracted the majority of European migrants due to its promising economic opportunities<sup>4</sup>, and the nature of the settlers who arrived in Algeria—described by French officials as "the dregs of society."<sup>5</sup>

Initially, the French were a minority among immigrants. Their numbers tripled between 1841 and 1846 during the period of active state-sponsored settlement under Governor-General Bugeaud. However, this growth later slowed, averaging around 8% annually from 1846 to 1856 before declining to 6% between 1856 and 1872. Nevertheless, a pivotal shift occurred in 1851 when the French population surpassed that of other European settlers.<sup>6</sup>

### The Colonial Administration's Fears about the Growing European Population and Losing Control of the Colony:

In his 1843 letter addressed to the French Parliament, Marshal Bugeaud revealed three fundamental crises facing the settlement project: First, the "quality crisis" represented by the influx of unqualified settlers;<sup>7</sup> second, the "demographic catastrophe" manifested in the numerical superiority of non-French Europeans; and third, the "military shock" in the face of Emir Abdelkader's resistance.

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<sup>2</sup> René Ricoux, *The Illustrated Demography of Algeria: A Statistical Study of the European Populations Residing in Algeria*, G. Masson, Publisher to the Academy of Medicine, Paris, 1880, p. 9.

<sup>3</sup> M. de Peyerimhoff, *Investigation on the Results of Official Colonization from 1871 to 1891*, Vol. 1, Algiers, 1906, p. 16.)

<sup>4</sup> Belazzouz, El-Arbi, "Colonial Policy in Algeria and Its Impact on European Migration (1830-1900)", *Journal of New Eras*, No. 7-8, 2012-2013, p. 289.

<sup>5</sup> Belazzouz, El-Arbi, *The European Communities in Algeria from 1830 to 1954: Evolution and Specificities*, PhD Dissertation in Contemporary History, Department of History, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Algiers 1 (Abou El Kacem Saâdallah), Algiers, 2014-2015, p. 63.

<sup>6</sup> Kamel Kateb, *Europeans, Natives, and Jews in Algeria (1830-1962): Representations and Realities of Populations*, National Institute of Demographic Studies, Paris, 2001, p. 29.

<sup>7</sup> Belazzouz, El Arbi, *The European Communities in Algeria from 1830 to 1954: Evolution and Specificities*, op- cit, p 63.

What particularly displeased the French was that they were losing their soldiers while the numbers of Spanish and Italians were steadily increasing. The French army lost about 100,000 French soldiers from the beginning of the occupation until 1847.<sup>8</sup>

We will illustrate statistically the number of French compared to other Europeans in a table comparing the number of French with other Europeans from 1833 to 1847<sup>9</sup>:

year	French	Foreign Europeans	Total Population	European
1833	3,478	4,334	7,812	
1836	5,485	9,076	14,561	
1839	11,000	14,000	25,000	
1841	15,497	20,230	35,727	
1846	46,339	49,780	96,119	
1847	42,274	67,126	109,400	

Statistics reveal a striking demographic evolution in the number of Europeans in Algeria between 1833 and 1847, during which the French initially formed a minority among the immigrants.

In 1833, there were 3,478 French settlers as opposed to 4,334 foreigners, whereas by 1847 the French population had risen to 42,274, still overshadowed by 67,126 non-French foreigners. This rapid expansion alarmed the French authorities, particularly because the first wave of migration had brought large contingents of Spaniards and Italians rather than the Swiss and Germans whom France had hoped to attract.<sup>10</sup>

France found itself caught in a genuine dilemma rooted in the wider nineteenth-century European demographic context. While Britain, Spain, Italy and the German states enjoyed relatively high fertility rates, France recorded the lowest. Simultaneously, French industrialisation<sup>11</sup> absorbed much of the domestic labour force, diverting it away from colonial settlement projects.<sup>12</sup>

Consequently, the French administration constructed a hierarchical taxonomy of immigrants,<sup>13</sup> Germans and Swiss were placed at the apex as “noble migrants,” whereas Italians and Maltese were relegated to the bottom and branded “undesirable aliens.” Ironically, it was precisely these latter—officially disdained—groups whose numbers continued to swell.<sup>14</sup>

These converging factors precipitated a radical shift in French policy, compelling the colonial administration to naturalise non-French Europeans in order to offset the persistent shortfall of metropolitan settlers. Consequently, Algeria evolved into a settler colony with a singular demographic profile, markedly divergent from the original blueprint of the French imperial project.

