

The Role of Exploratory Expeditions in Establishing French Expansionist Projects in the Algerian Sahara

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Abstract

This paper examines the role of the exploratory expeditions undertaken by French officers and European explorers—such as René Caillié, Lieutenant Lapie, Avézac, General Devaux, Flatters, and Gerhard Rohlfs—in supporting French colonial policy in the Algerian Sahara. The study highlights how the findings of these expeditions were exploited to facilitate the exploration, occupation, and expansion of French influence throughout the Sahara.

The paper further analyzes the major colonial projects implemented by France, beginning with the proposal to connect northern Algeria with the Sahara through a railway network in 1853. These projects aimed to exploit the Sahara's abundant natural resources, which were either scarce or unavailable in Europe, including dates, livestock, alfa grass, and henna, thereby strengthening the French economy.

Moreover, France sought to suppress the traditional trans-Saharan caravan trade, establish military dominance over the region, facilitate the movement of military convoys, create restricted military zones, and encourage European settlers to exploit oasis lands confiscated from their indigenous owners, causing severe economic hardship for the local population.

The study also discusses the promotion of Christian missionary activities, which significantly affected the religious and cultural identity of the inhabitants of southern Algeria. Finally, it demonstrates how the Algerian Sahara became a strategic military base for launching French expansion toward Sub-Saharan Africa, enabling the exploration of its routes and geographical features.

Keywords: French colonial policy; military caravans; Christian missionary activity; settler colonialism; Algerian Sahara.

Introduction

Following the French invasion of Algeria on 5 July 1830, French colonial expansion gradually extended eastward, westward, and southward. This expansion relied heavily on the geographical surveys and reports prepared by French explorers who had been dispatched before the occupation of Algeria.

The southward expansion into the Sahara soon became one of France's principal colonial objectives. Reports produced by French military officers and explorers revealed the existence of valuable natural resources that were either unavailable or scarce in Europe, including alfa grass, dates, and substantial livestock wealth consisting of sheep, cattle, goats, and camels. These discoveries convinced the French colonial administration of the strategic and economic importance of the Sahara.

Consequently, France initiated an ambitious program of expansion aimed at occupying the region, constructing roads and railway networks, extending its authority to the deepest parts of the desert, and exploiting its abundant natural resources for the benefit of the French economy.

1. Explorations and Expeditions

The French colonial authorities organized and financed numerous scientific and exploratory missions to investigate the Algerian Sahara and assess its geographical, economic, and strategic potential. These expeditions constituted one of the principal foundations upon which France later based its colonial expansion into the desert.

1.1 René Caillié (1824–1828)

René Caillié was among the earliest European explorers to venture into the Sahara. His expeditions enabled France to acquire valuable information concerning the desert routes and the trans-Saharan caravan networks.

Born into a modest family, Caillié developed a passion for travel literature from an early age. After an unsuccessful expedition to Senegal in 1818, he embarked on a second journey in 1824, determined to reach Timbuktu regardless of the hardships involved. His observations significantly enhanced French geographical knowledge of the Sahara and facilitated subsequent colonial penetration.

1.2 Lieutenant Lapie

Lieutenant Lapie succeeded in producing one of the earliest comprehensive maps of Algeria, highlighting the physical features and topography of the southern regions. This map later became an indispensable instrument for both military and civil expansion, enabling France to strengthen its administrative and military control over the Sahara.

The French occupation authorities also benefited from the knowledge of the Mauritanian scholar Ahmed al-Mustafa Ould Tourir al-Jannah, who passed through Algeria in 1832 while returning from the pilgrimage to Mecca. His familiarity with the desert routes and local conditions provided additional geographical information useful to the colonial administration.

1.3 Avézac's Expedition (1836)

In 1836, the French explorer Avézac undertook a geographical survey of the Algerian Sahara. His work focused on identifying the region's principal geographical features, including ancient trade routes and transportation networks that could later be exploited for colonial purposes.

Recognizing the strategic importance of these findings, France established a Scientific Commission in 1837 to examine Algeria's natural resources and economic potential. The commission included both military officers and civilian specialists. Among its most distinguished members was Auguste Carette, whose influential work *Recherche sur la géographie et le commerce de l'Afrique méridionale* became one of the principal references on the geography and commerce of North and Sub-Saharan Africa.

