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Settler Identity and Colonial Violence in French Algeria 1945-1962:
An Exploration of the Relationship between Settler Identity Formation and the
Justification of Violence in Settler Colonies

Alexander Rotard

The aim of this paper is to explore the role of settler identity formation in the legitimisation and
unleashing of colonial violence in Algeria between 1945 and 1962. This will be examined through an
analysis of British perspectives on French justifications for colonial violence in Algeria. Recent
investigations into colonial violence in Algeria have moved away from the broader question of colonial
violence, paying more attention to specific violent events such as the Sétif and Guelma massacres.

The present paper reconsiders the question of colonial violence by investigating the understudied
relationship between settler identity formation and colonial violence. This will be conducted by combining
a Fanonesque psychological approach to the broader question of colonial violence with a modern
examination of colonial and metropolitan responses to specific violent events. It will propose that racist
European epistemological assumptions not only legitimised colonial violence by dehumanising the
indigenous ‘other’ but also by shaping settler identity.

The essay will diverge from the classic postcolonial literature by bringing into question the assumption
that the settlers were aware of their illegitimacy and were therefore free to rationalise about their response
to indigenous anti-colonialism. This argument oversimplifies the complex nature of the colonial situation
by ignoring the reality that most settlers were entirely convinced of their right to exist within the colony
and were therefore able to justify violence. This reality will be demonstrated by applying psychologist
Albert Bandura’s theory of moral disengagement as well as Amartya Sen’s ideas on identity and violence to
the colonial context.

This paper makes the case that the racist epistemological notions upon which the settler colony was
founded served to reduce the plurality of European identities to a singular affiliation: settlers. It will argue
this process restricted the colonisers’ ability to engage their ‘normal’ morality when deciding upon a
suitable response to indigenous challenges to colonial power.