<sup>8</sup> Kamel Kateb, *Op- cit*, p 38.

<sup>9</sup> Statistical Yearbook of Algeria, 1932.

<sup>10</sup> Yahya Bouaziz, *Colonial Domination and the National Movement 1830–1954*, Algiers: University Publications Office, 2007, p 9.

<sup>11</sup> French children were channeled toward industrial employment, particularly as France ranked among the first European nations to undergo industrialization; consequently, the metropole lacked the capacity to supply additional settlers.

<sup>12</sup> Gérard Crespo, *Étud comparative des immigrations italiennes en Algérie et en Tunisie*, In : Actes du colloque les peuplements de l’Afrique du Nord : une histoire de migration plurielles, organisé par la Fondation : Algérie Maroc-Tunisie, au Maison de la Chimie, Paris le lundi 12 décembre 2011. p 64.

<sup>13</sup> At the outset of colonization, France prioritized attracting migrants from Northern Europe—particularly Germans and Swiss—owing to the favorable reputation these groups enjoyed. They were widely regarded as robust, industrious, and disciplined. By contrast, Italians, Spaniards, and Maltese were labelled “foreigners,” a designation recurrently employed in the reports of French police commissioners and colonial administrators throughout the 1830s, 1840s, and 1850s. This ethno-cultural taxonomy reflects the prevailing hierarchical gaze of the period, which evaluated prospective settlers according to their national origins and perceived capacity to integrate into the French settler project.

<sup>14</sup> Gérard Crespo ,*op-cit*, p 64.

The mounting prominence of non-French Europeans at the very core of France's Algerian colony generated acute anxiety within the colonial authorities, who grew increasingly apprehensive that Algeria might mutate into a multinational territory imperilling French supremacy. In 1882, Maurice Wahl gave voice to these xenophobic fears in terms that were unambiguously hostile:

“French soil must remain French. First and foremost, the arrival of immigrants must be rigorously monitored especially that of the Spanish and only individuals bearing valid documentation and evidence of steady conduct should be admitted. Vagrants and the dangerous must be expelled without mercy; no degree of hospitality can oblige us to accept the refuse of other nations.”<sup>15</sup>

In order to surmount these challenges, the colonial administration implemented an expansive naturalisation policy designed to engineer a “society with a French majority” in Algeria, thereby safeguarding metropolitan control over the colony. This strategy emerged as a direct response to the massive influx of non-French European migrants above all from Spain and Italy—whose numbers threatened to alter the colony's demographic balance.<sup>16</sup>

French authorities thus revealed an ambivalent, even contradictory, stance toward non-French European communities, particularly the Spanish and Italians. On the one hand, colonial officials—most notably the historian Maurice Wahl—openly acknowledged the indispensable role played by Spaniards in sustaining the colonial economy, serving as the backbone of the agricultural, mining, and public-works sectors. On the other hand, persistent doubts hovered over the political loyalty of these groups, whose enduring cultural and identitarian ties to their countries of origin aroused apprehensions in Paris that they might evolve into a centrifugal force capable of undermining the very French imperial project for which the conquest of Algeria had exacted such considerable effort.<sup>17</sup>

This contradiction was embodied in the stringent surveillance policies subsequently adopted by the colonial authorities. Statistical data were repurposed into a powerful instrument of oversight, enabling the administration to monitor the movements of these communities and channel them in accordance with metropolitan interests. This dynamic was especially pronounced in regions such as Oran, which experienced a substantial influx of Spanish immigrants. There, the colonial regime instituted a meticulous statistical system that recorded the population's composition according to religious affiliation and geographic origin, thereby integrating these data into a broader apparatus of systematic colonial control.<sup>18</sup>

Toward the Italians, France pursued a markedly different strategy—one predicated on gradual incorporation rather than exclusion. By extending French citizenship and streamlining legal and social integration, the colonial state effectively neutralised any perceived threat emanating from this community<sup>19</sup>. Indeed, a number of assimilated Italians ascended to positions of political prominence, most notably René Viviani, the French prime minister of Italian descent.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, Italians retained a distinct cultural and religious identity. Deep-seated Catholic piety remained central to their daily lives, manifest in resilient

<sup>15</sup> Maurice Wahl, *l'Algérie*, Librairie Germer Baillière, Paris 1882, p 217.