1.4 General Devaux's Mission

General Devaux strongly advocated the occupation of the Sahara, believing that French control of the desert was essential for securing Constantine and safeguarding French interests in North Africa.

Among the projects he promoted were the construction of wells and roads to facilitate military movement. On 13 July 1844, he authorized two French commercial caravans to depart from Biskra: one heading toward Touggourt and the other toward In Salah. Their objective was to explore the commercial markets of the interior and evaluate the region's economic opportunities.

1.5 Heinrich Barth

French colonial planners attached considerable importance to the writings of the German explorer Heinrich Barth, widely regarded as one of the greatest explorers of Africa during the nineteenth century.

Barth provided exceptionally detailed descriptions of the Sahara's inhabitants, their customs, beliefs, and the geography of the region. In an article published in the Bulletin of the Geographical Society of Paris, he urged France to undertake an extensive colonial enterprise in the African Sahara, advocating the incorporation of these territories into Algeria through a comprehensive understanding of the trans-Saharan routes.

His research supplied French colonial authorities with valuable geographical and ethnographic information that later contributed to the planning of military expansion.

1.6 Henri Duveyrier

At the request of Emperor Napoleon III, the French explorer Henri Duveyrier, who was then residing in Ghadames, collected extensive information concerning the Sahara and its inhabitants.

Duveyrier observed that Ghadames had approximately four thousand inhabitants composed of Arabs, Berbers, and Black Africans. He succeeded in establishing close relations with the Tuareg, learning their language and integrating himself into their society.

His celebrated work, *Les Touareg du Nord*, constitutes one of the earliest comprehensive studies of the Northern Tuareg. The book examines the region's physical geography, water resources, social customs, traditions, and tribal organization, and it remains an important historical source for scholars studying the Sahara.

1.7 The Flatters Expedition (1879)

The Flatters Expedition of 1879 was primarily intended to investigate the feasibility of constructing a trans-Saharan railway linking Algeria with the Niger region.

The expedition also sought to identify routes that would facilitate French expansion into Sub-Saharan Africa and strengthen France's strategic position throughout the continent.

1.8 Gerhard Rohlfs

The German explorer Gerhard Rohlfs successfully crossed the Sahara from Morocco to Libya through Algerian territory.

Unlike several contemporary explorers, his mission was essentially geographical rather than political or commercial. Nevertheless, the information he gathered concerning the desert's

physical geography, climate, and transportation routes later proved highly valuable to French colonial authorities.

Conclusion of this Section

Collectively, these exploratory missions generated an extensive body of geographical, economic, ethnographic, and strategic knowledge concerning the Algerian Sahara. Their reports substantially reduced the uncertainties associated with desert travel, identified viable communication routes, and provided France with the scientific foundations necessary to prepare and implement its colonial expansion into the Sahara.

2. Major French Expansionist Projects in the Algerian Sahara

Following the gradual penetration of the Algerian Sahara, the French colonial authorities encountered persistent resistance from local populations determined to halt colonial expansion. Despite these obstacles, France remained committed to extending its control over the southern territories in pursuit of economic, strategic, and security objectives that would consolidate its influence across North and Sub-Saharan Africa.

To achieve these ambitions, the French administration launched a series of large-scale expansionist projects aimed at integrating the Sahara into the colonial system.

2.1 The Trans-Saharan Railway Project

One of the earliest and most ambitious colonial initiatives was the proposal to construct a railway linking northern Algeria with the Sahara. In 1853, the engineer Kappany proposed a railway extending from Algiers through Bou Saâda, Ouargla, and In Salah, ultimately reaching Tamanrasset, with secondary branches connecting Tripoli and Tunis.

This railway was intended not merely as a transportation network but as a strategic instrument for consolidating French authority, facilitating troop movements, and accelerating the exploitation of Saharan resources.

In 1856, the engineer Adolphe Duponchel, inspired by the rapid expansion of railway systems in the United States and Great Britain, advocated the construction of an integrated railway network linking all French colonies. In 1875, he proposed a railway extending from Algeria to Touat, Ifoghas, and Timbuktu.

