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Perceptions of Colonial North Africa during the Tunisia Campaign (1942-1943)

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Abstract :

This paper analyses differential views, approaches and reactions by the Anglo-American Allies to the conditions of (co-)existence of the military personnel and civilians of diverse nationalities, encountered during the 1942-3 Allied invasion of Tunisia: Tunisian Arabs, French and other European settlers, as well as the various nationalities among the fighting parties on the ground.

It discusses perceptions and representations on the part of members of the Allied forces following episodes of interaction, as gathered from campaign records. It focuses on the interactions between communities as witnessed by the Allied forces - including the Free French Forces - and between the communities and the forces themselves. Issues raised centre around the following themes: tensions and collusions; perceptions of the French colonised 'Orient'; and first ripples of decolonisation, brought into the open on the occasion of the shock to the collective system arising from military invasion. The central thesis is that according to these testimonies, British servicemen on the ground, unlike American personnel, had yet to take on board the inevitability of a future postcolonial order in that part of the world.

These perceptions and assessments of the situation are examined on the basis of evidence taken from the campaign archives: log books, memoirs and diaries, photographs and sketches, circulars and private correspondence etc. held in the Imperial War Museum in London and in the Memorial Leclerc in Paris.

This paper looks at perceptions of North Africa on the eve of the last decade of French colonial presence, by the invading Western Allies during the 1943 campaign against the retreating troops of Rommel. It hopes to gain insights into the non-combat related reactions of ordinary servicemen of varying rank before a colonised region which lay outside the sphere of British or American influence, in a so-called 'Oriental' location. It looks at their attitudes to the place,

which was then home to a cosmopolitan population, reflecting a complex history of settlement and domination.

The corpus which informs this study is defined by its non-specialist, even non-specific nature. It is made up of archival evidence of the impact made by the location of the campaign, and then by its inhabitants on British servicemen, as logged in soldiers' personal diaries which have been donated to the Imperial War Museum in London, usually following the author's death. It springs, of necessity from a small, random sample of 'informants'. The interest of it is that it is first hand, unrehearsed, and broadly unconcerned with effect or self-justification. Did these candid newcomers sense a forthcoming change in the set-up they briefly uncovered little more than a decade before independence? Did they approve or disapprove of what they saw? Did they, as young Western nationals - some of them highly educated - fighting for democracy and the freedom of nations to forge their own destinies, display the first signs of a postcolonial sensibility? Or did they browse at the North African populations and countryside with classical, 'Orientalist' predictability? Were they, to paraphrase General Patton's form of words, merely 'touring through Tunisia and Eastern Algeria with an army'?

Diaries are a peculiar form of written primary material. According to Paul Ricoeur, 'the reader is absent from the act of writing, the writer is absent from the act of reading.'¹ This ought to be all the more true of private logs and diaries. Even so, we must remember that the writing subject is never totally unselfconscious. A text is always written for a readership, if only for an implied one. In this case,

¹. Paul Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, Cambridge, 1981, p. 146

authors knew that the likelihood was high at each entry that it may be the last thing that they wrote, and that it may be read by their loved ones, or by some ill-defined posterity. In any case, attitudes revealed in the diaries from the North Africa campaign fall broadly into two categories. First, perceptions of the place itself: perceptions of the Tunisian countryside as a physical and aesthetic framework for the servicemen's experience. Second, attitudes towards the cultural mix which was North Africa at the time: the Arab population, and the French and other settlers, adding up to a jumble of nationalities and people of a variety of origins. To these must be added the perceptions of the non-British troops involved in the conflict, because of the insights they bring into the diarist's general outlook - but also because of the overlapping of perceptions and of situations on the ground: 'Italians' are referred to as a substantial part of the settler population, but also, naturally, as members of Mussolini's army; 'the French' can refer to either Vichy France or the Free French who were part of the Western Alliance. Some diarists from the IWM archive fought alongside Leclerc's men during part of their time in Tunisia. The 'French' label also refers to the dominant part of the settler population and to the colonial authorities. In addition, 'the Arabs' refers in this context to residents of Eastern Algeria and Tunisia, but also to conscripted troops, mainly in this instance from Morocco, who fought with the Free French army. Attitudes and perceptions therefore necessarily overlap, and throw light on one another.