<sup>16</sup> Muyl Marie, *Les Français d'Algérie : socio-histoire d'une identité*, Thèse de doctorat, Université Paris Panthéon-Sorbonne, 2007, p 51.

<sup>17</sup> Maurice Wahl, *op-cit*, p 216.

<sup>18</sup> A.O.M., Aix-en-Provence, Algérie. 1G/204, *Européens - Statistiques 1835 - 1848, 1853. Tableau statistique de la population européenne dans la province d'Oran selon les confessions religieuses et la répartition géographique (1848-1849)*.

<sup>19</sup> By 1919, the Italian community in Algeria had reached 130,000; by 1939 it had risen to 180,000, compared with only 65,000 French settlers. This pronounced demographic disparity compelled the French authorities to manipulate official data, deliberately understating the Italian presence to bolster French demographic hegemony and to allay the fears of political and media elites regarding a looming “foreign peril.” Conversely, Mussolini's Fascist regime exploited the situation to consolidate its influence among Algerian Italians and to propagate anti-French ideologies. In contrast, neighbouring Tunisia—where no comparable French assimilationist policies were pursued—did not experience such acute identity tensions, thereby underscoring the particularly contested and sensitive demographic fault line within colonial Algeria. For further details, see: . Gérard Crespo, *Étude Comparative Des Immigrations italiennes En Algérie et en Tunisie, Actes du colloque « les peuplements de l'Afrique du Nord : une histoire de migrations plurielles »*, *op-cit*, p 68.

<sup>20</sup> Robert F Foerster, *The Italian Emigration of Our Times*, London, Cambridge Harvard University Press, 1924, p 222.

devotional practices and traditions that withstood—even as they negotiated—the relentless pressures of Gallicisation.<sup>21</sup>

Thus, French policy revealed a Janus-faced disposition: an economic visage that aggressively exploited the labour and skills of these communities, and a securitarian visage that ceaselessly sought to neutralise any potential challenge to absolute French hegemony. This duality epitomises the structural complexity of colonial governance, forever poised between the imperative to harness human capital and the perpetual dread of relinquishing control.

### Naturalisation Decrees for Europeans in Algeria

What are today commonly labelled “Français d’Algérie” (French Algerians) did not, in fact, all originate from metropolitan France. As historians have underscored, “the transformation of European settlers in Algeria into French citizens was driven less by a sudden surge in trans-Mediterranean French migration than by a deliberate extension of naturalisation procedures.”<sup>22</sup>

The persistent presence of a large foreign-born population—constituting 49.7 % of all Europeans in 1851 and still 41.3 % in 1872—prompted acute concern within French official circles. In response, the metropolitan government formally opened the path to naturalisation in 1865 through the *Sénatus-Consulte* of 27 September 1865.<sup>23</sup>

Article 3 of that decree specifically provided that “any foreigner who can prove three years’ continuous residence in Algeria may enjoy all the rights of a French citizen.”

By reducing the required period of residence to less than one-third of the ten consecutive years stipulated in metropolitan French law, the legislator deliberately incentivised foreign settlers to embrace French citizenship, thereby accelerating the demographic consolidation of French sovereignty in the colony.

This preferential treatment underscores the strategic importance France attached to the settlement of foreigners in Algeria and the consolidation of a durable French presence there. In contrast to metropolitan France, the legal status of foreigners in Algeria improved with remarkable rapidity: once naturalised, an immigrant was deemed a French citizen, endowed with the full spectrum of rights and subject to the corresponding obligations.<sup>24</sup> The overarching objective of this policy was to reinforce French demographic dominance and to secure Algeria’s indefinite incorporation as an extension of French territory, while simultaneously curbing the growing influence of rival European nationalities.<sup>25</sup>