In 1878, Duponchel was officially commissioned to survey the proposed route. However, his mission advanced no farther than the region of Laghouat because of the considerable geographical and logistical challenges.

2.2 Scientific Commissions

To assess the technical feasibility of the railway project, the French government established a commission of experts. On 12 July 1879, the Minister of Public Works, Charles de Freycinet, submitted a report emphasizing that the railway would provide France with an effective means of penetrating the Algerian Sahara and consolidating its colonial presence.

The government allocated three million francs to finance three major scientific expeditions:

- The First Mission, headed by Pouyan, surveyed the railway route from Oran toward Touat. Its work ended at Mougrar in the Ksour Mountains, while Camille Sabatier continued gathering information concerning the remainder of the route.
- The Second Mission, directed by Choisy, included the engineer Georges Rolland, who carried out an extensive geological survey of the Oued Righ region. The mission

concluded that the railway linking Biskra, Ouargla, and El Goléa would provide the greatest commercial advantages.

- The Third Mission, commanded by Colonel Flanis, pursued objectives extending beyond the territories already occupied by France. Its members argued that constructing a trans-Saharan railway required continued military expansion into the southern regions by every available means.

2.3 Construction of the Railway Network

In 1857, a decree authorized the construction of approximately 1,400 kilometers of railway lines extending from eastern to western Algeria before gradually expanding into the Saharan regions.

Among the most significant railway projects was the Arzew–Aïn Sefra line, whose construction required several years and represented one of the principal transportation infrastructures supporting French colonial expansion into the Sahara.

The railway greatly facilitated:

- the rapid deployment of military forces;
- the transportation of settlers and administrative personnel;
- the movement of commercial goods;
- and the export of Saharan resources to Mediterranean ports for shipment to France.

2.4 Economic Exploitation of the Sahara

Beyond transportation infrastructure, the French colonial administration sought to exploit the Sahara's considerable natural wealth.

French businessmen and settlers were encouraged to acquire fertile agricultural land—particularly oases and water-rich areas—through confiscation and speculative investment. Capitalist companies supported by Saint-Simonian economic ideas promoted agricultural colonization and commercial development.

Geological surveys further revealed substantial mineral resources, including:

- coal;
- sulfur deposits;
- lead;
- zinc;
- copper;
- and other valuable minerals.

These discoveries reinforced France's conviction that the Sahara represented an important source of economic prosperity for the French Empire.

2.5 Control of Trans-Saharan Trade

France also sought to eliminate the long-established trans-Saharan caravan trade dominated by merchants from Morocco, Tripoli, and Mali.

These caravans transported perfumes, luxury goods, handicrafts, and Saharan products across Africa. French authorities regarded this commercial network as an obstacle to their economic ambitions.

Consequently, French military forces frequently intercepted caravans, imposed restrictions on their movement, disrupted their commercial activities, and gradually established a colonial monopoly over Saharan trade routes.

2.6 Administrative Reorganization of the Sahara

To strengthen colonial administration, France introduced a new administrative organization of the Saharan territories.

In 1905, a decree reorganized the southern regions into several administrative districts, including:

- Aïn Sefra
- Ghardaïa
- Touggourt
- The Oases Territory

Subsequent reforms in 1907 transferred several regions to new administrative jurisdictions. Ouargla became an important administrative center, while Touat and Gourara were placed under the authority of Aïn Sefra.

Despite these reforms, the southern frontiers remained poorly defined until the years preceding the Second World War. Military commanders frequently modified administrative boundaries according to strategic considerations rather than geographical or social realities. This process culminated in the establishment of new administrative districts, including Djanet in 1938.

2.7 Strategic Objectives of French Expansion

French expansion into the Sahara pursued several interrelated objectives:

1. Facilitating the movement of military columns to suppress resistance movements in southern Algeria.
2. Connecting colonial administrative centers throughout Algeria and linking them with France's African colonies.
3. Exploiting the Sahara's agricultural, mineral, and commercial resources to strengthen the French economy.
4. Transforming the Algerian Sahara into a strategic gateway for French expansion toward Sub-Saharan Africa.

