

“To Spread the French Language Is to Extend the *Patrie*” *The Colonial Mission of the Alliance Française*

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ABSTRACT The Alliance Française was founded in 1883 to reinforce France’s colonial ambitions in Tunisia and throughout the Mediterranean basin. Its focus on language as a tool of empire was unprecedented among the colonial powers. This article revisits that colonial past and examines the Alliance’s role as a purveyor of colonial education during the early years of the Third Republic. Its founders envisioned modern France as an imperial republic that would consolidate a republican polity while simultaneously asserting its mounting stature as a world empire. Quickly spreading beyond its colonial matrix, the Alliance Française grew to build a vast cultural network abroad. This article examines the complex and often contradictory processes that led from colonial strategies of dominance to the development of modern French cultural relations abroad. It argues, too, for a more comprehensive inclusion of nineteenth-century imperial expansion within the historical narrative of the rise of modern French cultural diplomacy.

KEYWORDS colonial history, French language, cultural policy, Tunisia, Alliance Française

When readers of this journal hear mention of the Alliance Française, certain images undoubtedly leap to mind. Americans likely picture well-heeled ladies in Chanel suits sipping Bordeaux wine at pricey cultural events, or local groups of earnest Francophiles getting together to improve their conversational skills in French, discuss the latest Parisian literary prizes, celebrate Bastille Day, or organize bicycle tours to Provence. For the most part, the Alliance conjures up an image of French as the quintessential language of culture with a capital C.

In 1883, however, the newly minted Alliance Française evoked visions of a decidedly more strategic and political nature: those of an aspiring colonial power, of republican elites bent on redressing a nation felled by Prussian sword, and of a civilizing mission casting France as the towering exemplar of cultural superiority, republican progress, and imperial emulation. Its founders elected the French language as the new standard-bearer for a program of national

renaissance through imperial expansion.¹ This, in short, was the program of the “Alliance Française for the Propagation of the French Language in the Colonies and Abroad,” a name it retained until its post-1945 reincarnation.

Today, the colonial past of the Alliance Française has been largely forgotten. Most often, when the history of the Alliance is mentioned in the contemporary media, the banner of its official founding fathers is quickly unfurled with the presumed intent of rooting the institution’s identity squarely in the heroic liberal firmament of the early Third Republic. A litany of well-known great men is frequently cited, including Louis Pasteur, Ferdinand de Lesseps, Jules Verne, Ernest Renan, and Auguste Armand Colin, each of whom undeniably played a role in the unfolding story of the Alliance but acted largely as figureheads—with the exception of the publishing magnate Armand Colin—rather than key players in its early years. Yet even these well-known public figures shared a common involvement with the imperial expansion of modern France and in rooting the imperial imagination in the minds of the nation’s youth, as was most vividly the case of Verne, who used his status as a world-renowned writer to popularize a new image of French national and imperial grandeur.² In an equally powerful vein, Armand Colin worked tirelessly to spread French thought and influence via his extensive textbook-publishing enterprise that exported French books throughout the expanding empire. However, this imperial dimension of the public personas of Alliance founding fathers has been fully eclipsed from view.

Instead, the Alliance’s early history is generally subsumed within other, more dominant creation narratives—such as that of patriotism, international friendship, a shared love of France and the French language, or early *francophonie*—that attempt to explain the organization’s origins and remarkable longevity.³ A March 2010 article in *Le monde*, coauthored by three prominent members of the Alliance Française Foundation,⁴ television celebrity and journalist Bernard

1. The title quotes Victor Duruy speaking at the first General Assembly of the Alliance Française (hereafter AF), “Assemblée générale tenue le 20 mars 1884,” *Bulletin de l’Alliance française* (hereafter BAF), no. 1 (1884): 28.

2. Louis Herbet, president of the AF’s propaganda division, cited Verne’s work as having “accomplished the most effective propaganda for our language and our national genius.” Verne founded a chapter of the AF in Amiens, helped raise funds for AF activities in Tunisia and other sites in Africa, and served as honorary president of the national organization. Lemire, “Jules Verne”; Dine, “French Colonial Empire in Juvenile Fiction”; Phillips, *Mapping Men and Empire*, 129–42; Lebovics, *True France*, 52.

3. See Bruézière, *L’Alliance française*. More recently, the AF has been portrayed within the context of fin de siècle patriotism and as an essential event in the rise of modern cultural diplomacy by François Chaubet in *La politique culturelle*. In “Alliance française,” 765–69, Chaubet acknowledges the AF’s colonial origins and attributes the institution’s early orientation to “neo-mercantile rhetoric” and “imperial rivalries.”

4. Created in 2007, the Alliance Française Foundation is a distinct legal entity that took over the functions of the International Relations division of the central Paris office. It is a private foundation with public interest status that encourages private investment and charitable donations to subsidize and expand the activities of the AF throughout the world.

Pivot, novelist and French Academician Erik Orsenna, and Alliance world president Jean-Pierre de Launoit, recounts a familiar institutional refrain: Alliance founders had the “simple and brilliant” idea of entrusting to foreigners, “those who love our language and culture . . . in a disinterested manner,” the task of developing French culture abroad.⁵ Narratives such as this one, however, that foreground international friendship and a shared love of French, need at the very least to be balanced against the more comprehensive historical reality of the Alliance’s role as a cultural auxiliary in French imperial expansion. If left to stand alone, such narratives as a form of institutional memory are misleading and merely illustrate the powerful erasure of France’s colonial past from contemporary cultural and political discourse. The founding story of the Alliance Française was not everywhere and at all times about friendship and love of French, nor was it disinterested. While many “friends of France” throughout the world did rush to be part of the Alliance Française networks abroad, there were also many others whose introduction to the French language occurred within the circumscribed world of colonial subjugation.⁶ Of course, an understanding of the Alliance’s colonial origins does not suffice to explain the rapid expansion of its global network, nor can it account for the institution’s spectacular longevity and creative adaptation to the needs and desires of a changing francophone world. The story of the Alliance Française is multifaceted and, as such, warrants a careful telling. The portion of that story I present here strives to restore the institution’s historical complexity by examining how the Alliance hoped to use the propulsive force of culture and language to anchor French imperial power. To ignore this essential dimension of the history of the Alliance Française would be to misinterpret its remarkable evolution as an institution and to misunderstand the origins of modern French cultural diplomacy itself.

Although we are most familiar with the institutions and policies of French cultural diplomacy as by-products of the post-1945 world, I argue here for the importance of adopting a longer historical lens, one that focuses on the earlier imperial genesis of these very forms and practices. The Alliance Française provides a thought-provoking frame for this longer view because, although originally a colonial institution, it remains extremely active throughout the world today as a venue for the official promotion of the French language and culture.⁷

5. De Launoit, Pivot, and Orsenna, “Alliance française.”

6. In 1884 Pierre Foncin, inspector general of public schools, noted that the AF was already receiving a “quite voluminous correspondence” from potential friends of France around the world. Drapeyron, “L’Alliance française.” Simultaneously, the AF began working in tandem with the governor of Senegal to fund schools set up by the French military following its incursions into the inland territories. *Journal officiel de la République française, Lois et décrets*, July 4, 1884, 3567.

7. How it made this transition is a question I am exploring more fully in a book-length study of the AF.

By probing its history, we find that early promoters of the Alliance first maneuvered in specific and diverse colonial contexts. They experimented with language and culture as tools of French influence in an effort to solidify France's broader political, economic, and diplomatic agenda, particularly in regions of complex imperial rivalries.⁸ But did the Alliance merely channel the embryonic cultural policies of the Quai d'Orsay as formulated in Paris?⁹ Or was it a more malleable human network, adapting to and shaped by local circumstances, engaging in the creation and testing of forms of cultural intervention that might one day have a larger payback for the French imperial state?¹⁰ Did all Alliance members share a common agenda? What were the interests and strategies of those on the receiving end of its efforts? Did Alliance libraries, schools, prize ceremonies, and evening French classes favor relations of reciprocity and friendship, of domination and subordination, or some complex mix of the two?¹¹ These are but a few of the broader questions that this essay examines. To answer them fully would require a closer examination of local contexts than can be accomplished within the purview of this article. Still, their mere formulation suggestively indicates a buried reservoir of imperial experimentation and knowledge that ultimately led to and undergirded France's enormous post-1945 investment in the promotion of its language and culture abroad.

Propagating French

Within this overarching imperial scenario, the Alliance Française claimed a unique space by professing a single-minded focus on the promotion of French. Domestically, many Alliance founders had contributed to the intensive political effort to republicanize the countryside, one that relied on the public schools, the disciplines of history and geography, and the French language itself, to consolidate a republican national culture.¹² They also saw French as a powerful tool for extending and more deeply rooting France's expanding empire. As two sides of the same coin, the very act of projecting France's imperial and cultural power abroad, through military conquest but also through an increasingly activist

8. Jennifer Dueck in "International Rivalry and Culture" examines similar questions about France and "the transition from colonial cultural policy to cultural diplomacy" (145) during the decolonization of Syria and Lebanon. See also Dueck, *Claims of Culture at Empire's End*.

