Days of Glory (Indigènes)
Yes, Soldiers of France, in All but Name
By A. O. SCOTT
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"Days of Glory," the English title of Rachid Bouchareb's new film — called "Indigènes," or natives, in French — has a rousing, somewhat generic war-movie ring. And Mr. Bouchareb, a French director of Algerian descent who has made four previous features, sticks close to the conventions of the genre as he follows a small group of World War II infantrymen from North Africa through Italy and across France into Alsace. His combat sequences are filmed with exquisite precision and edited with admirable economy, and the quieter moments that allow the characters of the men to emerge find a perfect balance between dramatic impact and psychological authenticity.

In many ways "Days of Glory," Algeria's official Oscar submission for best foreign language film, fits comfortably into a proud and apparently inexhaustible cinematic tradition. It is a chronicle of courage and sacrifice, of danger and solidarity, of heroism and futility, told with power, grace and feeling and brought alive by first-rate acting. A damn good war movie.

What makes "Days of Glory" something more — something close to a great movie — is that it finds a new and politically urgent story to tell in the well-trodden (and beautifully photographed) soil of wartime Europe. That English title also evokes the opening lines of "La Marseillaise," which announce that the day of martial glory has arrived for "the children of the fatherland."

The soldiers in Mr. Bouchareb's film, from Algeria and other French colonies in North Africa, are fighting for France, but the nature of their patrimony is painfully ambiguous. Their stories are hardly unique: hundreds of thousands of "indigenous soldiers" fought against the Axis under the French flag, but their experiences have had at best a marginal place in popular histories of the war.

The soldiers in Mr. Bouchareb's film are told again and again that ridding France of its German occupiers is a patriotic duty, but again and again they confront their status as second-class citizens (if that) of a republic consecrated to liberty, equality and fraternity. Some of the indignities seem trivial — black and Arab soldiers are denied fresh tomatoes in the mess hall — but they are part of an unmistakable pattern. Promotions go to native-born Frenchmen; the African troops fight for months without leave; and the assumption that they are unsuited for command and more easily expendable than the others seems written on every white officer's face.

The present-day relevance of this story hardly needs to be spelled out. At least since 1789, the idea of France has represented, at least in theory, both a set of universal aspirations (enshrined, for instance, in the revolutionary Declaration of the Rights of Man) and a particular national identity. "Days of Glory" shows just how acute, and how intricate, this contradiction can be. Some of the North African soldiers, even as they resent the brutal colonial subjugation of their lands, persist in believing the old republican slogans, trusting that their valor on the battlefield will force their colonial masters to recognize them, at long last, as equals. Some of the French, soldiers and civilians alike, seem willing to extend this recognition. At one point, the sergeant who commands a troupe of North African soldiers tells one of his superiors not to refer to the soldiers as "natives." He also says that "Muslims" is not an appropriate name. "What should I call them, then?" the captain asks.
"The men," the sergeant responds. "The men."

The actors who play those men — along with Bernard Blancan, who plays that sergeant, a pied noir (a Frenchman born in North Africa) named Martinez — shared the prize in Cannes last year for best male performance. In departing from the usual practice of singling out individual achievement, the jury acknowledged the film's great strength, which is that its political ideas and historical arguments are embedded in the distinct fates and personalities of its characters, none of whom bears the burden alone.
In some ways the central figure is Abdelkader (Sami Bouajila), a corporal better educated than most of his comrades. His thoughtful nature makes him both a true believer and a potential rebel; his devotion to French ideals intensifies his resentment of French practices.

Yassir (Samy Nacéri) and his younger brother Larbi (Assad Bouab), Berbers from Morocco, have fewer illusions. Their families suffered terribly during the pacification campaigns of earlier decades, and the brothers fight not out of loyalty to France but for each other, for family honor and for material gain.
Saïd (Jamel Debbouze), who comes "from total poverty," as he puts it, is both proud and servile, misjudging the sergeant's affection for him and refusing all offers of promotion or advancement. Messaoud (Roschdy Zem), an ace marksman with "bad luck" tattooed on his chest, has a quiet, sorrowful air. He tests the tolerance of French society and the military bureaucracy by falling in love with a Frenchwoman, a Marseillaise, as it happens, who loves him back.

