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From Colony to Camp, From Camp to Colony: First World War Captivity in *Ahmed Ben Mostapha, goumier* by Mohammed Bencherif

Abstract: This article offers an analysis of the representation of captivity in *Ahmed Ben Mostapha, goumier*. The novel, published by Algerian writer Mohammed Bencherif in 1920, was partly inspired by his own experience as a prisoner of war during the First World War. Relying on historical, sociological and anthropological sources, the article focuses on the protagonist's experience as a POW in German camps and in Switzerland. It also proposes a metaphorical interpretation of captivity in the colonial context, reading Ben Mostapha as a "conscript of modernity," conditioned by French republican ideals. Finally, it examines thought-provoking analogies between colony and camp in Bencherif's novel.

Keywords: First World War, Algeria, POW camp, Halbmondlager, conscript of modernity, Mohammed Bencherif, French colonial ideology

1. Introduction

The purpose of this article is to analyse the representation of captivity in *Ahmed Ben Mostapha, goumier*, a novel published by Algerian writer Mohammed Bencherif in 1920 and partly inspired by his experience as a prisoner of war during the First World War. While the contribution of colonial troops to the 1914–1918 conflict has recently attracted much scholarly attention, the ordeal of non-white prisoners of war (POWs) still remains largely unexplored.[1] In contrast to Western servicemen, who left letters and diaries, including accounts of their experience in captivity, many soldiers of colour were illiterate and left few testimonies. Yet captivity was not a negligible facet of the First World War: between 6.6 and 8.4 million men were taken prisoner and 2.5 million prisoners were captured by Germany alone (Kramer

76, 78). As Heather Jones has recently argued, the 1914–1918 conflict "marked the advent of mass industrialised, militarised captivity, a new phenomenon that instigated just as much of a technological leap forward and cultural caesura with the past" (2015, 268). Complex and innovative technologies were applied in the camps to segregate, watch and inspect the prisoners, as well as to make escape impossible (Jones 2015, 279). Hence the POW camp was regarded by contemporaries as the epitome of modernity (Jones 2015, 266). However, it is important to emphasise that dominant commemorative practices in the aftermath of war marginalised the ex-POWs as cowards and deserters.[2] For this and other reasons, 1914–1918 captivity was neglected in Euro-American historical research until the last decade of the 20th century (Jones 2011a, 316; Wilkinson 2017, 3). As to the historians of postcolonial nation states, they have attempted to reconstruct a tradition of anti-colonial struggle rather than focus on the colonials' participation, and internment, in the first global war as members of imperial armies (Liebau et al. 4). Non-white captives have therefore been subjected to a multi-layered process of erasure from historical memory, because of their race and nationality, as well as the silencing of returned POWs in commemorative discourses in Europe and beyond.

2. Algerian Soldiers: Mohammed Bencherif and Ahmed Ben Mostapha

In this respect, the life story of Mohammed Ben Si Ahmed Bencherif (1879–1921) deserves particular attention. A respected physician and an officer in the French army, he also distinguished himself as the first novelist writing in French in North Africa. He was the grandson of the caliph of the Ouled Naïl, a seminomadic people who lived in the Djelfa province in north-central Algeria. Tutored in Arabic and French by private teachers at home, he was raised in accordance with traditional customs to become a leader of the Ouled Si M'hamed. He was then educated at the grand lycée d'Alger and was the first Algerian to receive a *baccalauréat*, a diploma of secondary education. Bencherif studied at the Ecole Spéciale Militaire de Saint-Cyr (ESM), a prestigious institution for the French upper classes, which he left with the rank of *sous-lieutenant* [second lieutenant] in 1899. He therefore occupied an in-between position, as a member of both the traditional nomadic elite and the Francophone establishment of educated *évolués* in Algeria. During his stay in France, he became acquainted with many French aristocratic, political, artistic and literary celebrities of *la Belle Époque* and corresponded with them all his life. Back in Algeria, he served with the second light cavalry regiment of the Algerian Spahis in the West of the Algerian Sahara and became the batman of the Governor General of Algeria, Charles Jonnart. During these years he was confronted with the racism and discrimination of the arrogant French *colons* in Algeria. Disillusioned with the Republican ideals of fraternity, he returned home and assumed the responsibilities of *caïd*. As part of the military reserve force, Bencherif was mobilised in 1908. Taking command of a *goum* (a squadron in Arabic), he participated in the French conquest of Morocco. During this mission, like his tribesmen, he felt uncomfortable fighting Muslim brothers. At the outbreak of the First World War he was mobilised again and struggled to reconstitute the *goum* of volunteers, who were, however, reluctant to take part in a conflict of *roumis* [Europeans]. In 1914, he departed for France. Having lost three quarters of his squadron during the siege of Lille, he was captured by the Germans on 12 October 1914. He tore off his military insignia to remain with his men and, at the POW camp in Mersbourg, he defended his comrades against violence and exploitation. His health was seriously affected; after sixteen months of captivity, he was transferred by the Red Cross to Switzerland. Repatriated in 1918, he regained his position of *caïd* of the Ouled Si M'hamed. In 1919 he published *Aux villes saintes de l'Islam,* and in 1920 *Ahmed Ben Mostapha, goumier*; neither attracted critical attention. An idealistic humanitarian deeply devoted to his people, Bencherif died in 1921 fighting a typhus epidemic which decimated his community.[3]

Ahmed Ben Mostapha, goumier can be considered a novel or a series of novellas bound by the figure of the eponymous hero (Khireddine 27). As Maria Chiara Gnocchi points out, it is written in an elegant, classic French, although Bencherif also attempts to reproduce the rhythm of ancient Arabic narratives and poems. The text abounds in original Arabic words, sometimes without a translation, which was unusual in colonial times (Gnocchi 44). Ferenc Hardi (105–111) inscribes the novel in the Arabic tradition of *sîra*, a popular literature of chivalry and adventure, with a noble, invincible hero at the centre, who acts as a loyal and honourable defender of the oppressed. We learn little about the personality of the central protagonist; this intentional vagueness suggests, according to Ahmed Khireddine (28), that Ben Mostapha could be any Arab in the French army. Taking into account the illiteracy rate in Algeria in the first decades of the 20th century, the novel was clearly written for a French reader with the intention of representing a Muslim character from an insider's perspective (Hardi 32). The autobiographical aspect is striking, and Ben Mostapha might be considered a pseudonym for the author. Nevertheless, on careful reading, it appears that, contrary to Bencherif, his protagonist fully accepts colonial domination. Moreover, unlike his creator, Ahmed dies in captivity. The narrator presents a factual account of his life, with few longer descriptions of landscape and little psychological insight. Long passages, however, are devoted to discussions of colonial politics and eulogies to the French Republic. The book is dedicated to the Algerians who fell on the fields of glory during the 1914–1918 conflict and those who died a slow death in the German camps, "et sur lesquels pèsera toujours, lourde, la terre ennemie" ['and on whom the enemy soil, heavy, will press forever'; trans A.B-K] (41).[4]