Finally, we hope to find insights into the political and geopolitical situation, including the open or covert networks of affinities, antagonisms and intrigue which affect any combat zone at a time of

military occupation and political change involving a reversal of alliances.

Topographical and architectural depictions.

There are two main contradictory modes in which the physical reality of Tunisia is presented by the servicemen in the diaries: the dust or mud-filled quagmire of the first weeks of the campaign in February and early March 1943, essentially around the time of the combat along the Mareth Line, when the outcome of the operation was still uncertain and Rommel was putting up redoubtable resistance against the invasion. The second mode is the account of the men's first breathtaking glimpse of the Mediterranean coast - whenever each individual diarist's regiment reached it, but usually, due to the chronology of the campaign, at a later stage in the spring. The style often evokes the tone of a travel brochure, but can also on occasion echo the German romantic poets' deep yearning for the Mediterranean sunlight:

We are welcomed by the beautiful sight of the Mediterranean sea. It is like a mirage to us.²

Descriptions of Tunis also express admiration for an overpowering brightness, and a striking, monumental yet sober architecture:

I can see the lovely white buildings and wide boulevards that lay shimmering in the lovely, bright sunlight... a lovely, clean, undamaged city, untouched from all this hideous war that has been raging on its doorstep.³

2. Lance Corporal Walter Cowen, North African campaign, Dec.1942-June 1943, diary, Documentary Archive, Imperial War Museum, London, p. 87.

3. W. Cowen, op. cit., pp. 85-86

The architecture of North African towns is often described in admiring terms, using recurrent words to typify its imposing grandeur under the Mediterranean sun: 'splendid', 'white', 'bright', 'clean'; this style of description applies to colonial and traditional districts alike, at least where formal or monumental architecture is concerned. Describing Kairouan, a diarist writes excitedly of: 'a truly Arabic town of domed buildings'.⁴ At an earlier stage of the North African campaign, and on his way to Tunisia, the same diarist had already described Constantine as 'the cleanest of North African towns', and Algiers as:

a city of splendour and poverty... splendid white buildings, exclusive cafés and modern shops...

He then completes the description by adding the human element:

smartly dressed French civilians and then, mingling in the crowds and squatting in doorways and gutters, beggars, men and women and babies in utter rags... Dirt, lice and disease.⁵

The contrast between colonial splendour and native poverty is not missed, therefore, and a hint of denunciation, perhaps of the inequities inherent in colonial rule, can be inferred from the wording of this extract. We must note, meanwhile, that pointing to the same contrast happens also to be an old standard of Orientalist representation. Picturesque poverty is a timeless favourite. Whatever the case may be, some other diarists express their views, in the privacy of their log, in less appreciative terms in which no ambiguity veils the Western subtext of superiority. One serviceman gives a rash

⁴. Sergeant G.L. Vale, illustrated diary, un-paginated, entry for 25/5/43

⁵. G.L. Vale, *ibid*, entries for 9/5/43 and 24/4/43

description of the ancient holy city of Kairouan which jars with the response by the author of the earlier quote:

1st May 1943: trip to Kairouan where we stopped for lunch. It's very wog, but rather better built than normal.⁶

Strong language, from the pen of a highly educated, high-ranking young officer (he was 28 at the time). Lieutenant-Colonel McClure, in this respect, is a shameless repeat offender. An earlier entry had already stated:

12/4/1943: went to Hedera, which is a wog village on the edge of the sea - quite picturesque but very smelly.⁷

Away from the sea, perception of the countryside itself falls into two categories, one positive, the other more guarded or downright hostile. The coastal Sahel leading from Eastern Algeria into Tunisia appealed to Sgt Vale, who mainly operated as a driver on a convoy from Constantine to Sousse and back again, at the very end of the campaign when fighting was almost over:

fertile country... well cultivated... golden corn, fields of vines, and groves of olives.⁸

This luscious scenery with its plentiful produce is described here as a cornucopia, a depiction reinforced further by that of its population:

Here, the natives are ploughing the hillside slopes with teams of oxen... same as have been used for thousands of years.⁹

Thus the scene is peaceful, rather like a primeval paradise. Nature is generous and unchanging, and all these characteristics of the place

6. Lieutenant-Colonel W.D. McClure, diary, p. 81.

7. McClure, *ibid.*, pp. 77-78

8. Vale, *op. cit.*, entry for 23/05/43

9. *ibid.*

rub off on the equally peaceful, timelessly industrious population. The scenery, however, deteriorates as the convoy moves further east and over the border to the Western reaches of Tunisia:

the country [is] now changing into barren white wastes of chalk and sand, with nothing growing but camel thorn and cactus.

Accordingly, and in keeping with the desperate conditions of this sun-scorched wasteland,

here many of the poorer natives live in holes dug in the ground.¹⁰

Perceptions of the cultural mix on the ground: the native Arabs

The theme of the natives appearing from holes in the ground or from nowhere is recurrent in a number of diaries. Describing a ‘tough drive’ through arid terrain, Lance Corporal Cowen recounts, for example, the following intriguing episode on the road to Bône:

in this wild and desolate countryside, *out of nowhere* appears an Arab family... it is a mystery how these people exist as there are no houses or crops or any signs of civilisation for many miles.¹¹

The family, nevertheless, appear friendly, and share some of their food with the troopers. The emphasis on the distance from civilisation is picked up further on in the account, however, when the author goes on to say that before they parted company,

the father of the Arab family pleaded with us to buy and take away his daughter of ten years of age for fifteen hundred francs.¹²

The diarist then states that the soldiers were happy to get back on the road and move on - without, presumably, taking him up on the offer.

¹⁰. *ibid*, entry for 25/05/43

¹¹. Cowen, *op. cit.*, p. 43; entry for 12.03/43

¹². *ibid*.

In this single entry, we find, concentrated in a short, terse account of a few lines, irrespective of the veracity of the recounted anecdote, a number of Orientalist themes passed on in Western consciousness over several generations, especially in those nations which took an active part in the European domination of other continents:

- the osmosis between topographical features of the landscape and mental traits attributed to the population (as developed for example by Baudrillard);
- the non-European Other emerging out of the blue - and living on thin air - who appears in quasi-hallucinatory fashion as if secreted by the very substance of the surrounding landscape;
- his sudden arrival from the periphery of human consciousness, in a text which, naturally enough in a diary, keeps the plot firmly focused on the writing subject and his party of British invaders.

Consequently, the situation is reversed, and it is - in the author's and the reader's outlook alike - the resident Arab family who burst in on the party of Westerners, rather than the other way around. The reversal of roles from centre to periphery is strengthened by the cultural comment. The Arab patriarch, a creature secreted *ex-nihilo*, from the outer reaches of human experience, displays behaviour traits - themselves the product of a moral code - literally a million miles from the simple central tenets of the author's and the reader's implied morality. Yet these behaviour traits, far from surprising the reader, strike by their familiarity in their strict adherence to the stereotypes: Mediterranean hospitality, but also staunch Arab patriarchy, with the

women reduced to the status of slaves; moral ambivalence - with the native's mood liable to swing unpredictably from hospitable to outrageous, and perhaps, by implication, from (over)-generous to hostile: the soldiers are happy, at the end of the episode, to get away. No one can now, of course, verify or disprove the tale of the Arab's attempt to sell his young daughter, or what may have been his actual intentions. There is no mention in the text, moreover, of the common language in which the reported conversation took place. What we may note, however, is the power of the perennial Orientalist tale which, by the mid-twentieth-century, on the eve of decolonisation, still stood the test of time. The power of the tale lies less in its outlandish - and indeed outrageous - content, than in the feeling of recognition that it triggers in the reader. It brings reassurance that familiar patterns from the era before the war are still in place, and have survived the chaos caused by modern conflict and warfare. The eternal Oriental Other, in other words, lived on.