The tensions and friendships among the men unfold episodically, and their confrontations with the varieties of French racism — and the occasional manifestations of French decency — are punctuated by bloody encounters with the German enemy. Mr.

Bouchareb, working from a packed, efficient script by Olivier Lorelle, has an impeccable sense of narrative rhythm. For all of its characters and incidents, "Days of Glory" rarely feels crowded or hectic, and its occasional didacticism never prevents you from appreciating the excellence of the filmmaking. Mr. Bouchareb makes every shot count.

The movie ends, true to Greatest Generation form, with a survivor's visit, 60 years after the war, to a cemetery, where rounded, tapered Muslim headstones are at least as numerous as white crosses. "If I liberate a country, it's my country," Saïd declared earlier, in a moment of postbattle exuberance. The last scenes suggest a grim corollary: If you die in a country, it's your home.

But the contradictions persist. The children and grandchildren of Saïd, Abdelkader and their comrades, are still not entirely at home in France, which shed its colonies grudgingly (and in the case of Algeria, brutally) in the decades after the defeat of fascism. The "indigenous" soldiers saw their military pensions frozen in 1959 as their countries moved toward independence. A law passed in 2002 promised them restitution, but no funds were authorized until this year, when Jacques Chirac, the president of the republic, attended a screening of "Days of Glory," a powerful exploration of injustice and resilience that arrived six decades too late, and just in time.

This movie has been designated a Critic's Pick by the film reviewers of *The Times*.

Reviews / 02 November 2006
Days of Glory (Indigènes)
By Tom Huddleston

Most artists like to imagine themselves contributing to the betterment of humanity, however obliquely. But they inevitably have to be content with changing the world incrementally, if at all: one soul, one consumer at a time. The number of modern artworks which have had a marked, direct and quantifiable effect, in real terms, on a populace at the time of their creation can probably be counted on the fingers of one hand, and most of those will be documentaries: The Thin Blue Line saved a man's life, An Inconvenient Truth seems to have turned a few heads. But most works of fiction, however politically charged, must content themselves with merely sparking debate, offering a viewpoint, letting the public decide for themselves.

In 1952, following the dissolution of their colonial empire, the French government elected to cease all pension payments to those who had served in the French Army, but whose countries of origin no longer fell under French rule, effectively disenfranchising thousands of North Africans who had fought through Europe against the Vichy and the Wehrmacht. Half a century later the ruling was deemed illegal by the European Court, and France was ordered to pay up. But successive French administrations have shirked this burden, postponing payment as one by one the last remaining claimants passed away. Until the release of Days of Glory earlier this year. The film's release rekindled the debate, its emotive story detailing the sacrifice made by those foreign soldiers who fought and managed to survive, and their comrades and friends who were not so lucky. Only a few months ago, after a private screening of the film, Jacques Chirac confirmed that full pension payments will finally be forthcoming.

The question of whether or not the film is actually any good seems, after all this, to be almost incidental. Structurally inspired by Sam Fuller's The Big Red One (and perhaps Band Of Brothers), Days Of Glory introduces us to a group of Algerian conscripts in the Free French Army, and follows their storied progress through the battlefields of southern Italy and France, as they struggle not only with the enemy, but with the ingrained prejudice and racial injustice inherent in the military system. We focus on three central, ultimately heroic figures: Abdelkader the firebrand, whose faith in his French leaders' adherence to the principles of Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité is repeatedly undermined; Messaoud the romantic, undone by his love for beautiful Frenchwoman Irene; Said the child, lost in a world he doesn't understand, clinging to his substitute father figure, their platoon Sergeant Martinez. It all builds towards the customary final make-or-break mission, in which the men are trapped behind enemy lines, forced to defend a mountain outpost against encroaching Nazi forces, a battle which few of them will survive.

