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The 8 May 1945 Demonstrations in Annaba and Its Environs as Reflected in the Colonial Archives

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Abstract

This article examines the events of 8 May 1945 in Annaba (Bône) and its surrounding areas. It focuses on the development of the Algerian national movement and the repressive policies of French colonial rule. The study revisits this decisive historical turning point through a close reading and deconstruction of reports produced by the colonial administration, the police, and French military courts. Using a critical historical approach that moves beyond the colonial narrative, it analyzes the political mobilization led by different currents of the national movement and its rapid entrenchment in both urban and rural communities on the eve of the confrontation.

The study also reconstructs the chronology of the events. It follows the transformation of celebrations of the Allied victory into open demonstrations calling for independence and displaying the national flag, up to the moment of violent confrontation. The article argues that French repression was not a temporary security response. Rather, it formed a systematic strategy of state terror. This strategy appeared in preventive security preparations, the arming of settlers, and severe sentences issued by the Military Court of Constantine, including death sentences and hard labor. It also involved symbolic and psychological coercion directed at religious leaders, as well as propaganda intended to obscure the facts. The study concludes that the massacres in the Annaba region created a decisive psychological and political break with the illusion of "assimilation." They also helped consolidate the conviction that armed struggle was inevitable, a struggle that erupted in November 1954.

Keywords: 8 May 1945 events; Annaba (Bône); Algerian national movement; colonial archives; systematic repression; military court.

Introduction

The spring of 1945 marked a decisive turning point in modern Algerian history. At a time when people across the world were celebrating the Allied victory and the fall of Nazism, many were also looking toward promises of freedom and self-determination. Algeria, however, was experiencing unprecedented political and social tension. Eastern Algeria was fully involved in this movement. Annaba and its surrounding areas, extending to important settler and agricultural centers such as Randon, Mondovi (present-day Dréan), and Duvivier (present-day Bouchegouf), became important sites of growing national consciousness. From April through the summer of 1945, that consciousness spread among different sectors of Algerian society. Algerian aspirations for liberation stood in direct conflict with the intransigence of a colonial administration that sought, through all its institutions, to preserve the existing order and consolidate its sovereignty.

Reconstructing the demonstrations of 8 May 1945 in Annaba and the events that followed is particularly important because of the intensity of political activity in the region. This activity has often been overshadowed by the dominant focus on the main centers of violence in Setif, Guelma, and Kherrata. In this context, French administrative, security, and military records are indispensable sources. Reports by sub-prefects, including those of Marcel Troussel, Sub-Prefect of Bône, confidential correspondence from the General Intelligence Police, military command telegrams, and records of exceptional courts provide a detailed view of the colonial administration and its day-to-day management of the crisis.

Reliance on this archive, however, requires strict methodological caution and sustained historical criticism. Colonial documents were not written to preserve the memory of the Algerian struggle. They were produced from a security-centered perspective and shaped by a condescending colonial worldview. National political activity was criminalized and

described as "rebellion," "rioting," or "fanaticism." It was also attributed to "foreign agitation" or "innate laziness," while the deeper causes of opposition to colonial rule were ignored. Even so, a critical and deconstructive reading of these reports - a reading against the grain - makes it possible to move beyond the colonial discourse. It reveals the organizational strength of the national movement and, at the same time, exposes the systematic machinery of repression directed against Algerians.

On the basis of these sources and this methodological approach, the article addresses two central historical questions. How do French administrative and military reports reflect the development of the political and organizational activity of the national movement in the Annaba region on the eve of 8 May 1945? What security, judicial, and administrative mechanisms did the colonial authorities use to suppress this movement and reassert control over the region?

Section I: Political and Organizational Conditions in Annaba on the Eve of 8 May 1945

On the eve of the end of the Second World War, the Annaba (Bône) region was not politically inactive. It was experiencing unprecedented organizational activity and mass mobilization. Despite their biased language, French administrative and security reports reveal deep concern among colonial officials about the rise of national consciousness. This development was not accidental. It was the result of sustained organizational work led by different currents of the Algerian national movement.