In many diaries, local Muslim populations are often referred to as an eerie, generally hostile or even directly threatening presence, reinforcing a vision of the North African Arabs as a ferocious, incomprehensible race, even as some of them are in the French army, fighting on the 'right' side:

There is a... big convoy of French open trucks passing by, carrying a big consignment of Moroccan-French troops. How fierce and hard they look, with their dark beards and their turban headgear, dressed in a djellabah. They are reputed to be good snipers. I note these Moroccan Goumiers - nicknamed *goums* and head-hunters - much to the frustration of their French officers do not take prisoners for interrogation. Instead, they return with freshly scalped ears to sell off as souvenirs to anyone interested.¹³

¹³. Cowen, *ibid.*, p. 53

Interestingly, a similar account, related in content and in style is given of a British Indian regiment of the 8th Army:

Fierce looking boys with their dark skins, beards and turbans, and not at all friendly...

Describing Muslim civilians in Algiers, the same author writes that:

We found the location of the Casbah soon enough, and also an air of distrust. Also a 'looking over the shoulder' feeling, amongst this Arab population...¹⁴

The author, however, adds a brief contextual note to the eternal dread of the unpredictable Orient: he writes that this is especially so '...with the present situation with France, and now the allied invasion'. This is a rare but direct reference to colonisation as a political situation, as opposed to a state of nature - the French colonise Algeria, just as [*we*] do India. Here, the possibility of responses of a political nature among the colonised to a divided imperial power, and to wider geopolitical changes (ushered in by yet another Western intrusion) lifts the 'natives' out of their hitherto assumed historical slumber.

On balance, however, what the diarists depicted is therefore a mixture of what they had expected to see and what they actually experienced on the ground. But like all Westerners, they knew the constructed Orient when they saw it – or thought they did. They sought and found the ready-made clichés. The Orientals, whether Algerian, Moroccan, Tunisian or Indian, share basic characteristics in the diaries. This is despite the fact that they do not originate from the same geographical areas, that French colonialism differs in many

¹⁴. Cowen, *ibid.*, p.17

ways from the British version, that not all Indians are Muslims, and that most of these discrete groups had never seen a resident from the other regions before. Nevertheless, the certainty that they share certain traits, such as 'fierceness' implicitly corroborates colonial assumptions drawn from travel writing, news reporting and rumour-mongering. Spotting them in an unknown territory under another brand of imperial rule turns the cliché into an even more undisputed universal. A certain awareness that the 'fierceness' may be due to contemporary issues rather than to inbred character traits is not absent. It may even contain intimations of new conflicts to come in the postwar era. But this message finds it hard to pass through the dense fog of unchanging oriental exotica.

Perceptions of the French and other western nationalities on the ground

Contrary to the Arab population, made to a large extent to fit a pre-scripted notion of the Oriental and of the colonised Other, the European ethnic mix of the Eastern Maghreb was an unforeseen quantity. As it turns out, it is featured in diary entries 'in action' rather than being the object of broad stereotyped descriptions. Typically, they are mentioned as hosts to the servicemen as they needed to stop and refresh themselves when their convoys were on the move; and as members of cheering crowds which saluted liberation from the German occupation.

We took it in turns to go inside a lovely farmhouse style cosy kitchen where we were entertained by [a] family with a lovely hot stew type meal. The family were very pro-British and seemed genuine in their praise for the British army. But we are always wary with any civilian population. No doubt one week ago they were very pro-German.¹⁵

¹⁵. Cowen, *ibid.*, p. 62

The need for hospitality and leisure leads the troops to fraternise with settlers:

We go ... to the swimming pools [where] there is always a gay crowd, soldiers and French civilians.¹⁶

Serviceman J.R.T. Hopper's view of the French protectorate is generally rosy:

Tunisia... had been well administered by the French civil service, parallel but superior to the Arab administration under the Bey of Tunis.¹⁷

The other descriptions of contact with the civilian settler population concern the reception of the allied armies in Tunis and in other major cities:

we find ourselves the second truck into Tunis... terrific reception from the French¹⁸

enthuses Lieutenant-Colonel McClure [author's underlining].

All entries involving liberation crowds feature flags, celebrations and deliriously happy civilians. Sgt Vale writes:

we British were greeted with enthusiasm by the French population.