Although its English title evokes strong (and doubtless intentional) connections with Kubrick's Paths of Glory, the film stands better comparison with more traditional men-on-a-mission movies like Fuller's. Indeed, the two films share many of the same flaws —like The Big Red One, (and, presumably, like war itself) Days of Glory is unstructured and episodic, sometimes frustratingly so. As director and writer (with Olivier Lorelle), Rachid Bouchareb lacks the sense of absurdity and uncontrollable horror on which Fuller's film was built. Perhaps it's a matter of direct experience: Fuller lived his war, Bouchareb's comes, at best, second hand. But his saving grace is the continued relevance of so many of the film's themes; in France, in the world at large, a clash between Moslem and Christian battlefield ideologies is more relevant now than at any time since the Algerian occupation. Bouchareb's unswerving focus on these issues, coupled with his likeable, well constructed central characters, lifts the film free of it's occasionally workmanlike plot and gives it real emotional and cultural resonance.

Not that this is, in any sense, a dry political tract. The battle scenes are excellently staged, and there are numerous nods to the boys' own adventure aesthetic of traditional WW2 pictures (our heroes are spectacular riflemen, while the Germans can only take down their targets with the aid of a rocket launcher). There's a great deal of humour, much of it derived from the fish-out-of-water culture clash between the African soldiers and the European citizenry they encounter. But there's also a real sense of anger and

betrayal, a recurring motif of French generals convincingly promising to make things better, but inevitably betraying their word.

The film's political outlook is focussed in the character of Sami Bouajila's studious Abdelkader, the self educated, aspirational soldier who naively believes that his race and his religion will not stand in the way of advancement. At first his protests are heard, even acted upon, but as he persists in attempting to improve the lot of his fellow Africans he meets resistance from both sides, from the Generals eager to keep him silent, and from the soldiers who just want to serve their time, collect their pay and go home. His mounting frustration is palpable, the look of betrayal in Bouajila's sad eyes genuinely penetrating.

The five leading men shared the Best Actor prize at Cannes, and deservedly so. As Said, Jamel Debbouze is endearingly helpless, popping his own grenade, telling exaggerating war stories to the local girls but never taking it any further. There's perhaps a hint of homoeroticism in his relationship with Bernard Blancan's hard faced Sergeant Menendez, but it's largely a father-son setup, with all the conflict and recrimination that entails. Roschdy Zem's Messaoud is the undoubted heart of the film, his tentative courtship with the lovely Irene perhaps the most touching sequence in the film.

But this romance is rather brutally undermined by the film's frustrating climax. It feels as though Bouchareb kills off most of his cast not because it suits the story, but because it's a genre requirement: it's hard to see how either the characters or the political integrity of the film could have been compromised by allowing just one of them a happy ending. The old-man-in-a-cemetery coda is more convincing and justified here than in Saving Private Ryan, but it still feels like a cliché, not helped by some flaky and unconvincing old age makeup.

Days Of Glory will go down in history for its political impact rather than its artistic quality. But there's still a great deal to enjoy here, the film is intelligently written and sharply directed, a terrific central cast playing strong, memorable characters. And if nothing else, it's good to gain a fresh, unique perspective on the Second World War, to understand yet another new facet of that most complex and fascinating of conflicts.

Days of Glory
Indigènes: The French army's exploited North African soldiers
By Joanne Laurier
2 April 2007

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 pied 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 Adbelkader 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.

"Days of Glory"
This extraordinary and deeply moving Oscar-nominated movie illuminates a forgotten patch of history.