Approximately 125,000 Algerians saw combat in France during the First World War and approximately 25,000 lost their lives (Fogarty 82; Hassett 26). Alongside Tunisians and Moroccans, they served in the *Armée d'Afrique*, as units of the metropolitan army garrisoned in North Africa (Fogarty 17). They represented almost one third of all French colonial troops, and two thirds of those from North Africa (Frémaux 63). The Algerians also provided civilian manpower; as a result, in 1918 one third of Algerian male population served in France, either in the war zone or on the homefront (Frémaux 78). As Richard S. Fogarty argues in *Race and War in France: Colonial Subjects in the French Army, 1914–1918*, while for Germany the use of soldiers of colour in Europe was an attack on white prestige, and Britain and the US showed caution in this matter, the French employed West and North Africans to stop the German invasion from the onset of the war (Fogarty 9). Due to the enormous disproportion in population – 40 million French compared to 67 million Germans in 1914 – the use of *troupes indigènes* [colonial troops] was regarded as the only way to save the French from extinction (Olusoga 150). Precisely because of the sacrifices involved in the colonising mission, the French believed that they had the "moral right" but also the "moral obligation" to recruit their colonial subjects (Olusoga 161). Participating in the defence of the metropole was *an impôt de sang* [a blood tax]: the men from the colonies had to pay "for the privilege of living under enlightened French rule" (Fogarty 16).

The eleven chapters of Bencherif's novel focus on the protagonist's adventures during the Moroccan campaign (Chapters I–V), his return to Algeria (VI–VII), his subsequent departure for Europe and his experience of captivity (VIII–XI). Ahmed Ben Mostapha does not hesitate to defend France in times of need. His encounter with *le lieutenant* Marcin, a particularly open-minded and charismatic French officer, who mentors the young *goumier* during the Morocco campaign, inspires his love for his adopted country. The friendship between the two characters, as Gnocchi (42) suggests, represents an ideal of hybrid exchanges between Arab and French cultures, strongly advocated in the novel. Marcin speaks fluent Arabic, admires Arab poets, and respects Ben Mostapha's noble nomadic heritage. When Ahmed's *caïd* decides to depart for France and is willing to leave the tribe under his command, the young man refuses to remain behind and joins the army, with the rank of lieutenant, at the head of a *goum*. Upon his arrival in Marseille, his squadron is enthusiastically welcomed by the French. The *goumiers* are also warmly greeted at Arras and Douai; the civilians perceive them as defenders against Prussian theft and abuse. The stereotypes of savagery are thus reversed, the non-white soldiers being constructed as defenders of European civilisation, which is threatened by the Germans. Ahmed Ben Mostapha's courage and gallantry are admirable. When his platoon is directed into combat in the surroundings of Lille and finds itself under heavy artillery attack, he orders his men to shoot the German gunners and saves their lives. In Lille, he is active in organising the defence of the city and wins the admiration of Frenchwomen. His war exploits, however, are short-lived, as, after the siege of Lille, together with his men, he is taken prisoner.

In the interpretation that follows, relying on historical, sociological and anthropological sources, I explore the protagonist's experience as a POW in

German camps and in Switzerland. Subsequently, I propose a more metaphorical application of the concept of captivity, approaching Ahmed as a "conscript of modernity," unable to renounce republican ideals. Finally, I trace fascinating analogies between colony and camp, showing how they morph into each other in the experience of Ahmed Ben Mostapha, and thus illuminate the construction of encampment, control, and subjugation in Bencherif's novel.

3. Captivity in Germany

After Lille is seized by the Germans and the *goumiers* are faced with the prospect of imprisonment, Ahmed proves his outstanding loyalty and devotion to his men. Abandoned by their French commander, the Algerian soldiers gather around Ben Mostapha, who struggles to keep up morale and insists on the glory of dying for France. When he hears the contempt in the voice of the German who orders the "Arabs" to be incarcerated, Ben Mostapha defends the honour of his men by stressing that they are French soldiers: "Ces Arabes sont des soldats français" (232). The word "Arab" in the German's mouth, uttered in a tone of disdain, is an example of what Laura Ann Stoler refers to as an "imperial disposition of disregard" (2016, 9), which echoes the racist hierarchies prevalent at the turn of the 20th century in Europe. What is more, during the First World War, the soldiers of colour in the French and British armies were the source of profound anxiety, particularly in Germany (Jones 2011b, 180). Importantly, Ben Mostapha thus defends the honour of his men as members of the imperial army, but he also attempts to protect them, seeking to guarantee that these non-white POWs would be treated as French soldiers rather than colonial inferiors. The incident therefore illustrates anxieties caused by the colonial encounter on both sides.

Having transported them in cattle wagons to Cologne, the Germans separate the Algerian officers from the *goumiers* and order them to be sent to the camps at Krefeld and Mersbourg respectively. This was common practice during the First World War: officers were held in separate camps, were exempt from labour, and received better treatment than their men (Jones 2015, 286; Kramer 77–78). However, discerning a profound discouragement in his brothers' eyes, Ben Mostapha decides to conceal his identity and to travel to Mersbourg with the other ranks. He consciously rejects the benefits of the privileged treatment provided to interned officers and accepts the unknown: "N'importe […] Beaucoup de ses hommes sont venus derrière lui, il partagera leur sort jusqu'au bout" ['It doesn't matter [...]. Many of his men followed him and he will share their lot to the end'; trans. A.B-K.] (234).