9. The figure of *rayonnement*—the outward spread of French culture like rays of light from the solar center of Paris—has long dominated discourse about French cultural dissemination and the AF. De Launoit, "Alliance française"; "Déclaration de M. Bernard Kouchner, ministre des affaires étrangères et européennes, sur la priorité et la volonté de renforcer le rayonnement culturel de la France, Paris le 9 mars 2010," discours .vie-publique.fr/notices/103000568.html (accessed Oct. 22, 2016); Sasportas, "La rayonnement de la France."

10. Chaubet, "Alliance française," 773.

11. For studies that explore similar questions, see Barthélemy, Picard, and Rogers, "L'enseignement dans l'Empire."

12. Caroline Ford in "Which Nation?" emphasizes that during this historical moment both Left and Right converged, albeit for different reasons, on the centrality of the French language to national identity.

propagation of the French language, was in turn a constituent and galvanizing element of modern French national identity.¹³ In short, the Alliance Française seized upon this moment of intensifying imperial expansion to reaffirm the enduring cultural power of France in the modern world. As such, Joseph S. Nye Jr. identified it as an early purveyor of “soft power.”¹⁴ In this moment of national consolidation and imperial possibilities, the Alliance rallied around the French language and culture as an undeniable and perhaps unique source of strength and prestige for France in the world.

In many ways, the Alliance’s emphasis on the French language was not new. Its founders did, however, seize upon a propitious moment to channel and capitalize on the well-established cultural power of French in the world. As the Ministry of Foreign Affairs knew so well, the French language and culture had long anchored France’s prestige abroad, particularly since Louis XIV’s court society soared to prominence as a model of civility and power. Stretching back to at least the sixteenth century, secular and religious schools that offered instruction in French played a significant role in France’s trade and expansionist impulses throughout the eastern Mediterranean basin. The language of aspiring elites, the centralizing state, and the law, French was also a critical language of the Enlightenment, the *Encyclopédie*, and the French Revolution, carrying well beyond the borders of France a subversive message of reason, individual freedoms, and the will to end arbitrary forms of oppression. Adding to this complex and sometimes volatile mix was a diasporic French of religious exile, spoken by Huguenots banished by the monarchy or Catholics shunned by the republic.¹⁵ Each of these factors contributed to the fortunes of French abroad.

But French was also a language of empire, and Alliance founders subscribed to the general view that language, education, and culture were the most valuable long-term means of establishing France’s imperial power. From the earliest days of the colonization of Algeria, French military leaders, after first endorsing the acquisition of Arabic by French officials, began calling for the propagation of French as the only sure means of winning native hearts and minds and even of paving the way for the “fusion of races.”¹⁶ In 1841 General Franciade Fleurus Duvivier explained that a fusion of France and Algeria could

13. See Conklin, *Mission to Civilize; Sessions, By Sword and Plow*; Blanchard, Lemaire, and Bancel, *Culture coloniale en France*; and Wilder, *French Imperial Nation-State*.

14. Nye, *Soft Power*, 100.

15. Cabanel, “Exils et exportation”; Cabanel, “La France et sa langue en Méditerranée.”

16. On the role of Arabic and military interpreters, see Cour, “Notes sur les chaires”; and Messaoudi, “Renseigner, enseigner.” Some contemplated the benefits of a biological fusion of races through procreation, thinking that unions between Muslim women and French men might create new colonial alliances that would undermine traditional power structures. Most references to racial fusion in this context, however, were not advocating miscegenation but rather a type of cultural fusion, imagined as the result of a shared education and long-term assimilation through reforms. See Abi-Mershed, *Apostles of Modernity*, 96, 138; Audouard, *Un Moyen d’assurer la conquête*, 7; and Duvivier, *Solution de la question de l’Algérie*, 42.

only result from the education of young children. Mixed marriages alone would not, in his view, produce children that were culturally mixed. Instead, he predicted, such children would merely take on the racial type of the place where they were raised. For Duvivier, the fusion of two populations would occur only when both had “generally the same thoughts, the same affinities, the same repulsions, [and] the same way of looking at things.” “Language,” he resolved, “is the only means to transmit and exchange [such] thoughts and feelings. . . . Not to spread our language among the indigenous subjects of Algeria would be to maintain the barrier that separates us.”¹⁷ A similar sentiment resonated throughout the Alliance’s early years.

As important, Alliance founders understood the extraordinary reach and power of the Catholic Church and its supporting role in France’s imperial expansion. As J. P. Daughton has demonstrated, despite its increasing secularization, France was, and remained, Catholic in most parts of the world.¹⁸ Indeed, French missionaries were arguably the most important vector of the propagation of French abroad. A consequence of the church’s powerful missionary revival following the French Revolution, nineteenth-century France emerged as the world’s premiere nation of overseas missionary activity.¹⁹ Much of this global expansion of French missions was the work of women religious who, as Sarah Curtis has shown, founded or participated in missionary orders that were engaged in social welfare, health, and education and that contributed in major ways to “the cultural construction of empire in the nineteenth century.”²⁰ Alliance founders not only understood this but admired their achievements. They sought to work with missionaries, fund their French-language schools, and help incorporate them into a larger, if not yet coherent, network of French influence abroad.²¹ Although, in the end, they pursued different goals, French missionaries and Alliance personnel were perceived and operated as representatives of France abroad. They also shared extensive experience acting in remote places in the world, without easy communications, and within complex host cultures that complicated or caused them to revise their goals.

By 1870 the propagation of French abroad undeniably had a long history. But it was particularly during France’s post-Sedan soul-searching over its plummeting status as a European and possibly a world power that the significance of

17. Duvivier, *Solution de la question de l’Algérie*, 8–9.

18. Daughton, *Empire Divided*.

19. From the late nineteenth century until 1940 France was responsible for an estimated 30 percent of the missionary activity throughout the world. See Prudhomme, “Les Missions catholiques”; and Prudhomme, *Missions chrétiennes et colonisation*.

20. Curtis, *Civilizing Habits*, 3.

21. Missionary groups funded by the AF agreed to teach in the French language, correspond with AF headquarters, and be inspected by its members.

French came into sharper strategic focus as a modern vehicle for revitalizing France's fortunes abroad. This new context of emergent imperial interest ultimately gave rise to the Alliance Française.

The Alliance Française: Faces of the Imperial Republic

There is no extant photograph of the undoubtedly bearded men dressed in black suits who gathered at the Cercle Saint-Simon, a Parisian literary and historical club for men, to create the Alliance Française on July 21, 1883.²² If such an image were to exist, it would feature an eclectic and compelling handful of men active in the dense associational fabric of the early Third Republic and linked by a variety of bonds ranging from joint publishing ventures to a dedication to popular and women's education, and a passion for the rising science and practical applications of geography. Among this core group were many who had a personal and political commitment to French imperial expansion:²³ Paul Cambon (1843–1924), the recently named resident minister of France in Tunisia; Pierre Foncin (1841–1916), educator, author of geographic textbooks, and inspector general of public schools;²⁴ Louis Machuel (1848–1922), the former public chair of Arabic in Oran and newly appointed director of public education in Tunisia;²⁵ Jean Jules Jusserand (1855–1932), the Tunisian bureau chief at the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and future ambassador to the United States; Paul Bert (1833–86), a physiologist, Radical anticlerical politician, minister of education in the Gambetta government (1881–82), and resident general of France in Annam and Tonkin (1886); Father Félix Charmetant (1844–1921), an Apostolic missionary, one of the earliest members of the Missionnaires d'Afrique-Pères Blancs (White Fathers), and the general director of the Oeuvre d'Orient, an organization that oversaw an important network of French congregational

22. Archives du Ministère des Affaires Etrangères, Paris–La Corneuve (hereafter MAE), Papiers d'agents-Archives privées 93, Jusserand, Correspondance particulière et privée, 61, "Fondation de l'Alliance française," letter from Pierre Foncin, Louis Machuel, and Antoine Bernard to Jean Jules Jusserand, Paris, July 18, 1883; "Comité d'organisation de l'Alliance Française," *BAF*, no. 1 (1884): 21–22.

23. Although operational only in Jan. 1884, the AF was set up during two organizational meetings on July 21 and Aug. 1, 1883. The core founding group of the AF comprises those in attendance at these two meetings. Others not mentioned here include Antoine Bernard, associate bureau chief at the Ministry of the Interior and Worship and author of "Enseignement indigène," *Revue pédagogique*, Mar. 15, 1884; and Alfred Meyrargues (1833–1901), financier and independent Jewish scholar of sixteenth-century France, tutor to the Rothschild family, and board member of the Ecole Normale de Filles de Sèvres. Meyrargues, Archives Nationales, Paris (hereafter AN), dossier Légion d'honneur (hereafter LH), 1810/13.

24. AN, LH, 991/36; "Foncin, Pierre," in Caplat, *Les inspecteurs généraux*, 353–54; Nishiyama, "Pierre Foncin."

25. Machuel received the public chair of Arabic in 1877 and was director of public education from 1883 to 1908. AN, LH, 1681/49; Cour, "Notes sur les chaires," 63–64; Messaoudi, "Louis Machuel"; Sugiyama, "Sur le même banc d'école," 8.

schools in the Ottoman territories and the Levant;²⁶ Paul Melon, a founding member of the Société Saint-Simon and a graduate of the Institut National des Langues Orientales who was active in Protestant networks, educational reform, and colonial matters²⁷; and historian and former rabbi Isidore Loeb (1839–92), secretary of the Alliance Israélite Universelle (1869–92), an organization that from the 1860s began developing an exceptional network of French-language schools for Jews in North Africa, Eastern Europe, and the Middle East.²⁸ These were the men who founded the Alliance Française. A handful of high civil servants, colonial administrators, educators, freethinkers, and representatives of France's three major religions, they formed an uncommonly diverse lot yet shared a single strategic agenda: the expansion of French interests in the colonial empire and throughout the Mediterranean basin.