By Stephanie Zacharek

Feb. 16, 2007 | The French title -- the better, more descriptive title -- for Rachid Bouchareb's extraordinary and deeply moving "Days of Glory" is "Indigènes," which means natives. "Days of Glory," an Oscar nominee for best foreign language film, set in the last years of World War II, follows a group of North African soldiers, largely Muslims, who have enlisted to free France -- a country they consider their motherland, even though they've never set foot in it -- from the Nazis. They're fervently devoted to the cause, even though they get far less respect and recognition than their French counterparts do. They receive inequitable rations; they're only infrequently promoted; and as outsiders, their contributions are forgotten even as they're giving their all. It only follows that history should forget them too.

I've never seen a picture quite like "Days of Glory," which not only illuminates a forgotten patch of history, but also broadens and enriches the idea of what it means to be both a patriot, in the best sense of the word, and a citizen of the world. French President Jacques Chirac, after seeing the picture last fall, was so moved by it that he took action to make sure that veterans who had once been disparagingly referred to as indigènes -- veterans from France's former colonies, who were receiving minuscule pensions in comparison with their French counterparts -- would begin receiving back payments of those pensions. It's remarkable that "Days of Glory" has affected policy. But even if it hadn't, its dramatic power has enough value by itself. This is a supreme example of how a filmmaker can make a work of fiction based on fact that, without didacticism or heavy-handed moralizing, leaves us feeling more connected not just with history but with what makes us human in the first place.

To tell this story, Bouchareb and screenwriter Olivier Lorelle use four central characters (fictional characters, but ones based on interviews and research done by the filmmakers). Abdelkader (Sami Bouajila) is a corporal who hopes to be promoted to sergeant, but not simply out of blind ambition: He's anxious to prove his worth, to his country as well as to himself, and also to be recognized for his contributions. Messaoud (Roschdy Zem) is a private and an ace marksman, who, when his unit arrives in Provence, is amazed by the warm welcome the locals extend to the soldiers, particularly by the attentions of a beautiful Frenchwoman, Irène (Aurélie Eltvedt). Yassir (Samy Nacery) is a Berber peasant who enlists chiefly for the money -- he needs it, in part, to marry off his younger brother, Larbi (Assaad Bouab), who also enlists. But even he becomes a dedicated fighter. And Saïd (Jamel Debbouze, whom American audiences may have seen in "She Hate Me" and "Amélie"), a Moroccan peasant who leaves his mother to fight, as his own father did in World War I, because he feels it's his duty.

The narrative here unfolds as a series of vignettes, a network of small scenes (and some big ones) that give us a sense of these soldiers' experiences, not just in battle but in how they relate to their commanding officers (particularly the stern, sharp-featured Sgt. Martinez, played by Bernard Blancan), to the people they encounter as they trek through Provence and the Rhône Valley, and to one another. Bouchareb stages the battle sequences with clear-eyed confidence and conviction; they're not particularly graphic, but they hold you.

But like all good filmmakers, Bouchareb knows that the greatest power lies in the details, in the small gestures rather than the grand ones. Sometimes his methods are so understated that we're not entirely sure what certain scenes mean until afterward, when we've had a chance to think about them. He shows us the African soldiers, exhausted but exhilarated after vanquishing a German battalion in the mountains; a car carrying a group of French officers, applauding the victory as if they'd been the ones to earn it, breezes by. To them, the soldiers who actually fought so valiantly are invisible.

Yassir and Larbi have been making money by removing watches and medals from dead Germans and selling their finds. At one point they enter a French church, to them an odd and mustily exotic place, and Larbi promptly begins emptying a collection box. Yassir stops him, scolding him for taking money from the house of God, even if it's someone else's God. And as the men travel through cold, snowy mountains, we see Yassir stop to warm the feet of his brother: All they have to wear are their sandals, which would be fine at home but are useless in this cruel climate.

Bouchareb trusts his actors to carry the weight of the movie, and they don't fail him. (The cast, collectively, took the prize for best actor at last year's Cannes Film Festival.) Bouajila, as Abdelkader, gives us a strong sense of a man whose sense of duty is matched by his intolerance for injustice, although his crude attempts to fight for it often get him in trouble: He brings a great deal of rough vitality to a scene in which he fights for (and wins) the right of all soldiers to have tomatoes with their dinner -- previously, these treats had been reserved only for native Frenchmen.