In Mersbourg the Algerian prisoners share the privations experienced by real-life POWs in German camps: the poor housing facilities and sanitation conditions, as well as the insufficient nourishment. Although Germany was a signatory of the Geneva Conventions of 1864 and 1906, as well as the Hague Conventions of 1898 and 1907, the aim of which was to protect POWs from mistreatment by the enemy, in 1914 it was not ready to receive thousands of captives, who suffered from various forms of neglect and abuse (Kramer 76). The Algerian POWs, "les fils du soleil" ['the sons of the sun'; trans. A.B-K.] (234), are particularly sensitive to the cold weather and the snow. In his novel Bencherif draws intriguing comparisons: for instance, in Ahmed's eyes, the meagre meal, consisting of vile bread with a few beetroots and potatoes in dirty water, is poorer than any meal consumed by the humblest of shepherds in Algeria (235). Such comparisons serve to deny the apparent civilizational superiority of the Germans and facilitate what Ravi Ahuja (156) refers to as the process of the "cultural appropriation of Europe" by colonial captives. By means of comparison, Ben Mostapha renders an extraordinary and distressing situation more familiar. Moreover, captivity thus makes it possible for Ahmed to assess the relative power of the Germans, to confirm their unquestionable inferiority to France, as well as their barbarity and lack of ethical values. The *goumiers* are searched and humiliated when their private possessions are taken away. Fortunately, after a few weeks, all the Muslim POWs are sent to the Camp du Croissant (Half-Moon or Crescent Camp) in Wünsdorf, where they are treated in radically different ways.

By December 1914, colonial captives in Germany had been centralised in POW camps at Wünsdorf, near Zossen, forty kilometres from Berlin. The Halbmondlager (Half-Moon or Crescent Camp) housed approximately 4,000 inmates, mainly from India and the French North African colonies. Most of them were Muslims, but there were also some Hindus, Sikhs, and Christians. 12,000 Muslim POWs from the Russian Army lived at the nearby Weinberger Camp. The captives were billeted according to their faith, nationality, caste, and military rank. Halbmondlager was a show camp, essential in pro-Muslim propaganda. Its administration attempted to accommodate the inmates' cultural, religious, and dietary needs. The men were encouraged to practice their religion and to celebrate their religious festivals. A mosque was even erected at the camp, a triumphant proof of the Germans' respect for the rights of the Muslim peoples (Jones 2011b, 176; Olusoga 250–252). As David Olusoga contends in *The World's War*, "[t]he Halbmondlager was built to demonstrate to both the prisoners and the wider Muslim world that Germany was a friend of Islam, a nation that was generous and respectful towards the Muslim soldiers who had fallen into its hands" (251).

However, Halbmondlager also served as "a recruiting station, a place of indoctrination and part of Germany's strategy of *Jihad* and global revolution" (Olusoga 255). On the 14th of November 1914 in Istanbul, Ali Haydar Efendi, Custodian of the Fatwa, proclaimed a series of fatwas approved by the sultan that in fact legitimized the *Jihad* against France, England, Russia and all the countries supporting them. Importantly, the final fatwa condemned the Muslims who had already been recruited by the Allies (Olusoga 212–213). Although there were two million Muslims in German East Africa, according to Olusoga, “Germany was able to portray itself as a nation innocent of subjugating Muslims – indeed, even as an enemy of imperialism and defender of the ‘slandered peoples’ of the European empires” (218).[5] The Germans sought to stir discontent and insubordination in the British and French armies, and the Muslim POWs in German camps were cast “as an avant-garde of insurrection: converts to the cause, they would spread hatred of the Allies among their countrymen and march alongside German and Ottoman soldiers on secret missions to spread the word of *Jihad*” (Olusoga 223).[6] At Wünsdorf, the prisoners were educated in their own languages and huge efforts were made to turn them into Jihadists and then send them to Constantinople to fight the armies of the Entente (Olusoga 255). Those who volunteered received substantial material rewards, whereas recalcitrant prisoners, loyal to France or Britain, were sent to reprisal camps (Jones 2011b, 177). In total, 1,084 Arabs and 49 Indian soldiers were dispatched to Ottoman Turkey. Nevertheless, they were generally mistrusted and mistreated by the Ottoman Army, and many of them deserted back to the Allies’ lines. Consequently, in 1917, the German authorities deemed Wünsdorf a failure (Jones 2011b, 177; Olusoga 256).

In Bencherif’s novel, when the captives arrive in Halbmondlager, they are treated more as guests of his Majesty the Emperor of Germany than prisoners. They are provided with clean and comfortable shelters, proper nourishment prepared in compliance with their religious beliefs, a mosque and even Turkish baths. However, rather than dwell on the satisfying conditions available at the camp, Bencherif describes at length the ideological manipulation and the efforts made by propaganda officers to encourage the colonial captives to change sides. Upon arrival at the camp, they are greeted effusively by Algerian deserters, who suggest that the Germans have saved them from France, a nation that oppresses Islam. They also inform them of the sacred war that has been declared by the Ottoman sultan, and express the hope that Algeria, a “pays meurtri” [‘a bruised country’; trans. A.B-K.] (236), will be soon liberated from its enemies. The most notorious among these traitors is Boukabouya Rahab, a real-life figure, who was the only indigenous officer to desert from the French Army and become actively involved in German and Ottoman propaganda (Fogarty 96). For days, Ben Mostapha and his companions are visited by Boukabouya and other “frères vendus” [‘sold brothers’; trans A.B-K.] (245), who try to take advantage of their physical and moral exhaustion to convince them to embrace the *Jihad*. Ahmed applies himself to help his comrades resist the temptations of betrayal.

With much irony, the novel depicts the Feast of the Sacrifice, on the occasion of which a great number of eminent officials visit the camp, among others a representative of the Imperial court, the Ambassador of Turkey, a few German generals and military attaches, as well as a pseudo-Mufti. Bencherif presents in detail the *Jihad* propaganda in the speech of the Islamic jurist at the service of the Germans. The Mufti stresses the significance of fighting for Islam under the leadership of the Turkish Empire, an “international” Empire, indifferent to the origins of its followers as long as they pray to Allah. He condemns the ethnic conflicts that have divided Muslims in Turkey in the past, and the manipulations of the British, eager to create in Turkey “un empire anglo-arabe” [‘an Anglo-Arab Empire’; trans A.B-K.] (241). According to him, the future of Islam and the Arabs depends on the captives’ unconditional support for Turkey: “La Turquie, entourée d’ennemis, ne peut plus exister que dans une union étroite avec l’Allemagne et vous tous, opprimés, ne pouvez être délivrés de vos chaînes que par l’épée turque” [‘Turkey, surrounded by enemies, can survive only in a close union with Germany, and all of you, the oppressed, can be liberated from your chains only by the Turkish sword’; trans. A.B-K.] (243). Bencherif’s POWs are not duped by these appeals to religious loyalty. The Russians, Cossacks, Tatars, Algerians, Moroccans, Tunisians and Indian Muslims imprisoned at the camp only pretend to participate in the prayers led by the false Mufti. In fact, they are well aware of the political goals hidden behind the call to sacred war and of the irony of a Christian Emperor supporting *Jihad*. In their view, those who have shifted their loyalties to the German side have been corrupted by the promise of power, status, and financial profits.