1. National Movement Activity and Mass Mobilization: From Rural Areas to the Heart of the City.

Archival documents clearly show that political activity in Annaba and its surrounding areas had moved beyond the urban elite and had taken root in peasant and popular milieus. This expansion benefited from the momentum created by the establishment of the Friends of the Manifesto and Liberty (Amis du Manifeste et de la Liberté). In rural areas and settler centers, municipal reports recorded intense activity aimed at creating local branches and cells. A confidential report by the mayor of Randon, dated 15 May 1945, documents the arrival on 22 April 1945 of delegates from nearby Mondovi. They included Bay Laghoun Mohamed Salah and Bay Laghoun Hawas, who came to establish a local branch of the movement. The report indicates a remarkable level of mobilization. In Randon alone, membership exceeded 620 people within a short period, and members agreed to pay individual subscriptions to finance political activity.¹

A similar pattern appeared in the municipality of Duvivier. The mayor submitted a report warning of the creation of two party offices in Duvivier and Medjez Sfa. He noted that subscriptions reached 130 francs: 30 francs for membership and 100 francs for propaganda activities. The report also stated that "natives who refuse to join are warned that they will be treated like the French."² This language suggests that membership in the national movement was becoming a measure of national loyalty and a sign of separation from the colonial administration.

In the urban setting of Bône, organization took on a broad and unifying front. This was reflected in the establishment of the Muslim Youth House (Maison de la Jeunesse Musulmane) on Rue Pyramide, in the former Monico premises. The initiative drew the attention of Sub-Prefect Marcel Troussel. He noted that it brought together the Association of Algerian Muslim Ulama, the Algerian People's Party (P.P.A.), the Friends of the Manifesto, and the Muslim Sports Union. He described this convergence as "an impressive consensus" and as a new development in Bône whose importance had to be emphasized.³ This organizational convergence was accompanied by a form of silent civil disobedience through an "economic boycott." Algerians suddenly stopped buying from European merchants and collectively transferred their ration cards to Muslim traders.

2. Colonial Surveillance of Political Mobilization: Between Historical Denial and Security Anxiety.

Faced with this rise in nationalist activity, the colonial administration displayed a clear intellectual and political contradiction. On the one hand, its reports acknowledged the precision and strength of the organization. On the other hand, they relied on condescending explanations to deny the political maturity of the "native" population. The comprehensive report prepared by the Sub-Prefect of Bône (Rapport d'ensemble du Sous-Préfet de Bône sur les causes historiques, politiques et sociales des événements) is particularly important for understanding the psychology of the colonial administration.

In his report, Troussel completely rejected the idea of an "Algerian nation." He argued that Algerian demands for independence resulted from an "absolute ignorance of their history." He also explained economic and social discontent by referring to what he called "laziness" and the condition of the "Chemessat" or "sun drinkers."⁴ This ideological denial soon came into conflict with the tense security situation. The same report acknowledged that "the psychological state of the Muslim population is changing noticeably" and recorded growing anger and political boldness. This boldness appeared on two occasions before 8 May. The first was 1 May, Labor Day, when activists of the Algerian People's Party used a General Confederation of Labour (C.G.T.) march to display signs demanding "Free Messali" (Libérez Messali). The second occurred on 3 May during celebrations of the fall of Berlin. Around 150 Algerians gathered behind a musical

¹ Rapport confidentiel du Maire de Randon sur l'implantation des "Amis du Manifeste et de la Liberté" 15 mai 1945, FR ANOM GGA 933-298.

² (Rapport du Maire de Duvivier sur l'implantation du "Parti des Amis du Manifeste et de la Liberté" et la demande d'armement préventif, 28 avril 1945 FR ANOM GGA 933-298

³ Rapport d'ensemble du Sous-Préfet de Bône sur les causes historiques, politiques et sociales des événements du 8 Mai 1945 ;29 mai 1945 FR ANOM GGA 933-298.