Zem's Messaoud, the marksman, has a wonderful scene in which he waits for the Frenchwoman he's just met, Irène, in her bedroom. He lifts a pillow from her bed and holds it to his face, taking the measure of its scent and its softness -- it's not so much a

symbol of luxury as a curious foreign object, an anthropological specimen that tells him something about the way other people live. When Irène enters the room, having stripped down to her slip, he gazes at her beauty in disbelief. In the movie's vision, she's the foreigner -- we have come to care so much for these soldiers that this lovely Frenchwoman is something of an alien ballerina.

The young Saïd is the movie's most heartbreaking character, a kid so green he coughs and sputters when he's offered a post-victory glass of whiskey by Martinez (who, after initially disciplining Saïd somewhat cruelly, has taken a liking to him). Debbouze has an unusual, unforgettable face: With his heavy brow and alert, questioning eyes, he's a mix of scrappiness and innocence -- part pugilist, part putto. When Saïd and his comrades finally arrive in France, he pulls a leaf off a tree and tastes it. He scoops up some soil and breathes in its scent, remarking on how different it is from the earth at home. He and his comrades have been looking forward to this day since they shipped out from Morocco. (Somewhat confusingly, they keep asking their superiors when they're going "home"; what they're really asking is, "When will we finally reach France?")

Saïd can't read. When a German plane drops a flutter of propaganda -- sheets of paper with a message, written in Arabic, promising that if the African soldiers will only cross over to Germany, they'll be warmly welcomed as equals -- Saïd nestles close to Abdelkader to find out what the words say. Abdelkader explains to him and then crumples the page, throwing it to the ground in disgust. Saïd picks up the flier and stuffs it into a hole in his boot: It's good enough only for that. As he proudly tells one of the villagers who welcome his unit in Provence -- a pretty young girl who's clearly interested in him, although it doesn't even occur to him to pursue anything -- "I free a country, it's my country. Even if I've never seen it before." What does it mean to belong to a country, even when you're made to feel you don't belong in it? That's the potent question "Days of Glory" asks, although it's humble enough to know it can't provide an answer. The best conclusion we can draw is that the search for a sense of belonging can fill up a lifetime, and beyond.

Days of Glory
A revelation... Days of Glory
'They were heroes that history forgot'

A film about north Africans fighting the Nazis in the second world war has reopened old wounds about France's attitude to its former colony, Algeria.
By Stuart Jeffries
The Guardian, Friday 9 March 2007

In his preface to The Damned of the Earth, Frantz Fanon's 1961 book about the psychopathology of colonial rule, Jean-Paul Sartre wrote of how Europeans made their subjects complicit in their imperial projects. "The European elite undertook to create an elite of natives; they selected adolescents, branded their foreheads with the principles of western culture, as with a red hot iron, and filled their mouths with big pasty words that stuck to their teeth."

This passage came to mind as I was watching the opening scene of Days of Glory, a new film tracing the drama of four north African men who fight to free France from German occupation during the second world war. A tribal chieftain walks through his village, rousting young men from their homes and urging them to take up arms for France. It is 1943, and De Gaulle's Free French are attempting raise an army of young men from its colonial subjects to fight for la mère patrie - a "homeland" few have ever seen. The recruiter shouts that his villagers must help throw the Nazis out of France: "We must wash the French flag in our blood."

What's so strange now is that such an invitation to sacrifice can have been at all seductive. Fight for France? Shed blood for the grisly colonial power that occupied Algeria in 1830 and plundered it mercilessly? That Algerians should be so in thrall to the French who, shortly after the 1848 revolution, made their country an integral part of France (consisting of three départements), says a great deal about the number that the colonisers did on the minds of the colonised.