In many ways Pierre Foncin is at the center of our story. Admitted to the inner sanctum of republican educational reform by Paul Bert, who named him director of secondary education in 1881, Foncin had a front-row seat for the roll-out of the Ferry laws establishing national primary education. While at the ministry, his mission extended to the colonial empire. As inspector of secondary education, he made several trips to Algeria both before and after the February 13, 1883, decree that applied the Ferry laws to the colony.²⁹ His firsthand observations and reports, along with those of other ministry officials, such as Ferdinand Buisson and Arthur Rambaud, contributed to the rationale for the new decree.³⁰ It heralded, in Foncin's opinion, a momentous era of republican educational reform in Algeria.³¹ Just one week prior to the founding of the Alliance

26. The Société des Missionnaires d'Afrique ("Pères Blancs") was founded in 1875 by Charles-Martial Lavigerie, who was named apostolic administrator of Tunis in 1881. Charmetant, having returned to France after falling ill during a mission to Timbuktu, was Lavigerie's personal secretary and for many years visited French officials on his behalf. It was well known that the fastest way to communicate with Lavigerie was through Charmetant.

27. Paul Melon was a member of the Société de Linguistique de Paris, the Conseil Supérieur des Colonies, the Comité de Patronage des Etudiants Etrangers, and the French-American Committee. Melon, *De Palerme à Tunis*; Melon, *Alliance française et l'enseignement*.

28. "Fondation de l'Alliance française"; "Comité d'organisation de l'Alliance française"; AF, *Association nationale*, 1889, 3; "Vingt-cinquième anniversaire de l'Alliance," *Journal des débats*, no. 152 (1909): 2. Loeb was secretary of the Alliance Israélite Universelle (AIU) until his death in 1892. The AIU's objective was never to spread French per se but to imbue its students with the language of the French Revolution and the rights of man. For the AIU, French was a vehicle of emancipation and social regeneration, as well as a means of promoting the secularization of Judaism itself. Spaëth, "Mondialisation du français." See also Chouraqui, *Cent ans d'histoire*; and Kaspi, *Histoire de l'Alliance israélite*.

29. AN, F17/22163; AN, F17/12331. Theoretically, this decree instituted free, mandatory, and secular primary education for all children, but mandatory schooling for indigenous subjects was never uniformly required or enforced. See Léon, *Colonisation*, 161–62; and Buisson, "Algérie."

30. Ferdinand Buisson was chef de cabinet for Minister of Education Jules Duvaux, and Alfred Rambaud was director of primary education. Benoist, *De l'instruction*, 102.

31. Foncin thought the decree was an "event of greater importance for French Africa" than the conquest of Algiers itself. Foncin, "L'instruction des indigènes," 847.

Française, Foncin published a fervent defense of indigenous education in Algeria and became publicly identified with the cause.³² While some accounts attribute the Alliance's paternity to Foncin, or to other individuals such as Cambon or even Machuel, the idea undoubtedly germinated at the intersection of two distinct yet intimately related groups: the educational reformers and colonial enthusiasts who gravitated around Jules Ferry and Léon Gambetta.³³ The story of the Alliance Française illustrates the permeability and elasticity of both educational and colonial networks that attracted like-minded individuals and characterized this early period of modern imperial expansion.³⁴

Before serving as the secretary general and then president of the Alliance Française for thirty-one years (1883–1914), Pierre Foncin had been enmeshed in another related network: the burgeoning commercial geography movement.³⁵ In the aftermath of the Franco-Prussian war, he authored popular geography textbooks that glorified French imperial expansion and textually grafted an imperial mind-set onto young readers for whom the empire would gradually become part and parcel of France itself.³⁶ The overseas economic expansion of France was, in Foncin's view, a vehicle driven primarily by regional interests, and he fervently believed that the French language could provide grease for its wheels. If the commercial fortunes of Marseille were, in his view, tied in large part to Algeria, the economic expansion of Bordeaux was also dependent on overseas trade: "French products will be bought," Foncin famously proclaimed, "wherever French is spoken. A French word that resounds in the world, is a French product purchased."³⁷ A cultural strategy linked to the spread of the French language, he believed, would lay the foundation for more successful business and trade endeavors in the empire and beyond.

All Eyes on Tunisia

Most specifically, it was the impending French control of Tunisia that was the immediate catalyst for the creation of the Alliance Française.³⁸ Seeing the potential for a civic alliance to support French schools in Tunisia, Jules Duveau (Bert's successor at the Ministry of Education) offered an official subsidy to the embryonic

32. Ibid.; also published in a single volume as Foncin, *Instruction des indigènes*.

33. Buisson, "Alliance pour la propagation," 48–49; Anonymous, *Paul Cambon*, 59; Vidal de la Blache, "Nécrologie," 69. Our precise knowledge of the constitution of the AF is limited due to the paucity of institutional archives, which were confiscated by the Nazis in June 1940 and then relocated to Moscow at the end of the war. Only twenty-three incomplete cartons were returned in 2000.

34. See Singarévelou, *Professer l'Empire*.

35. Vidal de la Blache, "Nécrologie"; Duthil, "Pierre Foncin."

36. Chaubet, *La politique culturelle*, 52; Chastenet, *Histoire de la Troisième*, 2:142.

37. Foncin, "Alliance française: Conférence faite," 23.

38. Deschanel, "A l'Alliance française," 5; Aldrich, *Greater France*, 28.

group “if a request were made in the name of the Tunisian committee.”³⁹ It was this offer that spurred the Alliance Française into existence. At their first meeting, Alliance founders established a regional committee in Tunis with Cambon as president and Machuel as vice president. As Victor Duruy put it in 1886, writing just three years after the creation of the new cultural entity, “Thus were born at the same time the Alliance Française and its Tunisian committee.”⁴⁰

Tunisia presented new challenges for the French, although some concerns, such as the effects of depopulation on colonial expansion, were familiar. Weak population growth in the metropole had left a reduced pool of French citizens available for migration to the empire. Consequently, the development of French schools as a means of extending France’s national influence gained momentum in colonial circles. If France’s new colonies could not be *francisées*, made French in language and custom, by the physical presence of French nationals, then “assimilation through schools and education” would be required.⁴¹ Foncin elaborated: “If the population of our country progresses only slowly, we possess in our colonies a kind of reservoir of *indigènes* that can be drawn closer to us by the [action of our] school[s] and to a certain extent made French [*francisés*].”⁴² This view took on new meaning and urgency in Tunisia, where, despite the establishment of a French protectorate, Italy was the predominant European presence and threatened, moreover, to use its cultural power to challenge French political hegemony. But true control would require that the French prove themselves masters not only over the bey’s subjects but also over the several thousand “Europeans . . . who called Tunisia home.”⁴³ Indeed, the French faced, in Tunisia, an exceptionally complex “colonial situation,” to borrow Georges Balandier’s phrase, one that presented a specific set of intractable and poorly understood human and political problems.⁴⁴ The intricate weave of nineteenth-century Tunisian society had been deeply impacted by centuries of migration and constant mobility and exchange among various peoples of the Mediterranean basin. Tunisia, as Julia Clancy-Smith put it, was a crossroads where “empires meet,” a space of British, French, Ottoman, and Italian rivalries.⁴⁵

39. “Comité d’organisation de l’Alliance française,” 21.

40. Duruy added that the AF would have a critical fundraising role: “Government officials were sure to find, through this private association, a complement of resources that was indispensable to the projects they considered useful.” “Propagande en faveur de l’Alliance française en France et en Algérie,” *BAF*, no. 10 (1886): 82.

41. Melon, *Alliance française et l’enseignement*, 5.

42. “Le 25e anniversaire de l’Alliance française,” *Journal des débats*, no. 152 (1909): 2.

43. In 1881 Tunisia had roughly seven hundred French nationals, compared with eleven thousand Italians and seven thousand British subjects, most of whom were Maltese. Lewis, *Divided Rule*, 32; Ganiage, Deschamps, and Guitard, *L’Afrique*, 68.

44. Balandier, “La situation coloniale.”

45. Clancy-Smith, *Mediterraneans*, 8.

Older patterns of migration, settlement, and acculturation had also given rise to cultural creoles who, as “long-term residents, mainly but not exclusively ‘Europeans,’ served as critical intermediaries between the increasingly numerous, diverse communities established in Tunis from the 1830s.”⁴⁶ This complex demography defies facile categorization and has invited scholars to question the very concept of what it meant, in such a setting, to be European or native.⁴⁷ Correspondingly, Tunisia’s “linguistic stew” of languages and dialects was no less complex.⁴⁸ Such was the multifaceted society into which a new French colonial administration attempted to insert itself with the long-term goal of affirming France’s political, economic, and cultural predominance.