By the close of the nineteenth century, France embarked upon an extensive campaign to naturalise the European population in Algeria—a campaign imbued with a pronounced sense of urgency. Indeed, by 1886 non-French Europeans constituted roughly 50 percent of the total European settler community, and their demographic growth was outpacing that of the French themselves.<sup>26</sup>

Confronted with an unrelenting influx of Europeans from every quarter, France grew increasingly anxious about the prospect of losing its grip on the situation across the Mediterranean. Consequently, “French nationality was imposed through the law of 26 June 1889, which mandated automatic naturalisation of any

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<sup>21</sup> Claude Llinares, Danielle Lima-Boutin, Forum publié à propos de :L’émigration italienne de 1830 à 1914 Causes, conditions et conséquences socioéconomiques, Paris le 17 mai / Marseille le 4 octobre 2008, p12.13 .

<sup>22</sup> Muyl marie, op-cit, p 51

<sup>23</sup> Kamel Kateb, op-cit, p 29

<sup>24</sup> Délibération sur le projet de Sénatus-Consulte relatif à l’état des personnes et à la naturalisation en Algérie, in procès-verbaux des séances du sénat, tome 5, N°.35-39, 1-7 Juillet 1865.

<sup>25</sup> Kamel Kateb, op-cit, p 29.

<sup>26</sup> Muyl marie, op-cit, p 51.

foreigner born in Algeria unless, upon reaching majority, he explicitly claimed his father's original citizenship." Thus, whereas in 1886 there were 219,000 French citizens and 211,000 foreigners, by 1896 the French total had risen to 318,000 (of whom 50,000 were newly naturalised), while the foreign population stood at 212,000. From 1896 onward, European-born-in-Algeria outnumbered European immigrants for the first time.<sup>27</sup>

### Impact of European Naturalisation on Social Integration

French policy in Algeria underwent a fundamental shift in its treatment of European communities through a succession of statutes designed to accelerate the incorporation of immigrants into the French social fabric. Foremost among these was the law of 1865, which liberalised the grant of citizenship by stipulating only two conditions: attainment of the age of twenty-one and three years of residence. Yet initial naturalisation rates among certain groups—notably the Spanish remained strikingly low; prior to 1889, the proportion of naturalised individuals in western Algeria did not exceed 2 percent of the total Spanish community, underscoring a tenacious attachment to their original identity.<sup>28</sup>

The landscape shifted radically with the law of 26 June 1889, which introduced automatic naturalisation for children born in Algeria<sup>29</sup> an instrument designed to dismantle foreign communities and swell the ranks of French citizens. The impact was particularly pronounced on the Italian community.<sup>30</sup>

The twin laws of 1865 and 1898 resulted in the naturalisation of 7,822 Italians—29 % of all naturalised Europeans and Algerian Muslims surpassing the Germans (23.5 %) and the Spanish (17.5 %). Naturalisations among Italians peaked in 1887–1888, when 815 and 855 individuals, respectively, were granted citizenship.<sup>31</sup>

As for the Spanish, the 1889 amendment triggered a sudden reversal: within less than two decades nearly half of the community rushed to acquire French nationality. This acceleration raises a fundamental question about the nature of such integration: was it a voluntary embrace of French identity, or the outcome of colonial pressures aimed at reinforcing demographic dominance?<sup>32</sup>

Naturalisation records further expose marked disparities among European communities. Out of 40,000 individual files examined, 1,275 Germans were naturalised compared with only 647 Swiss, signalling divergent uptake rates across these groups.<sup>33</sup>

Archival evidence confirms that French policy largely succeeded in eroding inter-immigrant distinctions above all by automatically granting citizenship to the Algerian-born—thereby diminishing ethnic differentiation and reinforcing social integration, albeit under the imperatives of colonial domination. In effect, these laws functioned as a powerful crucible in which Europe's heterogeneous identities were fused into a common mould of Frenchness, though the degree to which each community conformed varied according to its particular circumstances and allegiances.

Beyond naturalisation, intermarriage and military service proved instrumental in drawing the European populations closer to French society. These mechanisms were especially efficacious among Alsatians and

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<sup>27</sup> *ibid*, p 51

<sup>28</sup> Maurice Wahl, *op-cit*, p 215

<sup>29</sup> Gérard-François Dumont, *Les Flux migratoires vers le Maghreb*, In : *Actes du colloque les peuplements de l'Afrique du op-cit*, p 54.