With the benefit of 64 years of hindsight, the tribal leader's call to arms sounds even more ludicrous. Fight for a France that would, during Algeria's war of independence from 1954 to 1962, torture Arabs? Fight for a France that would shabbily abandon those Algerians who sided with the colonial power in that war of independence - leaving them open to murderous reprisals or shadowy lives of appalling penury?

I put my misgivings to Days of Glory's director Rachid Bouchareb. "I can quite understand that you might think this is strange," says Bouchareb, who was born in France to Algerian parents. "But what perhaps you don't know is that many Maghrebins [people from the former French colonies of Morocco, Tunisia and Algeria] had fought for France before and felt an ancestral commitment to France - their fathers and grandfathers had already fallen for France in the Franco-Prussian war and the first world war."

Bouchareb follows the story of these men, from their recruitment in the Maghreb sun to their last stand in snowy Alsace against a German battalion. "These were heroes that history has forgotten," he says. "My purpose was to make them live again in the

memories of those who have forgotten and make those who never knew learn something of their heritage."

Hundreds of thousands of men from the French colonies fought to free France from Nazism. Among them was Fanon, who was wounded in 1944 at Colmar and received the Croix de Guerre. When the Nazis were defeated and Allied forces crossed the Rhine into Germany, all non-white soldiers from Fanon's regiment were sent to Toulon instead. Such was the fate of the colonial subjects who fought for imperial France - to be airbrushed out of the myth that it was the sons of France who finally rose up against the Nazis. Days of Glory reminds us that it wasn't like that.

The film has been a revelation in France. It trounced the Hollywood blockbuster The Devil Wears Prada at the box office in its opening last September. More importantly, it added to the already vexed debate on what it is to be French."Arabs come up to me in the street and say thank you," says Bernard Blancan, who plays Sergeant Martinez, the ostensibly white leader of the battalion of Maghrebins. "So do the bobos [fashionable urban bohemians] - they always come up and say, 'Bravo.' It's become kind of politically correct to do so. Even trendy. I'm not sure how deep their sentiments go."

Days of Glory even catalysed President Jacques Chirac to attend the Paris premiere. Before doing so, he changed the law to bring foreign combatant pensions into line with what French veterans are paid. That addressed an injustice Bouchareb exposed in the epilogue to his film: at the start of the 1960s, the French government decided to freeze, at their 1959 levels, the pensions given to foreign fighters.

Days of Glory is one of a wave of films dealing with France's rule of Algeria. It is about time. French cinema has had too little to say about Algeria's relationship with France, even though other parts of Gallic culture - from Camus to Zizou - have been suffused with it for decades. "French cinema is often accused, and not without reason, for ignoring recent French history, particularly its more problematic aspects," says Jean-Michel Frodon of the French film magazine Cahiers du Cinéma.

One reason for that, no doubt, is what Fanon called the narcissism of the west: it was always more interested in its self-image rather than taking an interest in the rest of the world. Even Camus' L'Etranger is part of this narcissism: ultimately, the novel isn't about Algeria, but about a Frenchman who fails to cry at his mother's funeral and must be punished for that crime. The fact that he stabbed an Arab to death is more or less incidental.

Indeed, such was French narcissism that, in 2005, an ill-advised law was passed demanding that lycée teachers instruct students in the "benefits of colonialisation". Teachers were to "acknowledge and recognise in particular the positive role of the French presence abroad, especially in north Africa". To their credit, many French people saw this as a denial of their country's racist crimes. And the president of Algeria, Abdelaziz Bouteflika, said the law "approached mental blindness, negationism and revisionism". The following year Chirac faced down members of his own UMP party and a growing pro-colonial lobby to ensure that the law was repealed.

It is in this context that the wave of films about Algeria has hit France. Another of them, Mon Colonel, deals with the torture by French soldiers of presumed supporters of the Algerian National Liberation Front (FLN). Its makers suggest the law on the benefits of colonialisation, as well as a statue recently erected to the OAS (the Secret Army Organisation), are evidence "that our country continues to be tainted, haunted and maimed by that era".