For Paul Cambon, the first and most efficacious means of establishing French hegemony—and suppressing the role of the military—was through the law and the widening jurisdiction of civilian courts.⁴⁹ To that end, Cambon established a French court system that would have jurisdiction over all European residents. This, however, was no simple affair.⁵⁰ Claims of special protections emanating from the Ottoman Capitulations and the extraterritorial sovereignty of European states posed constant challenges to French rule. Recognizing the intricacy of their role, Cambon told new court officials: “Your mission is not only to establish French justice here, [and] to make it beloved and respected . . . but also to make it desired by those who still escape its jurisdiction.”⁵¹ As Mary Lewis has argued, there were several problems with Cambon’s approach. For one thing, he misunderstood the complexities and fluidities of social life in Tunisia. The neat divide he imagined between Europeans who would have recourse to French courts and natives who would continue to be protected by beylical courts was not that clear-cut. It was even a weak calculation to assume that, simply because they were protected by the same court and juridical system, Europeans in Tunisia would form “a community of interest.”⁵² This proved not to be the case. In the end, French officials would wager their future predominance not merely on the law but also on their schools and the propagation of their language and culture. It is perhaps no coincidence that a mere three

46. *Ibid.*

47. *Ibid.*, 9; Lewis, *Divided Rule*, 41.

48. Clancy-Smith, *Mediterraneans*, 61.

49. Lewis, *Divided Rule*, esp. 36.

50. *Ibid.*, 28–29.

51. *Ibid.*, 36. By this, Lewis notes, Cambon did not mean subjects of the bey, who were still under the jurisdiction of beylical courts, but rather the non-French Europeans who, until then, had frequent recourse to their consular courts.

52. Lewis, *Divided Rule*, 46–47. On Dec. 31, 1883, Britain was the first European power to voluntarily close its consular court in Tunisia. Other European countries would follow suit, allowing Cambon to claim a sizable victory. Villate, *La République des diplomates*, 81–82.

months after the inauguration of the first French court in Tunis, both Paul Cambon and Louis Machuel stepped up to play founding roles in the Alliance Française and its regional committee in Tunis.

Tunisia: An Anti-Algeria

Alliance founders wanted French republicans to “get it right” in Tunisia, cognizant that they had gotten so much wrong in Algeria.⁵³ A new form of republican colonialism aspired to be less militaristic and destructive of indigenous institutions, not necessarily out of a conviction of their inherent worth but because their dismantling, as in the case of Algeria’s Muslim schools, had proven to be so disastrous for French-Algerian relations and had created so much distrust and hostility among the indigenous population that all other educational efforts seemed doomed. By contrast, Tunisia came to be viewed as “a site of regeneration for the empire,” an opportunity for republicans to rectify mistakes made in Algeria, particularly in the realm of education.⁵⁴

Algeria became a counterexample in the French imperial playbook for many reasons. Most objectionable was the colonial raiding of Algeria’s *hubus* funds, monies raised by religious institutions for public education and charitable purposes. As Osama W. Abi-Mershed put it, the French sought “to break the financial backbone of Muslim institutions by confiscating their revenue-generating assets.”⁵⁵ Contemporary critics called it an act of willful destruction. From 1843 this pilfering triggered the rapid collapse of Muslim schools, courts, and mosques and provoked Alexis de Tocqueville’s disparagement. All “around us,” he wrote, “the lights have gone out. . . . We have made Muslim society much more miserable, more disordered, more ignorant and more barbarous than it was before it came to know us.”⁵⁶ “The collapse of Arab learning is complete in Algeria,” admitted the government general in 1849. In response, a measure “to repair education among the natives” was enacted: the financing of one *madrassa* (secondary Muslim school) in each province.⁵⁷ But the dismantling of Algeria’s civil and religious infrastructure had also produced a human exodus: local “personnel migrated in droves seeking livelihood or patronage in the faraway cities of Fez, Tunis or Cairo.”⁵⁸ It would be difficult to overestimate the ripple effects

53. Machuel, “L’enseignement public en Tunisie,” 46; Foncin, “L’instruction des indigènes,” 705.

54. Clancy-Smith, “Migrations,” 17.

55. Abi-Mershed, *Apostles of Modernity*, 98.

56. Alexis de Tocqueville, “Rapport du 24 mai 1847,” as translated in Abi-Mershed, *Apostles of Modernity*, 96.

57. “Project for the Organization of Muslim Public Instruction, June 5, 1849,” as translated in Abi-Mershed, *Apostles of Modernity*, 238–39.

58. Abi-Mershed, *Apostles of Modernity*, 98.

of this social and civic disintegration, which set the stage for a vehement rejection of France's future endeavors in Algeria. Writing about this episode in 1902, Maurice Halbwachs added: "From that day forward . . . the French state contracted a debt toward the Arab nation."⁵⁹

French schools in Algeria, however, continued to be conceived primarily through the lens of their usefulness to the colonial enterprise. From 1850 to 1870 the Ministry of War oversaw an era of experimentation in dual education, for both European and indigenous children, dedicated to "facilitating the propagation of the French language among the Muslim population." Thirty-six schools were created including six Arab-French primary schools that also taught Arabic and arithmetic.⁶⁰ Signaling a certain political will to expand the knowledge of Arabic among the European population, the headmasters of these dual schools were required to speak Arabic.⁶¹ These efforts did not dispel local hostility most often expressed as "collective disengagement" with French schools that had been created largely at the expense of Muslim education.⁶² Also, French families reportedly felt "great repugnance" at the idea of placing their children in daily contact with indigenous children.⁶³ By 1864 only eighteen dual schools remained, enrolling a total of 658 indigenous students.⁶⁴ The coup de grâce occurred in 1866, when support for schools in autonomous civilian communes was transferred to local municipalities, which in Algeria were notorious as mouthpieces of settler antipathy toward indigenous education. A swift cycle of willful neglect and abandonment ensued, causing these schools to wither.⁶⁵ The failure of France's educational reforms in Algeria was evident. In 1883–98 a new era appeared to be ushered in when French republicans, imbued with the heady confidence of the new Ferry laws, initiated "for the first time since the conquest" a coherent institutional effort to structure schooling for indigenous children.⁶⁶

59. Halbwachs, "L'indigénat," 220.

60. Ibid. Although overall attendance was spotty, forty-three schools opened during these years, attracting some European students but mainly indigenous Muslims. Abi-Mershed, *Apostles of Modernity*, 195, 133, 244–49; Colonna, *Instituteurs algériens*, 15–17.

61. The decree of May 2, 1865, introduced the position of an indigenous associate instructor and ended the requirement that school directors speak Arabic.

62. Abi-Mershed, *Apostles of Modernity*, 10.

63. Buisson, "Nos pionniers," 491.

64. Ibid., 490; Halbwachs, "L'indigénat," 220. The insurrections of 1871 and 1881 brought in their wake the complete shutdown of this experimental phase. Thereafter French schools modeled after the metropole would become the standard in Algeria.

65. Abi-Mershed, *Apostles of Modernity*, 197–99. Finally, in 1868 communal Arab-French schools were ordered to merge with municipal schools, creating a single unit, the *école mixte*, which provoked an upswing in European enrollments and a rapid decline in Muslim enrollments.

66. The Feb. 13, 1883, decree ended municipal responsibility for schools; both the cost and oversight of primary education in Algeria reverted back to the state. Buisson, "Nos pionniers," 491; Colonna, *Instituteurs algériens*, 15, 17.

It is within this context that we should place the Alliance Française's campaign to support indigenous education in Algeria.

Foncin railed against France's poor educational results in Algeria. By 1888 only six thousand Muslim students, out of a total of two hundred thousand school-age children, were enrolled in French schools. This result was not "worthy" of a "great nation," Foncin deplored.⁶⁷ The French had done many things wrong, but most egregious in his view was to have made a *tabula rasa* of the Algerian past. Instead of trying to improve Algerian schools that existed prior to the conquest, "we destroyed them violently, or let them perish, by design, or by ignorance."⁶⁸ The Alliance Française, he insisted, should raise the banner of indigenous education despite its controversial nature in both Algeria and France. Although European settlers in Algeria educated their own children at a rate even higher than that of the metropole, they remained resistant, even opposed, to the idea of indigenous education. In reaction, the Alliance Française attempted to stir up a movement of public opinion through lectures, newspaper articles, and other forms of propaganda to convince colonial settlers of its importance. In 1888, during an Alliance fundraiser at the Vaudeville Theater in Paris, Foncin enjoined the audience to pressure the governor-general of Algeria and the French Parliament to extract funds for indigenous primary school instruction. "How much would it cost?" he asked the audience. The sum he suggested—"fifty million [francs]"—was not an innocent choice. This same amount had been earmarked for the "official colonization" of Algeria, the state-sponsored efforts to build settlements and allocate land to settlers.⁶⁹ Foncin condemned those efforts as being "expensive and incit[ing] implacable hatred." This money, he argued, should be used instead to fund indigenous schools. "By reserving those 50 million for indigenous instruction," Foncin argued, "you will be doing more for the pacification and the future of our French Africa" than the "presence of 50,000 bayonets" could ever accomplish.⁷⁰ In the end, based partly on

67. "Discours de M. Foncin, Alliance française à Paris: Représentation théâtrale au Vaudeville, le 2 février," *BAF*, nos. 21–22 (1888): 25.