He is echoed by J.R.T. Hopper:

Tunis is a cosmopolitan city and the many Italians, Sicilians and some of the Arabs who had undergone intensive German propaganda (including the Bey who was soon disposed of by the French) may have kept off the streets, but the French, Maltese, Greeks and others did not restrain themselves. The very numerous de Gaullists and Jews (who had been oppressed) were particularly fervent.¹⁹

There was of course an equally motley crowd among the many uniformed forces who were battling it out in Tunisia. Perceptions of

¹⁶. Vale, op. cit., entry for 3/6/43

¹⁷. J.R.T. Hopper, personal memoir, p. 9

¹⁸. McClure, op. cit., p. 82

¹⁹. Hopper, op. cit., p. 14

them and of their behaviour were obviously coloured by whether they were allies or enemies. Rommel's army, nevertheless, inspires in Lance Corporal Cowen and many others a mixture of dread and admiration - even when finally defeated... unlike the remnants of Mussolini's forces, universally judged a little too eager to surrender:

we think, 'poor bastards, some of these Afrika Korps men'... [but] at least the odd German officer is trying to instil some kind of order and discipline into his men. By contrast, the Italians are so undisciplined, they keep straying towards us, trying to be friendly... we unfortunately treat them with contempt.²⁰

The diarist inserts a photograph of a ruined village in the aftermath of battle: bombed houses, some razed to the ground; in the foreground, a dead horse by an overturned cart. One bedraggled soldier is left standing in the mid-distance. The caption reads: *Italian army*.²¹

There is therefore a strict hierarchy of nationalities in the servicemen's attitudes towards other forces. In this respect, the French are treated kindly. The Free French forces are accepted wholeheartedly and effortlessly integrated in the communal effort without distinction or snide comment:

we head for Tebourzouk [*writes Lance Corporal Cowen*] and en route, stop for a break at a French camp. I spend an hour playing a game of cards with the French soldiers who seem to be waiting for orders to move forward.²²

There is none of the talk of easy surrender hurled at the entire nation in more recent times, with reference to June 1940 - events which were barely three years old at the time. J.R.T. Hopper writes that he was operating with a

²⁰. Cowen, op. cit., p. 92

²¹. Cowen, op. cit., p. 60

²². Cowen, op. cit., p. 48

young Arabic-speaking Frenchman in British uniform. He was a de Gaullist, and as French politics were still confused, he had to be known as ‘Sanglier’ because a wild boar had been his boy scout badge!²³

I was [*says Hopper casually and without further comment*] loosely attached to the French army, which was in the process of being reformed and coming into the war on our side again.²⁴

Vichy France gets surprisingly few mentions, except as a police presence to be wary of during covert operations. ‘The French’ or ‘French troops’ refers to the Free-French. The other side are prefixed *Vichy* French, for clarity. The settlers are viewed, as already noted, rather favourably as a ‘normal’ liberated population – rather than likely to contain disgruntled pro-German collaborators and traitors in large numbers. They are portrayed as welcoming, clean, safe - a source of hearty meals and civilized conversation. Even fairly clear hints at possible collaboration are treated surprisingly lightly:

In a farmhouse we called at there was only a young French woman and her children. She entertained alternate visits by German and British patrols, and told us that the German lieutenant was a nice young man.²⁵

Settlers are simply referred to as ‘the French’, sometimes with another origin attached (Maltese, Spanish, Jewish, Italian – or *Itie*: the only exception to the general rule of courteous labelling in this context). One way or another, and for reasons difficult to explain, the French are therefore not perceived ‘ethnically’ and the inglorious aspects of their recent history are not seen as stemming from an innate ignominy. This attitude contrasts, sometimes to a coarsely comic degree, with attitudes to the other nations. It differs markedly from the treatment dealt to the folklorised Arabs: picturesque but