"There has been an almost total absence in our cinemas of films about the Algerian war of independence seen as personal tragedies," says Costa-Gavras, writer of Mon Colonel. But his film does just that, dramatising how a young lieutenant becomes a torturer and how his colonel, a former resistance fighter, justifies what he and his men do to Algerians.

This has been a political hot potato in France and Algeria for decades, and it has long been known that torture was practised on both sides of the conflict. In the 1960s, all French soldiers who served in Algeria were amnestied - which meant that they could not be tried for war crimes.

In 2001, a French general, Paul Aussaresses, wrote a book exposing the extent to which the French army used such tactics. The following year, he was fined in a French court: not for admitting what he did, but for expressing insufficient remorse for his actions. The prosecutor argued that the general's writing style reflected a "cold tone, lacking any hindsight and any humanity". Aussaresses said during the trial that he would "do it all again if necessary", but the acts gave him "no pleasure". Torture is also dealt with in the third of the films about Algeria, La Trahison (The Betrayal), about the tensions in a mixed unit of Algerian Arab and French soldiers in 1960.

These films are welcome since, until now, the only significant film about the Franco-Algerian conflict was made by an Italian. The Battle of Algiers, Gillo Pontecorvo's 1966 masterpiece, dramatised the FLN's terror tactics against colonial rule, and how the French government used equally atrocious means in response. In 2003, the New York Times reported that The Battle of Algiers was being studied at the Pentagon, where audiences were "urged to consider and discuss the implicit issues at the core of the film - the problematic but alluring efficacy of brutal and repressive means in fighting clandestine terrorists in places like Algeria and Iraq".

Sartre wrote of the military aspect of colonialism: "We must face this spectacle, which is the striptease of our humanity. Here

everything is naked, and hardly beautiful: nothing but a lying ideology that is supposed to give exquisite justification for pillage." That striptease is set to continue. Bouchareb's next film is about the Sétif massacre in Algeria in 1945. This was another shameful moment for the French. Initially sparked by a clash between anti-colonial Algerian protesters and French soldiers on May 8, 1945 (the same day Germany surrendered in the second world war), it ended with between 20,000 and 45,000 people dying at the hands of the French military.

Why, I ask Bouchareb, is he raking over the past? He says there is a continuity between how France has failed to address the wrongs of its colonial past and the alienation of many children of immigrants from former colonies. "Because the film is pertinent to the question of what kind of France we imagine we're living in. Is it one that is sensitive to the wrongs visited on the ancestors of its immigrants, one that is prepared to admit the mistakes of the past and make the sons and daughters of those immigrants feel at home?"

Guys: the following news item (from a British newspaper, The Guardian) is aimed at alerting you to the current circumstances of the French of African descent in France.

10.30am GMT
Sarkozy promises tough stance on rioters
Matthew Weaver and agencies www.guardian.co.uk, Wednesday 28 November 2007 13.25 GMT

The French president, Nicolas Sarkozy, vowed today to take a tough stance against rioters after a third night of violence in a rundown Paris suburb spread to the south-western city of Toulouse.

"What has happened is absolutely unacceptable," Sarkozy said after meeting a wounded police captain at a hospital in Eaubonne, north of Paris.

Speaking after returning from China, the president focused on armed rioters who had shot at police on Monday evening.

"We will find the shooters," he said, promising to "bring them to account before justice".

He described the incident that sparked the violence - the death on Sunday of two teenagers riding a motorbike in an accident with a police car in the Paris suburb of Villiers-le-Bel - as "distressing". But he added: "Shooting at police has no link to this incident."

This morning Sarkozy also visited the families of the two accident victims.

Reuters quoted him saying shooting at police "has a name - attempted murder". He added: "It is not something we can tolerate, no matter how dramatic the deaths of these two youngsters on a motorbike may be."