68. Foncin, *L'Alliance française et l'enseignement*, 14.

69. In 1881 proponents of "official colonization" failed to extract the fifty million francs they requested from Parliament for a vast settlement project that would have expropriated native land for the creation of three hundred settlements for sixty thousand new colonists. Taking their cue from this defeat, Foncin and supporters of indigenous education began lobbying Parliament to reduce the budget allocated to colonial settlement and use those funds instead to expand education in the colony. Kateb, *Européens*, 84–88, 168–70; Assemblée Nationale, "Séance du 5 décembre 1882."

70. Never, Foncin claimed, would efforts at "official colonization" be as efficient as those of "private colonization" (*la colonisation libre*), an alternative means of encouraging settlement via the sale of land on the open market. Foncin unremittingly repeated this line in fundraising venues. "L'Alliance française à Paris: Représentation théâtrale au Vaudeville," *BAF*, nos. 21–22 (1888): 25; see also Foncin, "Alliance française," 173–74.

lessons learned in Algeria, Alliance founders disavowed the means and methods, though not the goals, of military colonization. While the army had been beneficial for the initial phase of pacification, it was anathema, in their view, to the establishment of an enduring “colonial civic order.”⁷¹

A majority of Alliance founders had previous on-the-ground experience that informed their views of what should be done differently in Tunisia. In late 1881, after the signing of the Bardo Treaty, which established the protectorate, twenty-five-year-old Jean Jules Jusserand left on a mission for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and conducted an in-depth study of political, economic, and industrial conditions. Significantly, his report recommended the expansion of French throughout the regency:

At the moment, we have no better way of assimilating the Arabs of Tunisia, to the extent that such a thing is possible, than by teaching them our language; this is the opinion of everyone who knows them best. We cannot count on religion to achieve this assimilation: they will never convert to Christianity; but, as experience has sufficiently demonstrated, to the extent that they will learn our idiom, a host of European ideas will be revealed to them. In the reorganization of Tunisia, education needs to be at the center of our concerns.⁷²

Along with Ferry, then minister of education, Jusserand elaborated a plan for the expansion of French instruction in the new protectorate. Both men agreed that it was the duty of the *pays protecteur* to act with “respect for . . . religious identity” so as not to aggravate “religious susceptibilities.” This held true “not only of the Tunisian Muslim population, but also of the Italian community [that] has remained faithful to its schools and its language.” Ideally, Jusserand wanted other Arabs to teach French to Tunisian Muslims in secular schools while continuing financial support for French congregational schools that would help establish a more unified and ultimately “French” settler community. French religious schools—reputedly favored by Italians over Italian secular ones—could become, Jusserand added, “a powerful means of attracting to our side many children and families who might have gone with the opposing side.”⁷³

71. On these points, AF founders aligned with the thinking of Prosper Enfantin, a leading figure in the Saint-Simonian movement. See Abi-Mershed, *Apostles of Modernity*, 97. On the notion of a “colonial civic order,” see Thompson, *Colonial Citizens*. The idea of forging a municipal civic order among European colonists as the basis of “a new fatherland” goes back to the origins of the French occupation of Algeria. Buret, *Question d’Afrique*, 319.

72. MAE, *Mémoires et documents, Tunisie*, vol. 11, Jusserand, “Note sur l’instruction en Tunisie,” Feb. 1882; Sraieb, “L’idéologie de l’école,” 241.

73. Sraieb, “L’idéologie de l’école,” 241; MAE, *Mémoires et documents, Tunisie*, vol. 10, Jusserand, “Note sur la Tunisie par M. Jusserand,” Jan. 1882, fols. 294–325; Demay, “Le clergé français,” 767; Arnoulet, “L’enseignement congréganiste,” 28.

Congregational schools could act as a cultural melding agent for a new trans-European settler community identified with France. Consequently, Jusserand urged continued financial backing for them: “If we stop our support now, for short-term financial reasons, we would open ourselves to the well-founded criticism of not having understood the civilizing task that would become ours and to poorly prepare the future of this new province that we have acquired.”⁷⁴

Catholic schools, however, were just one piece of the puzzle. One year prior to the founding of the Alliance Française, Foncin also traveled to Tunisia on an inspection tour for the Ministry of Education.⁷⁵ His report singled out the “remarkable results” of the Alliance Israélite Universelle (AIU).⁷⁶ The 955 AIU students, he wrote, began their studies as “timid, ignorant, sickly and dirty young vagabonds, speaking and understanding only Arabic,” and were progressively transformed—“as in factories that gradually change the coarsest of rags into white sheets of paper”—into “decently dressed” young men who were conversant in French, “could read, count, understand basic geography and science, draw and sing,” and who were ready to be employed as industrial or commercial apprentices. Foncin marveled at the transformational power of their education: “At five years old, they were little savages, little beggars in rags. They have become educated and self-disciplined young men, worthy of the name, and whose French sentiments are not to be doubted.”⁷⁷ He further commended the AIU school in Tunis for remaining “favorable to French influence” by successfully resisting an attempt to bring its school under Italian directorship. The AIU subsequently became an influential model for the founders of the Alliance Française.⁷⁸

Foncin returned from Tunisia fervent in his belief that support for French education in all guises would be critical to France’s success as an imperial power. According to his findings, Italian “national” education represented 37.5 percent of the current school population in Tunisia. France, he concluded, “will have to make the greatest efforts to maintain its intellectual influence in the [regency] and to defend it against the rapid progress made by an enterprising nation (Italy) that skillfully benefits from all of our hesitations and administrative slowness.”⁷⁹ Foncin exhorted the French government to vote budgetary credits, at least equivalent to those of Italy, and “to organize, or at least to encourage” its schools and the instruction of French throughout the regency. In the end,

74. Sraieb, “L’idéologie de l’école,” 241.

75. Foncin, “De Sousse.”

76. Foncin, “L’enseignement en Tunisie,” 409.

77. *Ibid.*, 409–10.

78. See Cambon, *Correspondance*, 192.

79. Foncin, “L’enseignement en Tunisie,” 417.

however, Foncin did not wait for the French Parliament to enact the elusive education budget he so desired for Tunisia but opted instead, with a handful of friends and colleagues, to create the Alliance Française as a private structure that, with discreet state support from the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Education, also would have the ability to raise private funds.⁸⁰ The Alliance would “come to the aid” of French schools in Tunisia and “help them sustain an honorable battle” against their Italian challengers.⁸¹ The terrain of colonial schools was a high-stakes contest that France could not afford to lose.

Indigenous education was equally at the forefront of their minds. Louis Machuel was a pivotal figure in this area.⁸² Machuel recounts how in 1883 Ferry asked him to come to Tunisia: “I don’t yet know exactly what we can do for public education in the regency, but you must manage to turn Tunisian youth into friends of France who, nonetheless, remain attached to their religion and institutions.”⁸³ In Algeria, Machuel’s father had served as the first director of the Franco-Arab school for boys in Sidi-El-Djelis, Constantine (1850–52), and then in Mostagamen (1853–61). Machuel was educated in these schools, as well as in a Muslim *kuttab*, where he studied the Koran, learned colloquial and classical Arabic, and gained a deep appreciation for Muslim culture, history, and society.⁸⁴ While many of his future Alliance Française colleagues, such as Foncin, were busy writing their first best-selling republican school textbooks, Machuel was hard at work in a quite different vein: experimenting with pedagogical approaches to the teaching of Arabic to Europeans.⁸⁵ He translated *Sinbad the Sailor* (1874) into French and published it as a textbook for French learners of Arabic.⁸⁶ His *Method for the Study of Spoken Arabic-Algerian Idiom* (1875) and *A First Year of Arabic* (1877) were the first of his many widely used language

80. Later that support would also come from the Ministries of Education and the Colonies, as well as local financing from various governors-general throughout the empire.

81. Melon, *Alliance française et l’enseignement*, 5.

82. Buisson, “Nécrologie”; “Machuel, Louis,” in Caplat, *Les Inspecteurs généraux*, 485–86.

83. MAE, Archives Diplomatiques, Nantes, Tunisie Protectorat, premier versement, carton 1359. Louis Machuel, “Quelques réflexions sur l’avenir des jeunes gens tunisiens instruits dans nos établissements,” Nov. 8, 1896, 1.

84. AN, LH, file 1681/49, “Louis Machuel.” Machuel’s education was uncommon and remarkable. As Richard Macken notes in “Louis Machuel and Educational Reform,” 46, the fact that Machuel attended a *kuttab* as a non-Muslim was “something almost unheard of at that or any other time in North Africa.” See also Macken, “Indigenous Reaction,” 247; Messaoudi, “Louis Machuel”; Nishiyama, “La pédagogie bilingue,” 99–104; and Buisson, “Nos pionniers,” 491.

85. Machuel was not alone in this effort. Jacques Auguste Cherbonneau, too, labored to produce Arabic language manuals. Following the military conquest, French authorities and Saint-Simonians favored the teaching of Arabic to civilian employees and military personnel partly for pragmatic reasons but also as part of their vision of a bilingual, “binational” Algeria in gestation. Messaoudi, “Teaching of Arabic,” 303–4.