3. Christian Missionary Activity in the Algerian Sahara

The objectives of the explorers and pioneers who ventured into the Sahara varied according to their nationalities, interests, and affiliations. While some sought to collect scientific information concerning the geography, climate, and inhabitants of the desert, others served foreign governments by identifying commercial routes that could facilitate colonial domination. A third group, however, devoted its efforts to spreading Christianity among the indigenous populations of the Sahara.

French missionary activity in southern Algeria became an integral component of France's broader colonial strategy. Religious missions were not confined to evangelization; they also contributed to the collection of geographical, ethnographic, and political intelligence that supported French military expansion.

3.1 Charles de Foucauld and the Missionary Enterprise

One of the most prominent missionary figures was Charles de Foucauld, who settled in the Hoggar region. His work represented a continuation of the missionary program initiated by Cardinal Charles Lavigerie, Archbishop of Algiers, during the second half of the nineteenth century.

Lavigerie openly expressed his objective of transforming Algeria into a Christian French land, envisioning it as a base from which Christianity would spread throughout the Sahara and into the heart of Africa.

Charles de Foucauld, a former French army officer, combined missionary work with extensive geographical observation and close interaction with the Tuareg communities. His prolonged residence enabled him to acquire an exceptional knowledge of their language, customs, and social organization.

3.2 Missionary Methods

Missionaries adopted several approaches to establish relationships with the local population.

They offered:

- medical assistance;
- charitable aid;
- food and financial support;
- educational services.

Beyond humanitarian objectives, these activities also enabled missionaries to gather valuable information concerning local society, tribal organization, communication routes, and political conditions.

The colonial administration regarded such information as strategically important for facilitating military penetration into the Sahara.

Missionaries also attempted to weaken the cultural and religious foundations of Algerian society by discouraging the use of the Arabic language, which constituted the principal medium for Islamic education. They further opposed the establishment of mosques and religious schools (zawiyas), considering them major obstacles to the spread of Christianity.

3.3 Relations with the Tuareg

Unlike many French military commanders, Charles de Foucauld succeeded in establishing relatively cordial relations with the Tuareg communities of the Hoggar.

He travelled extensively through Laghouat, Ghardaïa, El Meniaa, Ouargla, and Touggourt, gathering linguistic and ethnographic data.

His most enduring scholarly contribution was the compilation of an extensive Tuareg dictionary consisting of four volumes, which remains an important reference for researchers of Tuareg language and culture.

His familiarity with local society also enabled him to serve French colonial authorities by providing strategic intelligence concerning the region.

3.4 The Death of Charles de Foucauld

Despite his long residence among the Tuareg, suspicion gradually arose regarding the true nature of his activities.

On 1 December 1916, a group of local insurgents attacked his fortified residence in Tamanrasset. During the assault, the young revolutionary Soumi Oqatra shot and killed Charles de Foucauld while other members of the group searched the building for weapons and official documents.

Although his missionary mission ended with his death, French colonial historiography continued to portray him as one of the principal pioneers who facilitated France's penetration

into the Algerian Sahara and supported the expansion of French influence throughout Sub-Saharan Africa.

Conclusion

The French colonial authorities quickly recognized the strategic and economic significance of the Algerian Sahara because of its abundant natural resources, many of which were either scarce or unavailable in Europe.

However, the region's harsh environmental conditions—including vast distances, shifting sand dunes, and the absence of clearly defined routes—presented considerable obstacles to colonial expansion.

To overcome these challenges, France relied extensively on scientific expeditions and exploratory missions that produced detailed geographical, economic, and ethnographic knowledge of the Sahara. This information became indispensable for planning military campaigns and organizing colonial administration.

The construction of railway networks represented another essential component of the colonial strategy. These railways facilitated the transportation of troops, settlers, and commercial goods while enabling the export of Saharan resources through Mediterranean ports to France.

Simultaneously, Christian missionary activity served not only religious purposes but also political and strategic objectives by promoting cultural penetration, gathering intelligence, and supporting the gradual consolidation of French authority.

Despite these carefully planned colonial initiatives, French expansion encountered persistent and determined resistance from the indigenous populations of southern Algeria. Consequently, the complete occupation of the Sahara was significantly delayed, culminating only in 1911 with the occupation of Djanet, one of the last Algerian territories to fall under French colonial rule.

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