Sarkozy stopped short of describing the rioters as "racaille" - a word that literally translates as "rabble" but is perceived to mean "scum" in the suburbs. His use of that term as interior minister in 2005 inflamed similar unrest taking place then.

The current violence has many echoes of those riots, in the autumn of 2005. They also began in a deprived Paris suburb and were sparked by the death of youths in an accident involving the police.

Also as in 2005, the current unrest has spread outside Paris. Several cars and two libraries were set alight in Toulouse last night.

In the Paris suburbs there has been less violence than on the previous two nights. Large numbers of police in riot gear appear to have controlled the unrest.

The French interior minister, Michele Alliot-Marie, said the situation was "calm", although several cars had been set on fire. The beefed-up police presence would remain "as long as necessary", she said on Europe-1 radio.

Some 39 people had been arrested in and around Paris last night, the minister said.

The previous night, 82 officers were injured, 10 of them by buckshot and pellets, according to police. The authorities are alarmed by the use of guns in the current disturbances. Guns were rarely fired in the 2005 riots.

There have long been tensions between France's largely white police force and ethnic minorities housed in high concentrations in public housing blocks in city suburbs.
28 Nov 2007: Hundreds of officers are deployed in the troubled northern Paris suburb of Villiers-le-Bel to avoid a third night of unrest.

Days of Glory
Africa's War Heroes
By Esther Iverem—www.SeeingBlack.com Editor and Film Critic
Feb 23, 2007, 12:10

The unsung African men who fought for France during World War II, but have fought since to get their due recognition and respect, are the subject of "Days of Glory," a well-crafted, intricate and poignant film about war—and soldiers who fought while under colonial rule.

Director and writer Rachid Bouchareb tells his story primarily through three North African men, Saïd, Messaoud and Abdelkader, as they have left their families and are fighting along side other Arab and Black men from French colonies in Africa. "Days of Glory" is deft in its detailed treatment of the racism of colonial rule, and how that racism was internalized or rejected by the colonized.

Saïd (Jamel Debbouze) might be considered the Arab version of an Uncle Tom. His superiors like him because he seems humble, subservient and willing to go along to get along. He is good-hearted and likable but sees little empowerment among those share his skin color and, conversely, sees all power resting with the French. Messouad (Roschdy Zem) is the expert marksman who is also a dreamy romantic. He is contrast of sharp shooting and soft edges. Though such associations are not possible in his country, he falls in love with a French woman while in France and spends the rest of his time thinking about how to be with her.

Abdelkader (Sami Bouajila), the Malcolm X of the trio, is quick to remind his fellow dark soldiers that while they answered the call to duty of French General Charles de Gaulle, who spoke of liberty, equality and fraternity in the fight against Nazism, they are treated as second-class citizens in the military. It is through Abdelkader that Bouchareb shows us the hypocrisy of France asking these African men to die in a war against fascism, while making it clear that they do not have the rights of White French citizens.

These three corporals report to a fourth main character, Sergeant Roger Martinez, who we learn is "passing" as a White man in order to be accepted by the French both in society and in the military as a senior officer. The interactions of these four men are revealing, fraught with tension and are woven tightly around issues of race, pride and manhood.

"Days of Glory," titled Indigènes in French, is also absorbing and memorable as a war film that takes us to several locations in North Africa and France during pivotal battles when many lives were lost. Throughout, Bouchareb holds true to his theme of these soldiers fighting on two fronts, not unlike how African Americans spoke of fighting for the "double-V," for victory against the Germans and victory at home against racism. This film, which is nominated for an Oscar, is based on a true story of men who had courage, skill and tenacity but are forgotten heroes.

Esther Iverem's review of "Days of Glory" also appears on www.BET.com. She is the author of the forthcoming book *We Gotta Have It: Twenty Years of Seeing Black at the Movies, 1986-2006* (Thunder's Mouth Press, April 2007).