It is important to emphasise that the political purposes of assembling colonial captives at Wünsdorf concealed a less obvious racist intention. As Olusoga suggests, “[t]he camps constructed to house the non-European prisoners were a wholly new phenomenon, because never before had so many men from so many nations, and of so many different races, been gathered together” (258). The Germans therefore took scientific advantage of the fact that thousands of colonials were hoarded in barracks near Berlin. Soon, “the camps at Wünsdorf became a vast field laboratory” (Olusoga 261). The captives were subjected to the scrutiny of German anthropologists, who measured, interviewed, recorded and classified them, depicting the Allied non-white troops as backward savages (Olusoga 263). In Bencherif’s novel, Ben Mostapha and his companions feel angered and humiliated at being treated as objects of curiosity by the Germans: “Pauvres déracinés! Leurs fêtes, leurs danses, leurs prières même, imposées par l’autorité, servent de pâture à la curiosité allemande” [‘Poor uprooted ones! Their festivals, their dances, even their prayers, imposed by the authorities, being staked out for vultures’; trans. A.B-K.] (244). Olusoga compares the camps to human zoos, the *Völkerschauen* of the 19th century (258), and Bencherif’s protagonists are clearly aware of being puppets in a racist spectacle. Significantly, the multi-racial POWs behind barbed wire became a dominant image of the war in Germany, reinforcing the paranoia of encirclement by global enemies. This cliché also opposed the purity of the German soldiers to the corrupt and barbaric hordes from the colonies (Olusoga 245–246). The scientific findings of the German anthropologists at Wünsdorf thus served a hyper-nationalist agenda and foreshadowed the obsession with racial difference fully normalised in the concentration camps of the Second World War.

While some captives in Bencherif’s novel express a certain degree of satisfaction with the preferential treatment they are offered at Wünsdorf, for Ahmed the objectification of the colonial POWs and the constant attempts made by the Germans, supported by the Muslim traitors, to force or cajole the inmates to change sides and travel to Istanbul, are a source of moral torture [‘torture morale’; trans. A.B-K.] (246). The propaganda officers spy on the prisoners, and use every opportunity to further their cause. Ben Mostapha is one of the first captives to be subjected to a long questioning. His interrogator realises that Ahmed is not a simple *goumier*, but an exceptionally intelligent and educated man of good family. He therefore suggests that Ben Mostapha must be aware of the evil France has done to the indigenous population in Algeria. He claims that the Algerians are recruited by force, and all the Maghrebi soldiers are treated as canon-fodder and refused due recompense and advancement in the French army; any signs of protest are thwarted and the rebels are imprisoned without any possibility of self-defence. To support these statements, Ahmed’s captor cites a book by Lieutenant Boukabouya. Bencherif refers there to a pamphlet published in 1915 by Boukaboya, entitled *L’Islam dans l’armée française* [Islam in the French Army], where the famous deserter complained about the racial hatred and discrimination against the North Africans in the French Army. Having been humiliated and refused promotion himself, Boukabouya claimed that desertion was the only way for him to preserve dignity and self-respect (Fogarty 111–112). In his brochure, he argued that the Germans showed much more respect for Islam than the French, who clearly mistrusted Muslim soldiers (Fogarty189).[7] Ahmed’s interrogator emphasises that Boukabouya is befriended by the Emperor himself and his services will not be forgotten. If he agrees to support the Germans and the *Jihad*, like Boukabouya, Ben Mostapha will partake of special privileges. Otherwise, however, he might be submitted to a more severe regime.

Nevertheless, instead of intimidating him, the incident only reinforces the protagonist’s loyalty to France. Having returned to his men, Ahmed shares his indignation with them and agitates against their captors. He warns them that the Germans see them as a docile mass to be manipulated and bribed so that they will renounce their oath of allegiance to France and will sell their honour. To illustrate the depths of the treachery, Bencherif refers to the antagonism between the Arabs and the Turks (see Frémaux 274). Ahmed asks his companions how it is possible that the legacy of Mahomet, a pure Arab, has been overtaken by the Turks. The Arabian Empire of the past, ruled in a spirit of tolerance and equity, was replaced by the Ottoman Empire, the fanaticism of which has led to shameful acts of intolerance and massacres. He sees the Turks as responsible for the disorganisation of the North African societies, the stagnation in education and science, as well as their cultural inferiority. He emphasises that there are as many ethnic differences between the Turks and the Algerians as between the French and the Germans. Inspired by Ahmed’s attitude, the *goumiers* swear on the Koran that they will not help their ancient oppressors (252–253).