<sup>30</sup> Antonio Cortese, *Op-Cit*, p 10

<sup>31</sup> Hugo Vermeren, *Op-Cit*, s p

<sup>32</sup> Gérard Crespo, Jean-Jacques Jordi, *op-cit*, p 106.

<sup>33</sup> Jean-Maurice Di Constanzo, *op-cit* , p 68 .

Lorrainers, who displayed a marked receptivity to assimilation, whereas Italians and Spaniards remained, on the whole, more circumspect.<sup>34</sup>

Cultural hybridisation and intermarriage likewise played a decisive role in forging a new identity, as French cultural influences became entwined with the diverse European heritages of the settlers, thereby deepening the Algerian-born generations' attachment to French culture through schooling and local educational institutions. Yet this process was accompanied by persistent tensions surrounding identity and citizenship: the colonial administration imposed stringent restrictions on foreigners' rights to safeguard unchallenged French dominance over Algeria's social and political landscape.<sup>35</sup>

### The Naturalisation of Jews in Colonial Algeria

From the outset of the French conquest in 1830, the colonial administration pursued a systematic policy aimed at securing the loyalty of Algerian Jews by exploiting their economic and social circumstances. French propaganda advanced the narrative that the colonial presence had come to "liberate" the Jews from what it portrayed as the repressive practices of Algerian Muslim society a message that resonated with certain Jewish commercial elites who viewed alignment with the coloniser as an opportunity to advance their interests.<sup>36</sup>

This rapprochement was given practical expression through the employment of Jews as intermediaries and translators by the French military, capitalising on their knowledge of local languages and society and thereby assigning them a pivotal role within the colonial apparatus.<sup>37</sup>

To consolidate this orientation, the French authorities introduced a series of measures intended to integrate the Jewish population into the colonial system. In 1837, a member of a prominent Jewish family was appointed " *bukri* " (community head) of what was officially termed the "Jewish nation," and state-subsidised Jewish confessional schools were established in the principal cities, with French imposed as the language of instruction. These initiatives, however, were not without contradictions: several Jewish families resisted them, fearing that some French teachers were pursuing covert proselytising agendas.<sup>38</sup>

In 1848, France took a further step toward aligning the status of Algerian Jews with that of their co-religionists in metropolitan France by extending French-language instruction more systematically within Jewish schools and by facilitating Jewish pupils' admission to institutions established by the *Alliance Israélite Universelle*, a philanthropic organisation founded by the French Jewish community.<sup>39</sup>

These colonial initiatives precipitated profound transformations in the structure of Algerian Jewish society between 1830 and 1870. Historians have documented a growing adoption of European values and patterns of life: many Jews abandoned traditional dress in favour of Western attire, and French education became an overriding priority across all strata of the Jewish community.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Maurice Wahl, op-cit, p, 205.

<sup>35</sup> *ibid*, p206.

<sup>36</sup> Abd al-'Azīz Filālī, *The 1934 Anti-Jewish Pogrom in Constantine: Zionist Dimensions and Arab-Nationalist Reactions*, Algiers: Dār al-Hudā for Printing, Publishing and Distribution, 2014,p 31.

<sup>37</sup> Nāṣir al-Dīn Sa'īdūnī, "Algerian Jewry and Their Attitude toward the Zionist Movement," *Revue al-Thaqāfa*, no 1987, Algiers, p 77.

<sup>38</sup> Abdelaziz Filali, op. cit.,p 31–32.

<sup>39</sup> Nāṣir al-Dīn Sa'īdūnī, op. cit.,p 77.

<sup>40</sup> Maurice Walh, op-cit, p 203.