⁴ *ibid*

band. As soon as the Allied national anthems were played, they raised the index finger of the right hand toward the sky and chanted political slogans. Eleven people were arrested, and some were later prosecuted for "undermining French sovereignty."¹

3. Preventive Measures and Settler Fears (La Paranoïa Coloniale). These rapid developments produced a state of pathological fear (Paranoïa) among European settlers (colons), as reflected in urgent demands for weapons and the formation of militias. In the report cited above, the mayor of Duvivier urgently requested an additional stock of weapons, including 30 rifles and ammunition, to be kept at the gendarmerie as a preventive measure (demande d'armement préventif). He justified this request by referring to the "growing arrogance and conduct of many natives" and called for a rapid defense organized by the "able-bodied population," meaning the European settlers.²

These preventive measures were not limited to rural areas. They also reached the center of Bône. As reports of Germany's surrender multiplied, the Sub-Prefect convened an emergency security meeting on 6 May 1945. It included Colonel Mounio, commander of the subdivision, the mayor, the Central Police Commissioner, and the gendarmerie captain. The meeting established a "protection plan." Under this plan, military units were to remain inside their barracks with their full weapons, while armed detachments were placed on maximum alert at strategic locations, including the match factory and the Yusuf barracks.³

These extensive preparations leave little doubt that the colonial administration fully understood the depth of the tension and was preparing in advance to use brute force. This evidence challenges the colonial claim that French forces were surprised by a sudden "native rebellion" on 8 May. Instead, it indicates that the machinery of repression was already armed and prepared to strike as soon as a pretext emerged.

Section II: The 8 May 1945 Demonstrations and the Intervention of Colonial Forces

In Annaba (Bône), 8 May 1945 was not simply a day of celebration marking the Allied victory over fascism. It became an open historical confrontation between the demand for national liberation and the colonial machinery of repression. By critically examining the security narrative written by Sub-Prefect Marcel Troussel, it is possible to reconstruct the sequence of events, analyze the mechanisms of confrontation, and assess how the French administration used coercion to contain the consequences of the uprising.

1. The 8 May March: From Official Celebration to an Open Demand for Independence. According to the administrative arrangements, a large procession was scheduled to assemble at 4:00 p.m. (16:00) in Place Marchis. Reports estimated the crowd at between 10,000 and 12,000 people, in addition to 7,000 schoolchildren. At first, the Algerian demonstrators, estimated at about 1,000 at the beginning of the march, appeared to comply with instructions to mix with the European groups. This appearance of conformity, however, was purely tactical.⁴

As the procession moved toward the war memorial along Rue Bugeaud and Rue Thiers, the Algerian crowd grew rapidly. People entered from side streets and surrounding areas. Near the Protestant church, the march changed sharply from an official celebration into a political demonstration. Protesters brought out banners that had been carefully concealed and began chanting explicit slogans: "Long live Messali," "Free Messali" (Libérez Messali), and "Down with colonialism" (A bas le colonialisme). In a highly symbolic challenge to French sovereignty, the Algerian flag was raised. The security report described it precisely as "a green flag with a crescent and a five-pointed silver star" (Un drapeau vert avec croissant et étoile d'argent à cinq branches).⁵ Raising the flag in the center of the European city represented an open declaration of a national consciousness that sought to break the barrier of fear and make a final break with the illusion of "assimilation."

2. Armed Confrontation and the Security Justification for Repression. Faced with this open challenge, the colonial authorities quickly activated the previously prepared "protection plan." Special Police Commissioner Martin advanced with police officers and ordered the demonstrators to lower their banners. This moment became the immediate trigger for the confrontation. The demonstrators raised the index finger of the right hand toward the sky, and violent clashes followed. The administrative report states that demonstrators used stones, bladed weapons, including bousaadi daggers (Les bousaadis), and small firearms against police forces, which quickly opened fire. The most violent confrontation occurred at the intersection of Rue Bugeaud and Rue Thiers. The main concern of the French police and gendarmerie was to prevent the demonstrators, estimated at around 3,000 people, from breaking through the security barrier and reaching Cours Bertagna, the center of the European presence in Annaba.⁶

The clashes produced a bloody toll that reflected the violence of the confrontation. Twenty-eight police officers were injured, and two European civilians were brutally killed, including Pierre Marchetti, who later died from his wounds. The administration recorded two Algerian deaths and 16 wounded. Official reports often minimized Algerian casualties. Even so, the Sub-Prefect's statement that the "strict measures taken in advance made it possible to avoid a terrible catastrophe" indicates that French forces used live ammunition and brute force without restraint to disperse the crowds.

¹ Ibid

² Rapport du Maire de Duvivier sur l'implantation du "Parti des Amis du Manifeste et de la Liberté", op cit.