Yet Ahmed's refusal to cooperate is followed by severe punishment. He is not even allowed to say goodbye to his comrades and is transferred to an unidentified German POW camp near the Masurian Lakes. This experience of captivity is summarised succinctly in the novel; the reader learns that the conditions at the camp are deplorable and that the Russian inmates, who form the majority of the prisoners, are treated like beasts (253). Ahmed feels completely alienated among unknown men, languages and cultures, unable to talk to anybody at the camp, cut off from any communication with the outside. He is also forced to do hard labour, clearing land in a pestilential swamp. Under the Hague Convention, the prisoners were not to be forced to contribute directly to the enemy's war effort, yet by 1916, 90% of the men captured by Germany supplied working parties (Jones 2015, 271, 281). Gradually, Ahmed loses his stamina and moral strength: "Le temps, morne, lourds [sic], bourreau, rongeur d'espérance, le temps qui dissèque les corps, laissant seul vibrer l'affolement des nerfs douloureux, déprime, amaigrit d'heure en heure la fine silhouette d'Ahmed Ben Mostapha Ben Djalloub, le lion des oulads-Nayls" ['Dreary, heavy, time, like an executioner, gnawing at hope, time that dissects the body, leaving only a panicky vibration of painful nerves, depresses and emaciates, hour by hour, the thin figure of Ahmed Mostapha Ben Djalloub, the lion of the oulad-Nayls'; trans. A.B-K.] (256). Ahmed finds refuge in daydreams about his friends from Algeria and France. Eventually, however, as a result of German reprisals following the French decision to send German POWs to Algeria, French officers are relocated to the same camp. In this noble company, Ahmed regains his mental balance and is happy to perform the most exhausting physical tasks. Yet he soon succumbs to a serious infection and his physical condition deteriorates. Bencherif clearly approaches "prisoner sickness as a form of *violence* perpetrated upon captives by the enemy," rather than an inevitable element of war (Jones 2011a, 110; original emphasis). Skeletal, starved, and diseased, Ahmed is eventually qualified for internment in Switzerland.

4. Internment in Switzerland

Throughout the First World War Switzerland managed to maintain armed neutrality. However, as Anja Huber argues, following a series of international agreements, in 1916 the Swiss government committed itself to intern some civilians and foreign POWs from France and Germany in neutral Swiss territory. The 1899 Hague Convention and Article 2 of the 1906 Geneva Convention provided the legal foundations for the internment of sick and wounded POWs. Internment was supervised by the army, and the person in charge was a military doctor, Colonel Hauser. This decision was seen as a humanitarian gesture, but it also served Switzerland's economic interests. Because of the restrictions on international trade imposed by the Allies as part of its strategy of blockading the Central Powers, the

Swiss population was increasingly impoverished by the war. As the economic crisis affected the tourist industry in particular, internment became an important source of income for the local population. The Swiss cantons made huge efforts to accommodate as many internees as possible in the vacant hotels, pensions, and sanatoria (Huber 252–266). Candidates for internment in Switzerland were carefully examined by a commission of doctors in the camps where they were incarcerated. To avoid the possibility that they might return to the front, most POWs were forced to stay in Switzerland till the cessation of hostilities (Huber 255). In total, 67,700 injured military POWs and civilian internees benefited from neutral internment in Switzerland during the First World War (Manz, Panayi, and Stibbe 10).

The protagonist of Bencherif's novel is expedited to Switzerland with the first convoy of captives, who are received enthusiastically by the Swiss. Upon arriving in Glion, wearied and prostrated, Ahmed is raised from his semi-conscious state by the words of the Marseillaise and joins the crowd shouting *Vive la France*. He is profoundly moved when he sees the French town of Evian in the distance from the train's window. Ahmed is delighted to be provided with a clean room, care, calm, and proper nourishment. Not only is his health ruined after forced labour in the German camp, but he appears to be profoundly traumatised by his experience of captivity, too. Thus, after fifteen months of incarceration, "Au moindre bruit, [Ben Mostapha] sursaute comme pour obéir aux ordres impérieux, tant de fois reçus" ['At the slightest noise, Ben Mostapha jumps as if to obey the imperious orders, which he has received so many times'; trans. A.B-K.] (260). He therefore hopes to regain his strength and composure in the quiet of the Swiss resort and the privacy of his room.

Ironically, however, the respite in Switzerland proves another kind of prison. Ahmed, pale but still attractive in his uniform of *goumier*, immediately becomes the object of interest of wealthy women, both French and Swiss. This fascination with colonial internees corresponds with historical facts. According to Huber, the POWs interned in Switzerland enjoyed good conditions and relative freedom. Soon, intense contacts (including sexual ones) developed between the local inhabitants, the tourists, and the foreign internees (259). In Bencherif's novel, worldly coquettes compete for Ahmed's attention and admire the heroism and the pure French accent of the handsome lieutenant, "un prince arabe venu volontairement servir la France" ['an Arab prince who has volunteered to serve France'; trans. A.B-K.] (265). In an atmosphere of flirtation and jealousy, they question him about the exotic customs of the Arabs, the confinement of the Muslim women, and the understanding of love in Arab cultures. Surrounded by gossip and erotic scandals, Ahmed is himself suspected of dissipation and love-affairs with several women. The bobsleigh event he is invited to join only weakens his health. Eventually, he is deeply fatigued by his worldly company and the role of exotic conquest he is expected to play. He realises that all these social events, entertainments and pleasures have not really improved his nervous condition either. He feels more lonely and misunderstood than ever:

> Au milieu de tant de sourires, il est plus seul que jamais!
> Seul!
> Là-bas, aux lacs Mazuriques, prisonnier du silence; ici dans le tourbillon mondain, prisonnier du bruit. (286).
>
> Surrounded by so many smiles, he is more lonely than ever!
> Lonely!
> There, at the Masurian lakes, he was a prisoner of silence; here, in the socialite whirlwind, he is a prisoner of noise. (Trans. A.B-K.)

In fact, the protagonist exhibits several symptoms of captivity-induced disorder, such as irritability, insomnia, introversion, apathy, emotional withdrawal and recurring flashbacks (see Shephard 313–323; Wilkinson 2017, 68–70). While the correspondence with his beloved French friends, who manage to locate him after a long search, provides Ahmed with profound joy and happiness, he quickly deteriorates. His correspondents admire his patriotism and devotion to France; they respect his intelligence and the breadth of his culture. They also hope to be reunited with him before he is allowed to return to his beloved Algeria. Nevertheless, Ahmed complains of an overwhelming sadness; his deepening sense of alienation and confinement is rendered metaphorically by the oppressive Swiss landscape: "Je porte sur mes épaules la Suisse tout entière, avec ses montagnes que ne finissent pas, trop longues, trop larges, trop hautes […]. Oh! ces escarpements infranchissables, ces murailles qui ferment de toute part mon horizon […] qui me séparent de vous" ['I carry on my shoulders the whole of Switzerland, with its mountains which never end, too long, too large, too high […]. Oh, these impassable cliffs, these walls which limit my horizon on every side […] which separate me from you'; trans. A.B-K.] (292). The identity of the "you" remains unclear; since at no point in the novel does the protagonist entertain any relationships with the Algerian *colons*, Hardi (36) argues that Ben Mostapha can only desire a rapprochement with the French of the metropole. The cold and the snow become synonyms of his internal isolation. The last letters sent to him remain without a response as Ahmed passes away, asking that his military medal be sent to his friends from France.