The same period also witnessed significant economic transformations within the Jewish community. While commerce remained the dominant pursuit, a growing number of Jews began to venture into agriculture and industry, signalling the onset of a structural shift away from their traditional economic base.<sup>41</sup>

Yet the place assigned to Jews within the colonial taxonomy remained fraught. On the one hand, they were not classified among the European “stock” upon which the French relied as a criterion for privilege; on the other, their collective naturalisation in 1870 rendered their legal status more ambiguous still. This dual reality generated a distinctive form of social differentiation: Jews found themselves situated in an intermediary position between the indigenous population and the colonial elite—an ambiguous location whose repercussions would profoundly shape social relations in colonial Algeria.<sup>42</sup>

### The Crémieux Decree and the Naturalisation of Algerian Jews

The Crémieux Decree of 24 October 1870 constitutes a decisive turning-point in the social history of colonial Algeria. It crowned a sustained French campaign—began with the occupation of 1830—to re-engineer the communal structures of Algerian Jewry. Step by step, the colonial administration dismantled traditional institutions: rabbinic courts were abolished in 1841, the office of *muqaddam* (head of the Jewish community) was suppressed, and Jews were gradually subsumed into the French judiciary. These measures generated a fraught legal hybridity, in which Jewish personal-status law co-existed uneasily with the French civil code, particularly in matters of marriage, inheritance and family law.<sup>43</sup>

Within this historical conjuncture, an escalating Jewish movement demanding French citizenship took shape. Its first articulation was the 1860 petition bearing ten thousand Jewish signatures, followed by delegations received by Napoleon III during his 1864 visit to Oran. Yet the 1865 decree, which permitted only individual naturalisation, yielded meagre results: scarcely two hundred Jews succeeded in surmounting the labyrinthine administrative obstacles. The widening gulf between legal reality and communal aspirations thus primed public opinion for collective naturalisation once the opportune political moment arrived.<sup>44</sup>

The decisive opportunity arose with France’s defeat in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870 and the ensuing political crisis. Amid these exceptional circumstances, Adolphe Crémieux—the Jewish minister in the Government of National Defence—managed to secure the passage of the naturalisation decree by leveraging a confluence of factors: the financial pressure exerted by the Rothschild family, the volatile political climate that allowed radical decisions to be taken, and the broad support voiced by the major urban Jewish consistories. Colonial archives reveal that the Oran Jewish Consistory was the most enthusiastic proponent of this measure, while some reservations surfaced among European settlers.<sup>45</sup>

The decree wrought a radical transformation in Algeria’s social map. Overnight, Algerian Jews were vested with a new legal identity that conferred upon them full civil rights, while their Muslim compatriots remained subject to the discriminatory *indigénat* regime. This abrupt asymmetry generated complex social dynamics: on the one hand, it fuelled a marked expansion of Jewish economic influence; on the other, it intensified Muslim resentment. The shift was registered in several key indicators—an increasing Jewish presence in the colonial administration, the proliferation of Franco-Jewish schools, and the emergence of a new Jewish elite organically tied to the imperial project.<sup>46</sup>

Reactions to the decree were far from uniform. Jewish circles celebrated the measure as a historic legal milestone, yet certain colonial newspapers voiced reservations, and limited protests surfaced within Muslim

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<sup>41</sup> *ibid*, p 203.

<sup>42</sup> Ricoux René, *op-cit*, p 41.

<sup>43</sup> Geneviève Dermenjian, *La crise anti-juive oranaise (1895-1905) L’antisémitisme dans l’Algérie coloniale*, L’Harmattan, paris, 1986,P 53.

<sup>44</sup> Geneviève Dermenjian, *op-cit*,P 53.

<sup>45</sup> Abdelaziz Filali, *op. cit.*,p 32.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*,p 33.

milieus. The colonial archives reveal, however, that actual opposition was more muted than later narratives have suggested; in the major Algerian towns the new dispensation met with a degree of initial acceptance. This equilibrium proved short-lived. Before long, the legalised inequality began to reverberate through everyday social relations, progressively widening the fissure within Algerian society.<sup>47</sup>

### The Impact of Naturalisation on Jewish Integration into the Colonial Society

During the colonial period, Algerian Jews constituted a distinctive social formation marked by pronounced class stratification. A small elite dominated the real-estate and agricultural sectors, while the majority endured harsh economic conditions defined by poverty and illiteracy. This Jewish elite rapidly assimilated into French culture: it adopted the French language and customs, enrolled its children in metropolitan schools and colonial military institutions, and ultimately surpassed even the naturalised European settlers (the *colons*) in the degree of its acculturation to French norms.