86. Published in four editions from 1874 to 1933, this textbook initiated several generations of non-Arabic speakers to the language. Machuel, *Les voyages de Sindbad le Marin*.

books.⁸⁷ If the French were determined to remain in Tunisia, Machuel believed, they would have to accept, understand, and respect Islam, learn Arabic, and cease viewing Islamic education as a generator of “fanaticism.”⁸⁸ Machuel longed to change age-old patterns on both sides of the colonial divide by focusing on the transformative power of education, mixed social relations, and associative reform.⁸⁹ As a founding member of the Alliance Française, Machuel promoted colonial-era ideas that were inventive, adapted to local circumstances, and rarely predictable.

The Tunis regional committee was composed of French and Tunisian elites. Muslims represented two-thirds of its 221 members and had donated three-fourths of its total treasury of fifty-eight hundred francs (only six hundred of which came from the central office in Paris).⁹⁰ The group organized *cantines scolaires* in neighborhoods where the lure of an inexpensive or free lunchtime meal might increase school enrollments and ensure regular attendance, organized adult night classes in French, and set up popular libraries. It gave financial support to public and congregational schools, as well as those of the AIU. Whereas Machuel had a budget of 120,000 francs for his educational initiatives throughout the regency, the Alliance Française could provide only symbolic and complementary support. Still, even meager amounts allowed small, fledgling schools to survive from year to year, and the Alliance was free to channel funding to congregational schools not targeted by Machuel’s efforts. When Machuel did create new public schools, such as the two Franco-Arab schools he opened in 1885, the Alliance Française helped get them off the ground. The Alliance provided much-needed school supplies and books from Paris, as well as the coveted, gilded “award books” given to the highest-achieving students of French in ceremonies that showered them with public praise and lifted them up as objects of colonial emulation. Through these varied approaches, the Alliance Française attempted to play a supporting role in the French settlement of Tunisia.

To complicate matters, the French conquest also provoked a nationalist reaction among Italians in Tunisia who resisted French assimilation and began to identify more strongly than previously with Italian cultural and economic institutions, such as the Italian Chamber of Commerce, gymnastics clubs,

87. With a fifth edition in 1900, his textbook *First Year of Arabic* was used at the Ecole des Langues Orientales in Paris. Three of his later publications also warrant mention: *Méthode de lecture et de langage à l'usage des étrangers de nos colonies* (1885, 20th ed. in 1901); *L'Arab sans maître, ou guide de la conversation arabe en Tunisie, en Algérie, et au Maroc* (1900, 19th ed. in 1953); and *Les auteurs arabes*, a 379-page anthology, with an introduction by Machuel, published in 1912 by Armand Colin as part of the series Selections from Great Writers: Literary Readings.

88. Fontin, “L’instruction publique en Tunisie,” 783.

89. See Sugiyama, “Comment inculquer”; and Moreau, “Les arabisants français.”

90. Foncin, *L’Alliance française et l’enseignement*, 11; “Tunisie,” *BAF*, no. 3–4 (1885): 17.

literary societies, and charities.⁹¹ The Dante Alighieri Society, created in 1889, opened a committee in Tunis to support Italian schools there. A low-grade “war of languages” ensued, but it was mainly a war of attrition. Although the French had guaranteed the protection of preexisting Italian schools in Tunis, as well as in Bizerte, Goletta, Sfax, and Sousse, the Alliance Française, with the encouragement of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, established committees in each of these same cities and supported French schools there. Clearly, the intention was to compete with and offer an alternative to Italian schools in the hope that French schools and cultural institutions would eventually predominate in Tunisia.

Alliance networks quickly spread well beyond the Tunisian protectorate. By 1895 seventy-five “action committees” were established in both colonial and noncolonial settings abroad. They raised money and distributed material support to congregational and secular schools where French was taught. Within the colonial empire, action committees were established in Senegal, Algeria, Madagascar, and French Indochina. School supplies, money, and basic furnishings were also sent from France via an elaborate national network of 150 “propaganda committees” scattered locally throughout metropolitan France. Financing for targeted schools came from a variety of sources, including membership dues and the budgets of the governors-general and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The Ministry of Education contributed to this effort by allowing civil servants to be “detached” from their metropolitan service to teach in colonial schools. The Alliance’s network of action and propaganda committees worked in tandem to open schools where none existed in strategic areas of French influence. In the new territories of French Sudan, the Alliance financed makeshift schools created by the French military to anchor the French presence and build the foundations of a civil administration.⁹² By 1891 the organization boasted a membership of twenty thousand, and by 1914 it had spent 6.5 million francs on French schools throughout the world. As an anti-Algeria, Tunisia had proved to be a critical testing site for techniques of cultural intervention. It provided the initial impetus and springboard for actions that enabled the Alliance’s rise and global expansion.

Colonial Education at Home

As the Alliance was shaping its colonial mission in Tunisia and other sites abroad, it was also engaging in a form of colonial education at home. In France,

91. Choate, “Identity Politics and Political Perception,” 100, 102, 105.

92. In the wake of military conquests of inland territories that would become French Sudan, the AF attempted to reopen failed or flagging garrison schools. The AF also subsidized missionary schools throughout the region. Bouche, “L’enseignement dans les territoires français,” 365–67; Bouche, “Les écoles françaises au Soudan.”

its chapters attracted local elites and middle-class citizens in cities large and small. They provided popular platforms for public figures, university professors, and speakers of all political persuasions to extol the grandeur of France and its language, culture, and national values but also to showcase its imperial project and entice local Alliance members to join that effort. In 1884, prior to launching his first political campaign, Jean Jaurès spoke on behalf of the Alliance in Toulouse, praising its humanitarian and progressive goal of diffusing the French language abroad: only then, Jaurès claimed, will “our colonies become French in heart and mind.”⁹³ In 1887 M. Forest, a speaker at the Alliance of Chambéry, elaborated on this linguistic strategy: “Trade does not follow in the wake of the warship; it follows the pathways of language.” He expounded what might be called a literary theory of economic expansion, claiming that the fortune of French products abroad had always been linked to the “preeminence of [French] literature”: “It is because a foreigner read Voltaire that he fell in love with our champagne . . . because society ladies had a French novel or a Parisian comedy in their boudoirs that they wanted French furniture, *articles de Paris*, or silk from Lyon.”⁹⁴

The Alliance Française, in turn, played a prominent role in the distribution of French literature and books of all types, including history, geography, technical, and general textbooks throughout the empire. One of the Alliance’s earliest champions, Armand Colin, raised funds, balanced accounts, and single-handedly ensured that the Alliance Française had committees in each of the twenty arrondissements of Paris. In an astute publicity move, he secured a prominent spot for the Alliance at the 1900 World’s Fair—as part of the Colonial Exhibit—and rallied fellow publishers to the cause.⁹⁵ The Alliance pavilion showcased the efforts of myriad French publishers who donated thousands of books and sold thousands more at reduced rates for distribution to Alliance-supported schools. The motivation of these publishers was certainly mixed, but there was a clear business side to their involvement: the French Empire absorbed 10 percent of French publishing exports at the end of the nineteenth century.⁹⁶ This “literature of empire” fueled a textual and imperial projection of the nation that reached far beyond the frontiers of military conquests or political treaties

93. Jaurès, *L’Alliance française*, 6; see also Jaurès, “Conférence sur l’Alliance française.” The young Jaurès gave an earlier speech in favor of the AF, in 1883, in Castres, his birthplace. Reberieux, “Présentation,” 72. These speeches preceded Jaurès’s first trip to Algeria, which caused him to revise his views on colonial relations. Brummert, *L’universel et le particulier*, 92.

94. Quoted in Plassard, *L’Alliance française*, 16–17.

95. Armand Colin convinced the AF administration to set aside funds for this purpose in 1897. “L’Alliance française, L’Exposition universelle de 1900,” *BAF* 82 (1900): 247–48.

96. Algeria was the primary target of this publishing export market. Barbier, “Les marchés étrangers,” 280.

and imparted an aura of high culture, technical prowess, and educational authority to France's endeavors abroad.

The Alliance's metropolitan committees made the empire more personal to its members by urging them to "adopt" specific colonial schools. Many Alliance chapters did so, sending money, school supplies, and books, helping establish local libraries, and engaging in a direct exchange of letters, photographs, drawings, and handicrafts with school directors and indigenous children. They adopted schools based on regional economic interests or personal local ties. In 1908 the Alliance of Bordeaux supported schools in Spain, Senegal, and Morocco where, they felt, the French had made inroads toward "economic conquest."⁹⁷ In the Cher a local Alliance committee subsidized a congregational school in Madagascar because its director, Father Thaïx, was a native son, having been born in the neighboring town of Montluçon.⁹⁸ Sometimes books were not quite what the situation called for. Perhaps to appease indigenous resistance to a new French school in the agricultural town of Testour, Tunisia, the Alliance of Quesnoy decided to purchase a plow to encourage practical training and the cultivation of school gardens.⁹⁹ At other times, Alliance funds were used to build the school itself. The Vendôme committee of the Alliance Française took under its wing a school in Madagascar, fifteen kilometers west of Tananarive, in the village of Fenoarivo. For several years its members followed the construction of the school: first the beams and a roof, and then doors and windows. Each step was described in the columns of the Alliance's monthly *Bulletin* as an action to emulate. The school in Fenoarivo served two hundred students, some of whom exchanged letters with students from the Vendôme *lycée*. Samples of the students' handiwork, sent to the Vendôme committee, eventually made their way to the 1900 Universal Exhibition and were displayed at the Alliance's pavilion.¹⁰⁰

The Alliance Française also reached directly into the schools of the Third Republic with its *Alliance française illustrée*, a large-format magazine filled with adventure stories of heroic missionaries, French military personnel, and

97. The Alliance of Bordeaux joined forces with local publishing houses to send free books to young Wolof students in the schools it supported in Senegal. Pastor Drancourt, director of a French school in Sor (a mainland area of Saint-Louis), wrote to the local AF committee thanking them for the books and quoting passages from student letters. Local businesses—notably Maurel et Prom, a major Bordeaux trading house with colonial interests and the fish canneries Rödel Fils Frères—also contributed to this effort by providing free packaging and shipping. AF, *Association nationale*, 1908, 3–4.