²³. Hopper, op. cit., p. 6

²⁴. Hopper, op. cit., p. 9

²⁵. Hopper, op. cit., p. 7

inscrutable and vaguely menacing. In fact, it stands in stark contrast to the naming of all other nations. In this military context the Germans, respected though they are, are predictably referred to as *Jerries*, the *Boche* or the *Hun* and invariably portrayed as arrogant. Even Scots are referred to, more often than not as *Jocks*. And the Americans, under the label *Yanks* get their share of attack with reference to the Kasserine Pass debacle.²⁶ Lieutenant-Colonel McClure, an expert in the genre, never refers to another nationality by its ordinary, proper name. The only exception is the French. Neither in McClure's diary nor in any other has this study uncovered the word 'Frog' or any derogatory term to name the French. The contrast is perhaps starkest with the torrents of jibes aimed at Italians, as we have seen, from all known walks of life. On hearing he is being moved to Naples, Lieutenant-Colonel K. Shirley-Smith jots down the following parting words:

Thank God, we are leaving the Arabs, but they say the Ities are worse in almost every respect... I will believe this when I see it.²⁷

Perceptions on the ground in relation to the geopolitical 'big picture'

These perceptions on the ground can be compared to those at high command level, especially regarding attitudes to the French. And it turns out that to a large extent, they did reflect perceptions in the higher echelons of the British army, as exemplified in notes and circulars. In this respect, the British mood of comprehension - or, at worst, of benevolent indifference - towards the French as a nation,

²⁶. Where they withdrew and, according to W. Cowen: 'we were on the spot to see them run away without even firing a shot'.

²⁷. Shirley-Smith, diary, p. 75

fighting force and fellow colonial administration is best measured when contrasted to that of the American high command. At the top of the latter, General Eisenhower, in a telegram to his Chief of Staff in London sent in December 1942, vituperates the French for slowing down the campaign's progress by their incomprehensible political wrangles:

We did not succeed in getting into the critical points ahead of the Axis, largely because of the senselessness of French officials in Tunisia who chose Vichy instead of Darlan... if French forces in that area had resisted even feebly our gamble would have been won.²⁸

The gap between British and American perceptions was not lost on members of the Free French forces who witnessed it. In a report entitled '*L'Activité des Agents des Etats Unis en Tunisie*', sent to his superiors in May 1943, Captain Alaurant who observed the Tunisia campaign from its very beginning notes that the British high command is issuing the following guidelines to its army chiefs in the region:

La plus grande discrétion possible en matière politique;
Le respect des attributions des autorités françaises;

It is to be noted, however, that a third guideline concerns the primacy of American command in matters of North African policy, and Captain Alaurant writes that an American Officer has been put in charge of overseeing *le 'Contrôle Civil'*.²⁹ Furthermore, still according to the same source,

les agents [américains] dits 'Civil Affairs' (brassards C.A.) parcourent le pays et parlent aux indigènes. Un de leurs thèmes de base est la richesse américaine, et le standard de vie qu'elle est capable de donner aux indigènes tunisiens (ibid).

²⁸. Telegram to General Ismay, 5/12/1942. Archives of the Memorial Leclerc-Musee Jean Moulin, Paris.

²⁹. *ibid.*, p. 1.

This can be set alongside a further comment made by Captain Alaurant in a handwritten note³⁰:

Il semble que les Britanniques aient, aussi souvent que l'autorité française n'était pas en carence, respecté notre souveraineté... Les agents de leur Security se sont gardés de tout empiètement.

The same handwritten document relates an anecdote which, according to its author, epitomises the discrepancy and highlights the 'decency' of British attitudes towards the French following the invasion of Tunisia by the Allied forces. Its setting is a dinner party held in Sousse on 8 May, and attended by Captain Peters of the RAF and two other high-ranking British officers, as well as a number of American officers, among whom was Lieutenant Clay, a protégé of General Dewey. The hostess was a French settler:

Le Lieutenant Clay n'a presque cessé de broder sur le thème du 'Control' américain sur l'Afrique du Nord au sens le plus fort du mot, au milieu du silence gêné des Britanniques.

Parmi les thèmes de la conversation... celui de la souveraineté: 'Après tout, si les indigènes détestent les Français, comme ils détesteraient les Anglais, ils en ont bien le droit, étant dans leur pays'... et sur l'administration locale:... 'Ce colonel Tribot-Laspierre, quand je veux, je peux le...'