This process of integration produced a dual identity. Legally and culturally, Algerian Jews regarded themselves as fully French; simultaneously, they preserved their Jewish religious and communal identity. They also maintained ties with the wider Algerian Muslim society through their familiarity with its language and customs. Occupying this intermediate position, they assumed a more moderate political role than the French settlers: acutely aware of the fragility of the colonial project, they refrained from embracing either separatist or extremist ideologies.

By the closing decades of the nineteenth century, loyalty to France had become a defining feature of Algerian-Jewish identity. Algerian Jews openly proclaimed their allegiance to the French state, which they hailed as their “mother-country.”<sup>48</sup>

This fidelity translated into a pronounced presence in the economic, social, and political spheres: they secured prominent positions and emerged as a significant electoral force, while occupying key roles in the police, postal services, banking, and taxation systems—developments that spurred commercial prosperity and a rapid multiplication of their fortunes.<sup>49</sup>

Yet this very prominence provoked fierce opposition among European settlers. The Crémieux Decree of 1870 encountered immediate resistance. On 19 June 1871, Charles du Bouzet, former Governor of Oran, formally requested its repeal, followed on 21 July 1871 by Interior Minister Lambertaye’s own draft bill for annulment. After protracted debate, the Lambertaye Decree of 7 October 1871 was promulgated, introducing new conditions for acquiring citizenship under the original Crémieux Decree.<sup>50</sup>

Between 1870 and 1875, antisemitic articles in the Oran press remained relatively moderate. The real escalation began in 1876.<sup>51</sup> when European settlers, feeling threatened by the civic advantages granted to Jews, channelled their reaction into organised hostility. The first antisemitic league was founded in Miliana in 1871 immediately after the Crémieux Decree—and a second, calling for an economic and social boycott of Jews, was established in 1892. Similar leagues sprang up in Constantine, Algiers, and Oran between 1894 and 1896, operating openly under the tolerant gaze of the French authorities.

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<sup>47</sup> Geneviève Dermenjian, op-cit,P 54.

<sup>48</sup> *ibid*, p 29.

<sup>49</sup> Geneviève Dermenjian, op-cit ,P 54.

<sup>50</sup> *ibid* ,P 54.

<sup>51</sup> *ibid*.

Thus, Jews found themselves in a paradoxical position: integrated into the colonial enterprise and enjoying substantial privileges, yet simultaneously confronting mounting hostility from European settlers who regarded them as dangerous rivals to their own interests.<sup>52</sup>

### The Revocation of Algerian Jews' Citizenship by the Law of 7 October 1940

Amid the turmoil of the Second World War and the fall of France to Nazi occupation, the collaborationist Vichy regime installed an authoritarian order in Algeria. The law of 7 October 1940 epitomised these antisemitic policies by formally abrogating the Crémieux Decree of 1870, which had conferred French citizenship upon Algerian Jews.<sup>53</sup>

This statute stripped roughly 35,000 Algerian Jews of their nationality, relegating them to the same legal status as Muslims under the humiliating colonial “indigénat” system. Its immediate consequences included the loss of suffrage and eligibility to stand for election, exclusion from public employment, and the barring of their children from higher education.

The law established ostensible exemptions that were, in practice, traps. Applications had to be filed within a mere 30 days and had to demonstrate either prior military service or “exceptional services” rendered to France. The decree of 20 November 1940 further required that all documentation be submitted before a justice of the peace, procedures that applied even to decorated veterans and former combatants.<sup>54</sup>

The policy served multiple objectives: to appease the Nazi regime and to implement its antisemitic agenda. Overnight, thousands of Jews were rendered stateless and stripped of civil rights, their property exposed to confiscation and their persons to the constant threat of deportation.