98. "Propagande: Départements," BAF 100 (1905): 171–72.

99. Macken notes that the *muaddibs* (Islamic schoolmasters) in Testour opposed the French school and "spread opposition to it among the fathers of their students." Local notables followed suit, resulting in a widespread Muslim rejection of the school. Citing a letter from the schoolmaster of Testour, Macken notes that in Oct. 1891 the school enrolled forty-five students, including seventeen Arabs who attended only irregularly. The remaining twenty-eight students were Jewish. Macken, "Indigenous Reaction," 280.

100. "Propagande: Départements," BAF 81 (1900): 226.

teachers abroad, as well as paragons of republican virtue. Launched in January 1894, the publication hoped to initiate school children to colonial culture, preparing them for “the idea of association and sacrifice” and influencing their older siblings and mothers as well.¹⁰¹ The magazine published correspondence from missionaries and school children in the Levant and Africa: “We want to give you news, my dear child, of all of the children who are . . . your friends and your brothers.” The colonial education of French schoolchildren was undertaken with an eye toward the future; perhaps one day, Foncin noted, some of them would head to the colonies as soldiers, merchants, or settlers.¹⁰²

Although during this period the mythical construct of a “greater France” was usually equated with the French Empire, in this magazine the term was more expansive. French children needed to become aware of France’s broader international presence, of “*la France extérieure!*” Children were learning French not only in Algeria, Tunisia, and the French Sudan but also in Mauritius, Louisiana, Newfoundland, Egypt, Lebanon, Asia Minor, Greece, Turkey, and Persia. Not to be forgotten were the children of French families who had emigrated from Alsace to Switzerland, from the Lower Alps to Mexico, from the Lower Pyrenees to Uruguay, the Argentinean Republic, California, and Chile. “Aren’t you interested in knowing what has become of them? They, too, are part of our family. . . . The *Alliance française illustrée* will serve as an intermediary between them and you.”¹⁰³ Articles on these global regions of *la France extérieure* were published side by side with features on French regional life and customs, suggesting that all of these various territories were analogous to the regions of one “greater France” that stretched across the globe. Through this process, the Alliance strove to develop a powerful network of support linking the home country to the colonial mission abroad, fostering ties with emigrant communities, and honing the cultural tools that would support French commerce and influence throughout the world.

All The World’s an Empire

The educational action of the Alliance therefore was not limited to France’s expanding colonial empire stricto sensu: by 1892 its schools had spread to Egypt, Asia Minor, Constantinople, Persia, China, Japan, and India. In 1895, of the nearly 350 Alliance-subsidized schools, night classes for adults, libraries, or

101. AF Archives, Paris, Fonds russe 35, série 4, boîte 1, dossier 3. The *Alliance française illustrée* stopped publication on May 11, 1895. The magazine had 162 subscriptions, and the board of directors had set the lowest level at 600 to achieve solvency.

102. *Alliance française illustrée*, no. 2 (Feb. 15, 1894): 2, 10.

103. *Ibid.*, 10.

action committees abroad, over a third were in the Levant alone.¹⁰⁴ No sooner had the Alliance announced its plans to harness the power of the French language to a larger colonial project than voices throughout the globe clamored for inclusion. Almost unintentionally, Alliance founders stumbled upon a rich cultural vein to mine, that of French emigrant communities in Spain, South and North America, and elsewhere, who also referred to themselves as colonies and proclaimed a deep attachment to *la mère patrie*. Emigrants recognized the possible economic and political benefits of organizing themselves as a French cultural community abroad. They created Alliance chapters, often with the encouragement of the nearest French consulate, and set up schools, much as they had previously founded mutual aid societies, newspapers, choruses, and musical groups.¹⁰⁵ The French state looked favorably upon these communities: emigrants could help anchor French civilization abroad and open new paths for trade and economic growth. “The language of Molière” became vital to maintaining a sense of Frenchness abroad.¹⁰⁶ Alliance administrators in Paris worried that the children of emigrant families would lose their ability to speak French, thereby losing their attachment to the very idea of France. Soon they would no longer be French and would thus be lost to the nation. The Alliance Française through its schools abroad could counter this tendency by reaching children who were young enough to be forever influenced by their knowledge of French. As long as the language was alive inside them, a flicker of patriotism could be rekindled. The Alliance Française offered a sort of cultural umbilical cord that would tie emigrant communities to *la mère patrie*.

Not all French-speaking communities abroad, of course, were cast in the same mold. The Alliance Française in Haiti wanted to establish cultural ties with France but on its own terms. Haitians’ love for France was “not blind or exclusive.” “We are hardly hypnotized by France,” its committee proclaimed. Instead, the Haitian Alliance sought cultural ties to France but also to Germany, England, and the United States. Haiti and France might be bound together by the “force and weight of history,” but members defined themselves first and

104. “Ecoles subventionnées par l’Alliance française,” *BAF*, no. 54 (1895): 12–16. Among these AF initiatives, at least 130 were in the Levant, 22 in Egypt, 12 in Greece, 12 in Canada, 11 in the United States, 9 in French Congo, 8 in Morocco, 7 in Tunisia, 6 in Algeria, 5 in French Sudan, and 5 in Madagascar.

105. In South America, where the French language remained a sought-after mark of culture usually reserved for wealthy families, the AF offered the middle classes access to French, thanks to its modest fees, particularly in countries where French was often not part of the public school curriculum. See Mathieu, *Une ambition sud-américaine*.

106. Mark Choate analyzes the related phenomenon of Italian emigrant colonialism. The “language of Dante,” he argues in *Emigrant Nation*, moored Italian expatriates to the fatherland, forging for the first time a sense of national belonging among emigrants whose previous cultural identification had been primarily regional.

foremost as “Latino-Africans” and clearly wanted to pick and choose which aspects of French culture they felt would benefit Haiti. Their first order of business was to establish a public library in Port-au-Prince with the collaboration of publishing houses—Hachette, Armand Colin, Delagrave, Flammarion, Larousse, and others.¹⁰⁷

As letters began to pour in, Alliance founders discovered the existence of an intense identification with French culture and history in far-flung reaches of the globe, such as Siam, Baghdad, and Tehran. For members of the Alliance Française in Tehran—created in 1890 as a Franco-Persian association—French was not merely the language of France; it was also “the grand international language of the Orient,” a transnational lingua franca of cultural mediation, the attribute of a broad, diverse, regional elite. Subsidized by both the French and Persian governments, the Alliance Française of Tehran created a secondary school in 1900 offering instruction in French, Persian, and Arabic. By 1920 it boasted a library of three thousand volumes, added English to its curriculum, and conferred a diploma allowing access to higher education and leading to careers in the Persian civil service. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs expressed satisfaction with this slow, indirect strategy for promoting French cultural influence, intimating that the results would have many long-term benefits for France: “The major portion of educated men in Tehran, who speak fluent French, were educated on the benches of the Alliance Française school. This instrument of long-term propaganda is only now bearing its fruit.”¹⁰⁸ Here we glimpse a French cultural strategy in the making: a seemingly hands-off approach that offers a subsidized cultural product but lets the buyer do the shopping. Indeed, people in a host of foreign countries had their own reasons for learning French, their own strategies for acquiring the symbolic capital afforded by French culture. The history of the Alliance Française stands to remind us that the cultural “conquests” of France were not unidirectional and that they were most often carried out by methods other than military intervention or colonial rule.¹⁰⁹

The Alliance conceived of France’s imperial reach in broad, expansive terms, comprising lands not necessarily under its direct colonial purview. First and foremost, it sought to solidify French influence along the entire Mediterranean basin: Algeria, Tunisia, but also throughout the Levant. As its provisional statutes put it in 1883, the lands “along the banks of this ancient, inland sea” had

107. AF, *Comité haïtien*, 11, 14; AF, *Congrès de l'éducation*, 24, 26.

108. MAE, Service des Oeuvres françaises à l'étranger, 60, AF, “Note sur l'Alliance française de Téhéran,” 1920, fol. 2.

109. Daughton has poignantly argued a similar point with respect to Argentina, advising historians to more closely assess how France maneuvered to achieve cultural influence in noncolonial lands. See Daughton, “When Argentina Was ‘French,’” esp. 836.

long anchored French authority; it was imperative “not to abandon this French preponderance but rather to fortify and expand it.”¹¹⁰ Alliance founders were imbued, then, with a vast vision of French dominance, one defined by the fluid contours of a composite, multilayered empire that was at once old and new and whose future was yet to be determined. In their minds, the emerging outline of the late nineteenth-century colonial world was grafted onto an older configuration of French imperial might, one that was deeply rooted throughout the Mediterranean region. The outposts that mapped out this vision of French imperial accretion were formed not solely by flags planted in the sand after victorious military confrontations or by the negotiated borders of diplomatic treaties. Nor were they exclusively the work of the French imperial state. Instead, this composite empire was formed, and held together, by the more nebulous and shifting borders of French cultural preponderance, rooted in private efforts, including those of missionary orders, civic associations, and trade initiatives, and staked out by the numerous French schools scattered throughout the vicinity. These schools that taught French to new generations, in ever widening circles, emerged as critical outposts in a disparate cultural empire whose potential, in the view of Alliance founders, needed to be channeled and fortified. Schools became a key element in binding the old and new empires together and spreading French cultural influence yet farther across the globe. It was this liberal vision of a cultural empire, one that was both private and public, and its role in modern expansionist thought that the Alliance Française sought to reinforce as part of a broader program of France’s imperial renaissance.