Alaurant indicates that at this point, Lt Clay made the gesture of breaking something in two.

Alaurant attributes the strength of the 'conqueror's' language to his youth and to the host's well-stocked cellar, but stresses that it manifestly betrays 'un état d'esprit très généralement répandu dans l'US Army.' He reports that by the end of the evening, Captain Peters looked embarrassed and that the RAF officers were clearly in shock:

l'un d'entre eux m'a dit en sympathie: 'vous avez entendu: ils sont comme cela, et celui-là est encore parmi les moins grossiers...'³¹

³⁰. *Rapport sommaire sur l'influence politique des Etats-Unis dans la Region de Sousse*, 11/5/1943. Archives of the Memorial Leclerc.

Lieutenant Clay lacked subtlety and tact. But in the perspective of this study, he, and those of similar views - reportedly widespread in the US army - shared the wider vision of the American administration of the time. If not a postwar sensitivity, they had a perception of a postwar new deal, which included radical change in the region, and was predicated upon some form of decolonisation from the French. By contrast, British military diaries give no clues as to a possible shake-up of the region which, in the near future, may undermine or remove French presence. As suggested above, their authors seem to interpret the Liberation that they bring as a return to the *status quo ante*: the restoration of a pre-existing order out of the chaos caused by illicit German and Italian occupation, and the moral outrage of Nazism. They do not see the change coming, even as, at a higher level of command, British diplomacy is starting to align itself on American geopolitical policy.

Underlying these differences in perceptions and attitudes is a different understanding of the alliances and rivalries which have shaped Western involvement in the Arab world in the long term. The pre-World War II order the British soldiers are happy to restore is that of the *Entente Cordiale*, half a century old at the time. The *Entente* was directed against Germany, and frustrated Italy's colonial ambitions in Africa. In this configuration a Franco-German alliance is an aberration; de Gaulle and the Free French are the natural ally, and the vector of continuity in the bid to restore a previous, harmonious order. To many Americans, by contrast, from Roosevelt and General Eisenhower downwards, the 'real France' is, on balance, the one based in Vichy, collaborating with Germany (the US kept an ambassador in

³¹. Ibid.

Vichy until 1943). The rest, including the Free French, are a cluster of well-meaning dissidents divided amongst each other, whose contribution to the Allied effort is marginal military back up, and who are, more often than not, a cause of irritation and puzzlement.

The context, besides, is equivocal, as the situation on the ground was more complex than may appear, as was, indeed, the interplay of the diplomatic influences in the Middle-East in the last century. In an article published in *Esprit*, Benjamin Stora evokes longstanding French-German displeasure at Anglo-American policy in the Arab Middle-East, and warns that:

C'est une des tendances lourdes de l'histoire. ³²

In this wider context, the Free French found themselves, in 1943, in an odd position: allied to the Anglo-Americans in a war against a Vichy-French/German alliance fought on their own colonial turf. This ushers in the possibility of ambiguities and of triangular tensions.

American misgivings may have picked up on some aspects of this broad historical trend, generally inimical to their national interest, and to their anti-colonial instincts. Once the Germans were hunted out, they quite overtly planned to drive a wedge between France and her unwilling Arab subjects, at least in this – as they saw it - outdated colonised part of the Maghreb. For many British servicemen by contrast, the restorative effect of the Tunisia campaign brings back an imperial and a social order of which they knew little before the war, but which is familiar by association with their understanding of the British Empire and of the Orient in general. Its harmony and continuity are assumed and reinforced by the happy scenes they

³². Benjamin Stora, 'La Mort de l'idéologie nationaliste arabe', in *Esprit* June 2003

witness in the North African cities as the conflict is coming to an end. Very few notes of foreboding are struck in the diaries. The Germans and the Italians, as late-coming interlopers, have been hunted or ridiculed out of the place in the spirit of the Entente Cordiale, and things can continue *comme avant*. A clear postcolonial postwar future is not yet within sight; the *travail de deuil* demanded of European nations by the forthcoming loss of empire is not yet on the servicemen's agenda.