In 1943, the laws and decrees issued by the Vichy regime were nullified and the Crémieux Decree was once again brought into force. Yet the events that followed—especially those of 1962 precipitated the mass emigration of Algerian Jews after independence, leaving behind a profound scar in the collective memory of Algerian Jewry. This period thus constituted a watershed in their history, exposing the fragility of their position despite decades of allegiance to France and paving the way for their collective exodus.<sup>55</sup>

### Conclusion

France's policy of facilitated naturalisation in Algeria was a carefully calibrated colonial strategy designed to serve multiple, interconnected objectives. Above all, it sought to transform Algeria into a natural extension of metropolitan territory, exploiting the colony's geographical proximity—only 772 km from Marseille to project French political and cultural power. The principal aim was to redress the demographic imbalance revealed by the 1876 census, which recorded indigenous Muslims as 71 % of the population against a mere 17 % of French citizens (including the newly naturalised Jews), a ratio deemed threatening to sustained French dominance and to the viability of the colonial project itself.

Faced with persistent reluctance among metropolitan French to emigrate, the authorities turned to the large-scale naturalisation of non-French Europeans Italians, Spaniards, Maltese—to offset the shortfall. Simultaneously, the Crémieux Decree of 1870 was wielded to incorporate Algerian Jews, thereby creating a loyal demographic base whose interests were explicitly aligned with the colonial order. This accelerated

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<sup>52</sup> Abdelaziz Filali, *op. cit.*, p 33

<sup>53</sup> 'Issā Shannūf, *Algerian Jewry: Two Millennia of Presence*, Algiers, Dār al-Ma'rifa for Publishing and Distribution, 2008, p 127.

<sup>54</sup> "Statut des Juifs français et étrangers en France occupée, France non occupée et aux Colonies et Pays de Protectorats, gestion des entreprises privées de leurs dirigeants, législation française et ordonnances allemandes...Etat français". *Recueil des Sommaires de la Jurisprudence française et Recueil des Lois Usuelles réunis*. 1943, p 07

<sup>55</sup> 'Issā Shannūf, *op. cit.*, p 124.

drive was further catalysed by France's defeat at the hands of Prussia in 1871 and the loss of Alsace-Lorraine, events that rendered the consolidation of French presence in Algeria all the more urgent.

Yet this policy was fundamentally selective. While it conferred full citizenship upon Europeans and Jews, it deliberately withheld equivalent rights from the Muslim majority, exposing the true objective: not equality, but the reinforcement of colonial control. Naturalisation thus became an instrument of demographic and political Gallicisation—an engineered assimilation that entrenched French hegemony while perpetuating the structural subordination of Algeria's indigenous population.

France resorted to an expedited naturalization policy in Algeria to reinforce its colonial grip by altering the demographic balance in favor of loyalist elements. The 1876 census revealed that indigenous Muslims constituted 71 percent of the population, whereas French settlers accounted for a mere 17 percent an imbalance perceived as a threat to French influence. To redress this asymmetry, the colonial administration facilitated the naturalization of Europeans and Jews through the Crémieux Decree of 1870, eliminating cumbersome procedures in a deliberate effort to manufacture an artificial French majority supportive of the colonial enterprise. This objective gained added urgency after the loss of Alsace-Lorraine, which heightened Algeria's strategic importance as an extension of metropolitan France. Yet this policy deliberately excluded the Muslim majority, who were granted a second-class citizenship stripped of substantive rights, confirming that naturalization functioned as an instrument of domination rather than a vehicle for genuine equality.

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- At the outset of colonization, France concentrated on attracting migrants from Northern Europe particularly Germans and Swiss owing to the favorable reputation of these groups, who were widely regarded as robust, industrious, and disciplined. In contrast, Italians, Spaniards, and Maltese were labelled "foreigners," a designation repeatedly employed in the reports of French police commissioners and colonial administrators during the 1830s, 1840s, and 1850s. This ethno-cultural classification reflects the prevailing hierarchical worldview of the period, in which immigrants were evaluated according to their national origins and perceived capacity for integration into the French settler project.
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- Conversely, Mussolini's Fascist regime exploited the situation to consolidate its influence among Algerian Italians and to disseminate anti-French ideologies. In contrast, neighbouring Tunisia where no comparable French assimilationist policies were implemented did not experience such acute identity tensions, thereby highlighting the uniquely contested and sensitive demographic fault line within colonial Algeria. For further details, see: Gérard Crespo, *Étude Comparative Des Immigrations italiennes En Algérie et en Tunisie*, Actes du colloque « les peuplements de l'Afrique du Nord : une histoire de migrations plurielles », op-cit, p 68.
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