5. Metaphorical Captivity

Ben Mostapha is also a victim of a more metaphorical form of captivity, as he entirely accepts colonial domination and uncritically embraces France's republican ideals. Already during the Morocco campaign, about which, as noted in the introduction, Bencherif himself felt much ambivalence, the protagonist of his novel gives a eulogy to France's colonial mission. In a confrontation with a Moroccan nomad, Ahmed explains in detail why he fights against his Maghrebi brothers. Contrary to the Moroccan's suggestions that the *goumiers* are mercenaries or slaves forced by the French to fight on their side, Ben Mostapha asserts that he has travelled to Morocco willingly. He declares that France has not interfered with the Algerians' religion and customs. The bonds between the two countries are indissoluble, and therefore, by acting in the interest of France, he also defends his own country. Ahmed tries to convince his interlocutor that France is willing to protect and instruct the Moroccans, who, with time, will be granted the same rights and duties as the French themselves. The taxes they will be asked to pay will be used to build roads, schools, and watering places. In exchange, the French demand only peace, for they are not really interested in territorial conquests. Trust and devotion – these are the weapons of France (114–116).

Consequently, Bencherif's protagonist seems to support the ideology of *La République coloniale*, the French colonial Republic. At the turn of the 20th century, the French idea of the nation appeared more inclusive than others, since "the republican conception of the nation limited membership, not by race or ethnicity, but by willingness to embrace the nation's culture and its revolutionary heritage" (Fogarty 2). French Republicans claimed that, with time, and provided with the advantages of French culture, language, history and law, imperial subjects would assimilate and enjoy the full benefits of citizenship. However, according to Nicolas Bancel, Pascal Blanchard and Françoise Vergès, the notions of racial and ethnic difference complicated this vision of unity: to become French became a goal forever evasive and inaccessible (33). The colonial Republic, a political concept that has become the epitome of universal values and has shaped the French national community, is a profound paradox itself; born out of the French Revolution, the aim of which was to abolish tyranny and inequality, this Republic built a colonial empire, based on violence, the denial of freedom, and the servitude of non-white populations (Bancel et al. 16, 147, 157). The idea of the civilising mission, conceived in terms of a duty to spread the ideas of an enlightened modernity, thus acquired a much more powerful dimension in France than in other imperial contexts, transforming the French into an exceptional nation (Bancel et al. 74). Although the violence inherent in the colonial empire could hardly be reconciled with republican ideals, education, medical care and infrastructure were represented as the benefits of French presence in the colonies that would accelerate the process of assimilation (Bancel et al. 105, 125). Military service in particular would bring the *troupes indigènes* closer to the French nation (Fogarty 11).

The case of Algeria was extreme since it had a special position among French colonies. As Philip C. Naylor explains, "[s]ince the conquest of Algiers on 5 July 1830, France often identified its power and potential, its grandeur and independence, in relation to Algeria" (12). As a settlement colony, it was to be exemplary. Like continental France, in 1848 Algerian territory was divided into *départements* [departments], which were to be smoothly incorporated into the national body. This, however, would entail the application of all the laws of the Republic, and therefore the French government implemented immediately a political and jurisdictional segregation between the white *colons* and the Muslim population (Bancel et al. 31, 109). The European settlers objected to all reforms of the colonial system and were hostile to the idea of assimilation; unless the Muslims renounced their *statut musulman* [legal status as Muslims] and rejected Koranic law, naturalization was in practice impossible (Fogarty 242–252; Hardi 75). In spite of the enormous contribution of Algerians to the war effort, French citizenship was not granted to the indigenous population in the immediate aftermath of war (see Hassett 43–76). If Algerians were "perfectible whites," cultural and religious differences rendered the process of assimilation particularly problematic (Fogarty 253).

In Bencherif's novel, Ben Mostapha's admiration for French republican ideas knows no limits. He declares that "La France [...] a de tout temps semé, comme des étoiles dans une nuit profonde, la clarté des pensées généreuses, guides et flambeaux de l'humanité en marche vers l'Idéal [...]" ['France has forever sown, like stars in a deep night, the clarity of generous thoughts, torches guiding humanity on the move towards the Ideal'; trans. A.B-K.] (127). As a product of "the emotional economy of empire" (Stoler 2009, 68), he serenely accepts the idea that the Algerians will be granted citizenship rights in an indeterminate future, when they prove they have reached maturity. In no way is he irritated by the colonial Republic's discourse of infantilisation, in which his countrymen are represented as children who need to be guided and protected by their (French) elders. On the contrary, he condemns the actions of *Jeunes Algériens* [Young Algerians], a group of educated and politically conscious Algerians who saw in the war an opportunity for evolution from subjects to partners. In their view, the duty of military service, imposed in Algeria in 1912, should have been followed by expanded political rights (Frémaux 48). Ahmed criticises their vociferous demands for independence. He believes that equality is a question of merit, and the defence of France in times of need, as well as death on the battlefield, are the greatest possible proofs of loyalty to the French nation.

Nonetheless, dismissing the protagonist as a caricature of colonial mimicry might be a risky anachronism. According to Khireddine (29–30), it is possible that the writer chose a protagonist loyal to the French to avoid censorship and potential repercussions. Dónal Hassett suggests that Bencherif's idealised vision of French colonization might have been related to his exceptionally elevated position as head of his tribe, which was partly due to his wartime service. While the writer's "membership of both the traditional Algerian nobility and the Francophone educated elite set him apart from the mass of colonial subjects who served in the French army during the Great War" (16), it also rendered his location in post-war Algeria particularly delicate. For the Indigenous veterans the evocation of their war effort in the aftermath of 1918 was an important strategy of negotiating advancement within the constraints of the colonial apparatus. However, in this way, Algerian elites also attempted "to expand their rights and, thus, reshape the imperial policy"

(Hassett 17). In the same vein, Christian Koller argues that Bencherif idealised "the Muslims' valour and loyalty towards France in order to back post-war claims for political reform in the North African colonies" (136).