An Empire of Language

In some senses, the colonial history of the Alliance is part of a very old story. Reliance on language as a tool of empire figured prominently in the imperial playbooks of ancient Greece and Rome, not to mention the fifteenth-century expansionist endeavors of imperial Spain or even those of the United States and China today. The Alliance Française may be primarily known for having spawned innovative language schools for foreigners who pause to brush up their French and then go on to spread the bonds of francophone friendship throughout the world. But it is critically important to realize that the Alliance was born in the crucible of imperial expansion and was deeply involved in articulating a new role for the French language and culture in that effort. Arguably, the Alliance contributed to what can broadly be termed colonial education, even if the

110. “L’Alliance Nationale pour la propagation de la langue française,” AF Fonds russe 35, sér. 4, boîte 1, dossier 1, fols. 64, 65, 68.

range and variety of its contributions have unexpected features that force us to ask new questions, to recontextualize the concept itself, and even to rethink its links to the evolution of French cultural and language policy up to the present day.¹¹¹

The history of the Alliance Française raises provocative questions partly because there is a continual slippage, in both discourse and practice, from an imperial playing field to that of a broader internationalist and even humanitarian plane. It invites questions about how to analyze colonialism and internationalism as intertwined yet also fundamentally different phenomena. What happens when we analyze the history of French imperial expansion as part of a broader internationalist agenda? The history of the Alliance Française forces such a question into a single analytical frame. Yes, the Alliance helped educate the French to think of themselves as an imperial power, but also as something more: an international, even a global power. Its founders and interlocutors in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs felt that the colonial empire alone would not ensure a position of economic or political prominence for France in the modern world. Its focus on the French language introduced a new story line: if France didn't have demographic or military might, as became painfully evident in 1870, at least it had self-proclaimed cultural superiority. According to this logic, the added value of French culture, and the language that expressed it, could be harnessed to further the economic and political interests of the French state. Modern France has undeniably derived enormous cultural capital abroad from the inroads made by the French language across five continents. But the history of the Alliance also suggests that the state projection of cultural power was only one part of the story. The Alliance Française network revealed the existence of a new geography of the French language that stretched from colonial and military outposts throughout the Empire to French emigrant communities abroad; from historic areas of French influence in the Levant to newer influential pockets of speakers or learners of French in South and North America. The Alliance network made visible and connected this broad swath of potential French influence throughout the world, but each of these communities was connected to France and the French language for a wide variety of social and political reasons and historical circumstances. This imagined cultural community of French speakers was configured throughout this period as being simultaneously imperial and international.

The history of study abroad, too, is enmeshed within the tangled web of French cultural diplomacy.¹¹² Indeed, in late nineteenth-century France, study

111. On evolving concepts and the historiography of colonial education, see Barthélemy, "L'enseignement dans l'Empire."

112. Walton, *Internationalism, National Identities, and Study Abroad*.

abroad and colonial education were cut from the same imperial cloth. In January 1889 the Alliance Française chapter of the fifth arrondissement of Paris recruited an illustrious tag team—Ernest Lavisse and Pierre Foncin—to solicit memberships from students at the Sorbonne. While Foncin praised Alliance-supported schools in colonial Senegal, Egypt, Spain, and Mauritius, Lavisse commended the Alliance for attracting foreign students to France (albeit, one imagines, hailing from other points of origin). “The countries that can attract foreign youth create for themselves a clientele of friends. We need [to acquire], and are very capable of acquiring, this clientele,” Lavisse contended. The Alliance should proclaim, “Come to France!” Those who heed the call would discover that “if true sentiments of universal justice, sympathy for those who suffer, [and] . . . humanity still exist somewhere, it is in France.”¹¹³

Four years later, in 1893, the Alliance Française created its *Ecole Pratique de la Langue Française*, a school in Paris for foreign students and teachers of French who wished to deepen their knowledge of French literature and history and perfect their command of French grammar. It is perhaps more than a provocative footnote to this story that until 1900, when foreign students and teachers of French embarked on their course of summer study at the Alliance’s newest school, they attended all classes and lectures at the *Ecole Coloniale*, the very same institution that trained civil servants for duty in the empire. Was this, too, a form of colonial education? Might foreign students, friends of France, and teachers of French abroad be fashioned into voluntary cultural auxiliaries of France, particularly in countries never subjected to French rule? The Alliance Française quickly realized that this was a powerful position to adopt.

Excavating the Colonial Past

Although not readily visible today, signs of the Alliance’s colonial past occasionally resurface. Mostly, though, the Alliance is what it appears to be: a worldwide network of Francophiles energetically promoting the French language and culture, artistic exchange, and the values of linguistic and cultural diversity in a globalized world. It stands in tight partnership with France’s state-sponsored cultural networks abroad, notably the *Institut Français*, created in 2010 to give new life to what is called “the diplomacy of influence.”¹¹⁴ Today, the Alliance promotes French as a transnational language of choice and fully recognizes that the destiny of French is global. Yet the globalization of French is itself rife with

113. “Alliance française,” *Revue de géographie* 1 (Apr. 1889): 149–50.

114. Statement by Bernard Kouchner, minister of foreign and European affairs, Paris, July 21, 2010, www.info-france-usa.org/spip.php?article1764 (accessed July 14, 2015).

tensions: barriers remain, postcolonial mind-sets persist, and from time to time ripples on the surface reveal the only partially submerged volcanic craters of France's colonial past.

Such concerns are important to the history of the Alliance Française but also to that of global and humanitarian groups such as the United Nations and nongovernmental organizations present throughout the postcolonial world.¹¹⁵ Clearly part of the story of France's precocious cultural and humanitarian outreach networks was rooted in its colonialist convictions and imperial designs. How does the scholar of modern France link this colonial past to the development of international cultural models that outlived the French Empire and that reach far beyond its borders into regions of the world that were not part of France's formal empire? Why does it matter that a former colonial institution, such as the Alliance Française, now fulfills a unique role as a cultural magnet for a vast array of individuals from India to Hong Kong and from South Africa to Russia who, despite having had very different historical ties to France, feel an affinity with the French language and culture in a postcolonial and fully globalized world? How are these non-French speakers of French shaping the global image of France in the twenty-first century? Questions such as these, closely intertwined with France's imperial past, continue to roil the surface of French political, social, and diplomatic relations today.

An understanding of the Alliance's colonial past, I argue here, constitutes a critical first step toward evaluating its role in the rise of modern French cultural diplomacy.¹¹⁶ But to gain a full understanding of this story, its colonial history must not be examined in isolation. J. P. Daughton has poignantly reminded us that the history of French colonial expansion is but one aspect of France's multifold interactions with the world at large.¹¹⁷ Much the same can be said for the Alliance Française. Beyond its initial colonial matrix, the Alliance's history reveals the emergent contours of a more global France as mapped out by the rapid expansion of its organizational chapters throughout the world, creating a network that stretched far beyond the political boundaries of empire. The Alliance's global presence grew according to the logic and imperatives of colonial conquest, but also those of diplomacy, economics, trade, religion, exile, and migration. Its set of connections crisscrossed the globe like a linguistic trace

115. Mark Mazower argues that the United Nations, like the League of Nations before it, was, at its origin, "a product of empire" and an example of "imperial internationalism" (*No Enchanted Palace*, 17, 28).

116. Bruézière's *L'Alliance française* and Chaubet's *La politique culturelle* give short shrift to the AF's colonial past. Although focusing primarily on the AF in the United States, Jonathan Gosnell ("Alliance Française, Empire, and America") does recognize and emphasize the colonial origins and global reach of the AF from its earliest years.

117. Daughton, "When Argentina Was 'French,'" 833.

element revealing the heretofore invisible pathways of the French language and corresponding cultural influences throughout the world, many of which were generated without any willful direction from the French imperial center but rather by local groups of individuals who had a vested interest in their idea of France. Yet, over time, only this internationalist side of the Alliance's history has been retained in memory: the dominant narrative of the Alliance's global presence has tended to erase and supplant the story of its earlier colonial roots. If France pioneered modern methods of cultural influence, the history of the Alliance Française sheds light on the complex and often contradictory processes that led to their development. It reminds us that the late nineteenth-century expansion of the colonial empire provided a fundamental testing ground for the power of French culture and language, revealing both its successes and its limits. It argues, too, for a more comprehensive inclusion of nineteenth-century imperial expansion within the historical narrative of the rise of modern French cultural diplomacy.

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