

Indigènes: The French army's exploited North African soldiers

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Indigènes (Days of Glory), directed by Rachid Bouchareb; screenplay by Bouchareb and Olivier Lorelle

During World War II, soldiers from some 23 nationalities in France's colonial empire fought against the country's occupation by Nazi Germany. Referred to as "indigènes" or natives, they were treated as inferiors, ill-equipped, denied leaves of absence and after the war often received pensions a fraction of the size awarded their French counterparts.

Hundreds of thousands of these soldiers were drawn from North Africa. Among them, Algerians were involved in some of the heaviest combat as frontline infantrymen fighting in Italy, France and Germany.

Indigènes, directed by Rachid Bouchareb, a French director of Algerian parentage, was the North African nation's nominee for this year's best foreign-language film Oscar and winner of the special acting ensemble award at Cannes. Its English title, *Days of Glory*, perhaps evokes Edward Zwick's *Glory*, a film about an African-American regiment that fought as part of the Union army in the US Civil War.

Bouchareb's film begins in 1943, the year that the French Expeditionary Corps is formed, comprising the Algerian Infantry Division, the 2nd Moroccan Infantry Division and the 4th Moroccan Mountain Division. Agents of General Charles de Gaulle scour Algerian slums to enlist young men who have never ventured far from home and have no idea what they're getting into.

The recruitment campaign, promoted as a fight against fascism, is born out of necessity: in 1940, much of the French bourgeoisie capitulated to Hitler and a staggering 1,400,000 French soldiers were imprisoned in Germany, where 40,000 of them eventually perished. The French national army essentially collapsed.

The "African Army" is the formal name for the more than 200,000 North African fighters in the French military. No amount of heroism and sacrifice, however,

prevents the colonial power's army brass from dubbing them "wogs." Forced to wear different uniforms, they are set apart even further from the French soldiers.

As the *indigènes* begin their military training, they disclose their motivation for "washing the French flag" with their blood. Saïd (Jamel Debbouze), an illiterate Algerian who admits to coming "from total poverty," feels compelled to follow in his grandfather's footsteps and sacrifice his life for "*la patrie*." The marksman Messaoud (Roschdy Zem), bearing a "no luck" tattoo on his chest, is also seeking to escape misery, while Yassir (Samy Naceri) is a Berber bent on earning money for the wedding of his younger brother (also a recruit). Yassir's mercenary attitude toward the mission comes from the fact that his family was eliminated during a French "pacification" campaign.

The most conscious and cultured of the quartet, and perhaps the most potentially dangerous to the French high command, is Abdelkader (Sami Bouajila), a battler against the army's xenophobia with the aim of achieving a military career.

He and the others are under the command of Sgt. Martinez (Bernard Blancan), a do-or-die *piéd noir* (someone of French descent born in North Africa), as they challenge the enemy in Italy, Provence and the Vosges. While Martinez argues against the army's discriminatory practices with his superiors, believing all valor should be equally rewarded, he is essentially a hardened racist. But he is also a dedicated soldier, and as such his respect for the *indigènes* ebbs and flows with the rhythm of enemy gunfire.

As the war continues, so does the segregationist treatment of the North Africans. A riot breaks out when they are denied tomatoes during a meal. More seriously, they are never allowed to visit their families or recognized for putting their lives on the line. Saïd's devotion to Martinez for saving his life elicits jeers from his Algerian

colleagues, which he is prepared to endure until the Frenchman's prejudice explosively erupts ("Wogs aren't cut out to lead men."). Nor are the black and Arab soldiers happy about being expected to share the sensibilities of their officers regarding entertainment.

Broken promises made to Abdelkader from on high are the ultimate betrayal as the Algerian troops play a crucial role in the liberation of Alsace. This battle is the movie's most intense scene, made personal by the resonating words of Saïd spoken earlier in the film: "If I free a country, it's my country. Even if I've never seen it before, it's my country."

Indigènes movingly renders the plight of North African peasants who answered the French call to liberate "the fatherland" from the Nazi scourge. On top of the indignities suffered by these "indigenous" soldiers during the war, the film's postscript reveals that the French government froze their military pensions in 1959 during the Algerian War. A law passed in 2002 promised restitution, but no funds were allocated until this year, apparently in response to the impact of the film.

Director Bouchareb talks about the film's reception in France: "Everywhere we went, people came to see us, whatever their origins. Sometimes they came from 50 kilometers away. They waited to show us their photos, to tell us about skirmishers they'd met and the people who liberated them. We saw a lot of second or third generations who told us about their parents. Sometimes they waited for hours because we were busy with the film.

"The film was given an incredible reception! We were asked to participate in debates with the French, North Africans and Africans who talked about the subject, the film and what their parents had been through.... Some came with the photo of their father who had fought in World War II. One of them, who had fought in the village, showed me his photos and the letters he wrote to the government that were never answered."

A series of recent French films have focused on exploring aspects of the French colonial suppression of Algeria. Valuable works such as Alain Tasma's *October 17, 1961*, Philippe Faucon's *La Trahison* and Laurent Herbiet/Costa-Gavras's *Mon colonel*, unearth long-buried crimes and experiences.

In a 2005 WSWS interview with Tasma, the director made a comment that is particularly germane: "There is currently the emergence of a generation of filmmakers of North African origins, Algerian and Moroccan, which is very interesting. The future of the French cinema clearly passes through these minorities."

This may be something of an overstatement, but undoubtedly filmmakers of West and North African descent will play a substantial role in the French cinema, as they do in French life.

Indigènes is, first of all, part of setting the historical record straight. As such, it is an entirely legitimate effort, and artistically well carried out. One feels the commitment and honesty of the cast and crew.

It is not a perfect work. It doesn't escape—how could it?—some of our general problems in the cinema at present. Despite its integrity and good intentions, the movie lacks a certain tension and depth, with images and sequences resting a little too comfortably on the surface.

The film treats big events: the French cause in World War II, the struggle against fascism, the implications of the war and serving in the army for hundreds of thousands of North Africans. It treats these events somewhat uncritically, perhaps without putting forward a strong position of its own. It's not entirely clear what we are to make of these events.

A certain flatness to the film is understandable. It's hard to say that the story has a happy or even a clear ending. What is the condition of the descendants of North African immigrants in France today, in the wake of the riots of late 2005? What is the situation in Algeria itself, where a rotten secular regime has conducted a bloody civil war against Islamicist forces? It is perhaps not surprising that the film has a somewhat ambiguous or unresolved tone.

Whatever its weaknesses, *Indigènes* represents a repudiation of the chauvinism currently being stoked up by the global political ruling elites against immigrant minorities.



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