Notwithstanding Bencherif's intentions, I propose to approach Ben Mostapha as a "conscript of modernity," a term employed by Talal Asad and David Scott to describe the non-Europeans who "were conscripted to modernity's project – were, that is, coercively obliged to render themselves its objects and its agents" (9). The choices offered to them were not so much dependent on their volition as they were conditioned by the modern world and the conceptual horizons imposed on them in the process of colonisation (Scott 115). For conscripts of Western civilisation, the modernising reforms of the colonial power therefore put in place certain new political, economic, and cultural desires (Asad 345). Thus, Bencherif's protagonist has accepted the radical reorganisation of his culture by the violence of the colonial regime, which has forced him and his people into a system of dependence and subjugation. And it is only within the ideological apparatuses offered by the very system of power that has subordinated him that he can express his hopes for change and imagine a better future. His encounter with "catastrophic modernity" (Gilroy 284) during the First World War does not affect his views. Even his experience of militarised captivity in the German POW camps cannot shake his faith in France. If we assume after Scott (163) that to be a conscript of modernity was the predicament of the first modern colonial intellectuals, Ahmed appears to have no other choice but to be modern. In this light, he appears a tragic figure, an ideological captive who cannot disown the world of republican ideals, although it excludes and alienates him.

The only, though still subtle, critique of the French can be found at the end of the novel. In his letters to his French friends, Ben Mostapha confesses that he is deeply gratified by the fact that he helped his Algerian brothers realise the benefits of the French colonising mission. He admits that he and his people are ready to sacrifice themselves for the French, who show them little sympathy (297), thus signalling the racial attitudes of some segments of the French population. Importantly, Bencherif responds here to the contemporary debate about the incompatibilities of Islam and French citizenship. Ahmed's friends mention the hostility of those who claim that the Koran orders Muslims to be enemies of the French people. These prejudiced Frenchmen believe in the enormous gap between Arab and Christian culture, epitomised by the controversial practice of polygamy (296).[8] Yet, when Ahmed's correspondents show his letters to these narrow-minded persons, they win their hearts for the Muslim cause. Consequently, Ben Mostapha becomes an agent of change, contributing to a progressive republican cause and the potential naturalisation of his people. Ultimately, in his last letter, the protagonist confesses that he dreams of returning to his native country to live "la vie de ceux qui savent regarder et comprendre la nature dans ses moindres frissons, qui savent prier et mourir simplement, loin de l'agitation et du bruit que les hommes inventent sous prétexte de civilisation" (300) ['the life of those who know how to look and understand nature and its slightest thrills, who know how to pray and die in a simple manner, away from the agitation and the noise that men invent under the pretext of civilisation'; trans. A. B-K.]. It remains unclear whether this statement should be treated as an expression of nostalgia and longing, or as an indirect critique of European civilisation.[9]

6. Conclusion: Colony/Camp

It is interesting in conclusion to refer to the connectivity between colony and camp, explored by Stoler, who approaches them as "substitutable, adjacent, and interdependent forms of containment" (2016, 21). In *Duress: Imperial Durabilities in Our Times* Stoler presents a historical overview of the morphings of colony and camp (penal colony, agricultural colony, resettlement camp, rehabilitation camp, punitive camp for insubordinate soldiers, detention centre, etc.) in the imperial context, suggesting that "[a]s historical formations, they feed off each other, are porous components of a political matrix that seep into each other" (77). If we approach the colony as a transitory, precarious political project (Stoler 2016, 72, 78), a place of "unsettledness" (Stoler 2016, 117) that has produced various relations of dependence and forms of dispossession, the analogy with camp becomes more striking. Both colony and camp are ruled by arbitrary technologies that "unevenly suspend rights, sustain privation, and diminish capacities for political life" (Stoler 2016, 116); they both implement population segregation, coerced labour, and systematic brutality.

In this light, it might be suggested that the protagonist of Bencherif's novel moves from one form of encampment to another, experiencing "varied degrees of unfreedom" (Stoler 2016, 102): for him the state of exception is the norm. Examining the colony – camp matrix in *Ahmed Ben Mostapha, goumier*, it becomes perhaps easier to understand why Bencherif does not dwell on the material details of the carceral reality. For the writer and his protagonist, the suspension of political rights, as defined by law, is fundamental to the regulations of intimate lives in Algeria; both are used to terror, force and alienation as disciplinary mechanisms of everyday existence in the colony. This perspective also sheds light on the ease with which Ben Mostapha decodes the mechanisms of control and manipulation in German POW camps, as well as on the colonial inmates' capacity for duplicitous mimicry. Looking back from camp to colony, the dichotomies between captive and captor, based on violent enclosures, confinements, and demarcations, show disturbing similarities with the racially inflected binary oppositions hidden behind the French civilizing mission. Ahmed's role as a conscript, rather than a volunteer, within the ideological network of the colonial Republic, becomes more understandable when we redefine the colony as a camp-like militarising and oppressive structure. His compulsive admiration for the French empire reveals perhaps that, similarly to the camp, the colony is based on a complex system of punishments that instils fear and conformism, and serves to contain dissidence. Furthermore, both colony and camp rely on an arbitrary distribution of difference to exploit the subjugated people, the French in Algeria and the Germans at Halbmondlager making efforts, under the veneer of respect and gratitude, to (ab)use the colonials/the POWs for their own purposes. Ahmed's captivity at the Crescent Camp in particular, and the hidden political and racial agenda of this project, highlights the complex liaison between colony and camp during the First World War. On the existential and ideological level, the protagonist's camp experience is therefore both similar to, and entirely different from, that of European soldiers. While scholars have recently started to explore the connection between the colony and Nazi concentration camps in the context of the Second World War,[10] Bencherif's novel inspires reflection on the dynamic transfers of oppressive isolation, discipline, and security techniques already during the first global conflict, which situates the colony and the POW camp as products of entangled histories.