³ Rapport d'ensemble du Sous-Préfet de Bône sur les causes historiques, politiques et sociales des événements du 8 Mai 1945 op cit.

⁴ Ibid.p 10

⁵ Ibid ,p10.

⁶ Ibid ;p11

3. Manufacturing "Loyalty" Through Coercion: Administrative Pressure on Religious Leaders.

The colonial administration did not stop at direct repression in the streets. It immediately used symbolic and psychological violence to isolate the protesting population from its religious and civic elites. The "Letter of Apology and Justification" (Lettre d'excuses et de justification), addressed on 17 May 1945 by Mohamed Boulkebal, Imam of the Great Mosque of Bône, to the Sub-Prefect, is a rare historical document that reveals the mechanisms of colonial coercion.¹

The document shows that the French administration summoned Muslim notables and severely reprimanded them for failing to use their "secular and religious authority" to prevent the unrest. Under the threat of arrest and military prosecution, which had already affected colleagues such as Abderrahmane Mourad, head of the Association of Ulama in Annaba, the Imam was compelled to issue a statement of disavowal and submission. In his letter, he explained his absence by noting that he had only recently arrived in the city, in February 1945. More significantly, he was forced to use religious language in support of the colonial agenda. He described the demonstrators as "people without faith or law" (sans foi ni loi). Under pressure, he went so far as to declare them "expelled from the Islamic faith" because they had "disobeyed God and those in authority."²

An academic reading of this letter should not place the Imam in the category of betrayal. It is more appropriate to understand him as a victim of a terrifying colonial apparatus that did not hesitate to crush anyone who stood in its way. French authorities understood that suppressing the uprising required more than bullets. They also sought religious rulings and condemnations from traditional leaders in order to weaken the morale of the resistance, criminalize the national movement, and strip it of its emancipatory meaning. The goal was to portray the movement as nothing more than acts of plunder and looting carried out by fanatics.

Section III: Colonial Repression Policies and Measures to Reassert Control

Once the demonstrations in Annaba had been contained and the crowds dispersed on 8 May 1945, the colonial apparatus rapidly implemented a comprehensive strategy of repression designed to reassert control. This strategy extended beyond direct physical violence. It included the prosecution of movement leaders before exceptional military courts, open psychological and military intimidation of rural communities, and a propaganda campaign designed to whitewash the colonial administration and obscure the traces of the crime.

1. The Judicial Guillotine and Arbitrary Administrative Detention

The Permanent Military Court of Constantine (Tribunal Militaire de Constantine) became the principal judicial instrument for repressing activists of the national movement in Bône and its surrounding areas. Judicial police and General Security reports from July and August 1945 show charges ranging from "attempted murder" and "armed rebellion" to "demonstrating against French sovereignty." The resulting sentences were extremely severe and failed to meet basic standards of a fair trial. The following table presents examples of these sentences as recorded in the security reports:

No.	Name (as recorded in the archive)	Charge	Sentence imposed by the Military Court
1	Wahni Ammar, known as Ismail Ben Laradi	Attempted murder of security personnel	Death sentence (Peine de mort)
2	Soltani Noui Ben Hassan	Attempted murder of a peace officer	Death sentence
3	Touaref Chouaib Ben Mekki	Attempted murder of a police officer	20 years of hard labor (Travaux forcés) and a 20-year residence ban
4	Abadli Chaabane Ben Ammar	Armed rebellion and violation of sovereignty	15 years of hard labor and a 15-year residence ban
5	Hani Farhat Ben Belkacem	Armed rebellion (after revision of the judgment)	10 years of hard labor and a 10-year residence ban
6	Boufessioua Abdelmadjid Ben Ammar	Armed rebellion and participation in demonstrations	12 years in prison and a fine of 3,000 francs

Source: Compiled from General Security and Judicial Police reports.

Rapport de la Sûreté Générale et Police Judiciaire sur les condamnations juillet août 1945 FR ANOM GGA 933-298. Alongside these severe sentences, the administration used "administrative detention" (Internements administratifs) without trial against political and religious cadres. A list from the district of Bône for September 1945 shows that figures such as Bay Laghoun Mohamed Salah and Senni Ammar were exiled to camps in the south.³ This security disarray also led to arbitrary arrest campaigns based on "late denunciations" (Dénonciations tardives). The military court later warned

¹ Lettre d'excuses et de justification de l'Imam de la Grande Mosquée de Bône adressée au Sous-Préfet, 17 mai 1945, FR ANOM GGA 933-298.

² Lettre d'excuses et de justification de l'Imam de la Grande Mosquée de Bône adressée au Sous-Préfet, 17 mai 1945, op cit.

³ État nominatif des internements administratifs des musulmans de l'arrondissement de Bône, 8 septembre 1945

against malicious accusations intended to settle personal disputes. It ordered the release of dozens of farmers and workers because of insufficient evidence (*Faute de preuves*), after they had spent weeks in prison.¹

2. Militarization and Psychological Intimidation as a Means of Restoring "Authority"

The French administration did not rely only on exceptional courts. It also assigned the army the task of "restoring the prestige of authority" (*Restaurer le prestige de l'autorité*) through open state terror. Directives issued at the end of May 1945 by General Duval, commander of the Constantine territorial division, provide a clear blueprint for militarizing public space and instilling fear among rural populations.

Duval ordered "demonstrations of force" (*Démonstrations de force*). These included sudden concentrations of troops at night in selected locations to intimidate local inhabitants, as well as armed patrols raiding even the smallest hamlets and isolated farms. One of the most significant instructions called for the "systematic organization of aircraft flights over the countryside, especially over markets." The stated objective was explicit: "The native population must know that the air force is capable of intervening at the first call."² This strategy shows how air power was used as an instrument of collective psychological intimidation against a rural population that possessed little more than simple agricultural tools.

3. Colonial Contradictions and the Propaganda War: Between Claims of Legality and Attempts to Buy Silence

In a late attempt to contain the moral and political consequences of the crisis, the Governor-General of Algeria promoted a discourse centered on "respect for the law" and the "impartiality of justice." At the end of June 1945, he issued instructions calling for an end to individual reprisals and arbitrary property confiscations.³ This official discourse stood in sharp contrast to administrative practices that relied on falsehoods and cinematic propaganda to conceal the massacres. The Governor-General's office issued strict instructions to *Actualités Françaises* to send a cameraman to the Constantine region. He was to film staged scenes showing "fraternity in the douars" and the return of "Muslims and Europeans working together in the fields." Sub-prefects were ordered to facilitate this propaganda operation in order to mislead French and international public opinion.⁴

At the same time, the administration became concerned about a possible mutiny among Algerian soldiers serving in the French army, especially *tirailleurs* returning from the European fronts. Particular attention was given to members of the 7th Algerian *Tirailleurs* Regiment (7e R.T.A.) who returned to find their families victims of repression. To prevent such a mutiny, the commander of the 19th Army Corps proposed financial assistance through the "Social Service" for these soldiers' families. In remarkably explicit language, he described this assistance as, in essence, "blood money" (*Prix du sang*).⁵ The wording amounted to an implicit official acknowledgment of colonial responsibility for the bloodshed and revealed an overt attempt to buy the soldiers' silence through material compensation.

Conclusion

A critical and deconstructive reading of reports produced by the colonial administration and the French security and military services shows that the events of 8 May 1945 in Annaba (Bône) and its surrounding areas were not isolated or spontaneous "riots," as the colonial narrative attempted to portray them. They were the culmination of a sustained process of political mobilization and organizational development led by different currents of the national movement. This work penetrated peasant communities in Mondovi, Randon, and Duvivier and also helped unify political forces in the urban sphere. The demonstrators' appearance in the center of the European city, their display of the Algerian flag, and their demand for independence marked a decisive psychological and political break with the illusions of "assimilation" and with false colonial promises.

These administrative archives do more than document the rise of national consciousness. They also expose the structural violence of the colonial system. The documents show that the French administration had prepared in advance, through its security plans and amid settler fears, to use excessive force to crush any aspiration to freedom. The records of exceptional military trials, which imposed death sentences and sentences of hard labor for life, together with directives for intimidation by land and air, demonstrate that repression was not merely a security response to a temporary breakdown of order. It formed a systematic strategy of state terror aimed at breaking the popular will and restoring a lost colonial "prestige." This strategy included symbolic coercion of religious leaders, attempts to buy loyalty through a policy described as "blood money," and the falsification of facts through cinematic propaganda.

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