Commenting on the centenary of the First World War, Santanu Das expresses the reservation that colonial war commemoration often involves an oversimplification of colonial histories. While it is important to "challenge the colour of memory" (Das 2015, 149) and recognise the contribution of colonial troops to the war effort, it is also significant to pay attention to the subtleties of colonial history (Das and McLoughlin 2020). Revisiting *Ahmed Ben Mostapha, goumier* a hundred years after its publication is therefore a risky endeavour. The interpretation of Bencherif's novel could be easily flattened as an ode of loyalty to the French empire, and the protagonist's experience of captivity reduced to a eulogy to France. Although he becomes a "witness to European barbarity" (Gilroy 93), Ahmed obstinately attributes corruption, wickedness, and systematic abuse to Germany alone. To the end, he refuses to recognise the racist, violent and coercive foundations of *la République coloniale*. In this sense, Bencherif's novel can be regarded as a counter-attack on Boukabouya's propaganda activity (Koller 136): the Germans are demonised, whereas the French remain paragons of perfection, who support and protect their colonial subjects. However, as I tried to demonstrate above, while the novel certainly illustrates Ahmed's semi-caricatural admiration of the French Republic, Ben Mostapha can also be seen as a conscript of modernity, both enlightened and limited by republican universalism. This points to Bencherif's own conundrum as an educated Muslim in post-war Algeria, forced to adopt the language and concepts shaped by the colonial Republic to subtly challenge the dominant system from within. In spite of his fascination with French civilisation, his defence of Islam and Algerian mores in *Ahmed Ben Mostapha, goumier* marks him as unequivocally not French, seeking for reconciliation and a perfect harmony between the cultures of the coloniser and the colonised. Yet, although Bencherif alters substantially the metropolitan interpretation of assimilation, proposing a vision of a multicultural Algeria, whose peoples respect mutual religious differences and enjoy the same political rights, Ahmed's lonely death in a space that belongs neither to the Same nor to the Other puts into question these progressive ideas (Hardi 35, 79).

Captivity in the novel refers to real camps as institutions of misery and political control, but also functions as a metaphor for ideological entrapment. The portrait of the protagonist is complex and shifts between the figures of outstanding hero, imperial loyalist, and colonial victim. In the German POW camps Ahmed adamantly refuses to change sides; if this might appear pathetic with postcolonial hindsight, it also proves that the protagonist is not a passive political subject, but an agent wary of German and Ottoman ideological manipulations. Moreover, in both Mersbourg and Wünsdorf Ahmed sacrifices heroically for his men and makes huge efforts to reinforce the esprit de corps in the camp community. Depicting his experience of physical and psychological deterioration at the Masurian Lakes, by contrast, Bencherif portrays him as a victim of forced labour, abject conditions, neglect, and abuse. The psychological effects of captivity, including apathy, PTSD, and a profound sense of alienation, become more pronounced during Ben Mostapha's internment in Switzerland. Importantly, his varied adventures as a POW in German camps and in Switzerland define captivity as a multi-dimensional experience, too. Finally, the analogy between colony and camp illustrates the depths of colonial subjugation, but also a disturbing continuity of population control, suspension of rights, and surveillance techniques, which renders the story of Bencherif's *goumier* even more unsettling and intriguing. Significantly, such an approach undermines a Eurocentric understanding of captivity during the 1914–1918 conflict by signalling unknown facets of ontological and epistemological camp experience.

Notes

1. Das argues that "the non-European aspects, like the non-European sites of battle, remain 'sideshows'" (2011, 2) of the Great War; Liebau et al. note the dominant Eurocentric frameworks applied to the study of non-white troops of the 1914–1918 conflict. Research on colonial soldiers intensified at the centenary of the war, when colonial subjects began to be increasingly seen as politically conscious historical actors, and not only as passive contributors to the imperial war effort (Liebau et al. 1).
2. In his analysis of First World War POWs in the British context, Wilkinson (2014, 37) argues that the mythologisation of the dead in Great Britain after the war left no space for the commemoration of the returned captives. In the French context, Annette Becker speaks of the ex-POWs as "les oubliés de la Grande Guerre" ['the forgotten of the Great War'; trans. A.B-K.].

3 The biography of the writer was reconstructed on the basis of the following sources: Khireddine; Hardi; http://djelfa.info/fr/culture/76.html; https://www.edilivre.com/ahmed-ben-mostapha-goumier-mohammed-bencherif.html/. Like several other literary texts created in Algeria by Francophone Muslims between the two wars, for a long time the novel was excluded from

the Algerian canon because of its political agenda incompatible with Algerian nationalism (Hardi 4–5). Both the author and his work were rediscovered at the beginning of the 21st century. So far, critics (Hardi, Gnocchi; Khireddine) have mostly focused on the form and the ideological message of the novel. To my knowledge, captivity, as represented by Bencherif, has not yet attracted serious scholarly attention.

4 Citations from the novel are all translated by the author of the article.

5 This "reflected a larger struggle for legitimacy in the Muslim world." Both the Germans and the French pretended to act as protectors of the interests of Muslim people: the former because of their alliance with Ottoman Turkey, and the latter "as guarantors of the integrity of an Islam that a selfish minority party in Turkey had hijacked, betrayed, and sold to serve Germany's international ambitions" (Fogarty 190).

6 These plans, for the most part, did not succeed, yet the Ottoman summons to *Jihad*, and the local conflicts that they inspired, managed to spread chaos, violence, and death among communities in North Africa and parts of Asia that could have been spared the sufferings of the global conflict (Olusoga 241).

7 According to Fogarty, "Boukabouya's charges of French racism toward *indigènes*, even those who became officers, nonetheless had substance. Both entrenched attitudes among white French officers and official army policy allowed notions of racial hierarchy to interfere with and sometimes undermine the purely military hierarchy based upon rank" (113).

8 Polygamy was the most important argument used during the war by those reluctant to grant French citizenship to the Muslims in Algeria (see Fogarty 242–260).

9 In this respect, it interesting to compare *Ahmed Ben Mostapha, goumier* with *Force Bonté*, an autobiographical novel published in 1926 by Bakary Diallo, a former *tirailleur sénégalais*. Although it is much less complex than Bencherif's novel, it also depicts the African protagonist's admiration for French civilization and his enthusiastic readiness to emulate European models throughout the Moroccan campaign and the First World War. Both novels were ignored for a long time as tasteless panegyrics of French civilisation. However, under an apparently unconditional support of French imperialism, both conceal a subtle critique of colonial subjugation and a defence of African cultural distinctiveness. The comparison confirms that, although both Bencherif and Diallo used their wartime service in an effort to reform imperial policies, it was impossible for African writers in the aftermath of the 1914–1918 conflict to challenge colonial authority in more radical ways. For a critical reassessment of *Force Bonté,* see Riesz; Murphy. For a comparative reading of the two novels, see Gnocchi.

10 See, for instance, Gilroy; Moses; Rothberg; Silverman.

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