

# INDIGÈNES/ DAYS OF GLORY (2006)

## Characters:

Saïd  
Messaoud  
Yassir  
Abdelkader  
Sergent Martinez

## Actors:

Jamel Debouzze  
Roschdy Zem  
Samy Nacery  
Sami Bouajila  
Bernard Blancan

**Director:** Rachid Bouchareb

## Introduction to the main themes:

*Indigènes* depicts four World War II soldiers (Saïd, Messaoud, Yassir, Abdelkader), each originating from one of France's North African colonies, who, like 130,000 others, enlisted to liberate the Motherland (and Europe) from the Nazi enemy, and ultimately fight discrimination along the way. These characters incorporate French cinema's main Arab personalities (called "beur" actors); the cast of *Indigènes* functions as a kind of "Who's Who in French 'beur cinéma'". In addition, the four main actors are directly paying homage to their ancestors, who did enlist in this "African Army" that helped liberate France and Italy from the Nazis. According to Jamel Debouzze, co producer of the film, the goal of this film is "to eliminate prejudices". We also have a brief glimpse of the difficulties faced by the French "pieds-noir" caught in the middle of the "true French" and the "indigènes" (embodied by the character of Sergeant Martinez). Will the promise the French "liberté, égalité, et fraternité" be realized by these soldiers?

## The Role of the "Indigènes"

Having never seen or touched, let alone lived in France, "indigènes" enlist to help free the French "Motherland." They do indeed liberate France and Italy, as shown in the film. We see the extent to which the "indigènes" contributed to liberating Europe when Abdelkader visits the cemetery in the end of the film; the contrast of graves with crosses and the many without underlines the large contribution of the "musulmans."<sup>1</sup>

## <sup>2</sup>A parallel can be drawn with United States History:

Can we draw any parallels between the role of these colonized men and the men depicted in the American film, *Glory*? – The American title, *Days of Glory*, to this French film alludes to the struggle of African Americans in the US depicted in *Glory*

- This film falls into the category of heritage war films; however, get students to think about the implications of the release of this kind of war film that mixes both military history and current socio-political commentary.
- When looking at *Glory* and *Days of Glory* in parallel, analyze how African Americans (for the purpose of this analysis, the equivalent to the North African population in France) fare in the

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<sup>1</sup> The glossary mentions the use of this term as a name to designate the North Africans.

<sup>2</sup> This section can be helpful in getting students to think of French film in the context of their own national experiences and knowledge of their own societal background.

United States today. How does this compare to the French of Arab decent? Are there recent events in France that might signal a continued debate?

### **Pre-viewing commentary:**

Why is this film interesting/important – What types of subtleties should students look out for during their French cinematic experience?

The film underlines the existence of a potential/hope to lead and open some debate on the forgotten past in addition to current socio-political issues. As a French, Moroccan, Belgian and Algerian co-production, the multilateral creation of this film shows a certain desire for reconciliation from both sides of the Mediterranean.

### **The Weight of History**

I. *Days of Glory* is a film that tells a story chiefly anchored in the World War II and the role that the “African Army” had in liberating France from the Nazis. However, for the average French viewer, many other elements come to mind when viewing this film:

- The place that North African immigrants have in French society today.
- The suburbs and the socio-economic gap at the center of French society.
- France’s reprehensible past as a colonizing nation
- The violent decolonization that these countries underwent (especially Algeria).

### II. World War II as the backdrop

How does this film go beyond the traditional « Hollywood » war movie?

The final scene in which Abdelkader, after paying a tired homage to his fellow “indigenes” (60 years later), returns to his apartment in the housing projects of a French suburb stresses the continuing implications of inequality in France. There is a political twist that shows that remembering the past isn’t enough. There is more to be done today to eradicate the racism that persists and the social inequalities that continue to exist (different from that which was expressed during WWII but racism nonetheless).

### **Post-Viewing Activities:**

1. Analyze the four main characters by looking at i.) their personal reasons for enlisting in the army, ii.) their relationship with France and iii.) the way their rapport evolves through the film.

Saïd: Enlists in order to do his part in freeing France, to whom he feels tied. As the movie progresses, he gets closer to a Frenchman who had been living in North Africa (or “pied-noir”)

Yassis: Enlists to make money in order for his brother to be able to get married. His poor relationship with France worsens throughout the film and he recalls the negative aspects of the colonization imposed on Algeria, and the violence that came from it.

Messaoud: Would like to live in France. How does his relationship to the Army evolve as he gets closer to and separated from a French woman?

Abdelkader: Obsessed with obtaining the social recognition due to him and his comrades. As the only of his unit to survive, what are the implications of him living?

2. Analyze the reasons for which both French and Arabic were used. What is the signification of this mixture? The audience clearly observes the linguistic and cultural division that spans the movie.

3. Study the mixing of two cultures, achieved through the choice of music.

The soldiers of the “African Army” both know and sing the French national anthem (“La Marseillaise”). However, Arabic music is chosen to celebrate the victory in Italy. Even in the beginning of the film, the

various images (Arab women dancing and North African quotidian scenes) mixed with the Arabic music immediately underline the importance of the distinct cultures of North Africa. The scene in which the soldiers sit through (part of) a ballet (representative of French/European culture) shows the culture clash and misunderstanding between civilizations.

### Essays:

1. This film is classified as an epic war movie and fits well into this cinematic subgroup; however, what element(s) make this film more than just a war movie?

Answers should include the continued sociopolitical implications.

2. How can this type of socioeconomic commentary be projected onto US history or current social conditions?

Answers could include information about marginalized groups in the US and the evolutions of their “status” throughout history.

3. What kinds of links can we make between the status of these men during that time period and the status of immigrants coming from these same North African regions currently living and rioting in France?

4. *Days of Glory* deals with the ambiguous national identity felt by these soldiers and their living relatives today. Discuss the disequilibrium portrayed in the film and its continuing implications today.

### Key Vocabulary / Glossary<sup>3</sup>

« **au repos** » = The military command, “at ease”

**L’armée d’Afrique** = Literally “African army”. A name given for the first time to the army corps in 1830, with its meaning evolving over time to refer to African soldiers.

**L’artillerie** = The artillery

**Le “bled”** = The country, the countryside in North Africa. The term comes directly from the Arabic word for country: “balad”.

**Les indigènes** = Indigenous peoples. A term that designates the colonized population under France’s Colonial Empire.

**Le Maghreb** = The region including North African Arab countries (Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia).

**Les musulmans** = The Muslims

**La “Pacification”<sup>4</sup>** = A name given to the French colonial conquest of Africa.

**Les pieds-noir** = French originators (white) living in the North African colonies

**La section** = The company

**Le tireur<sup>5</sup>** = The sharpshooter (or sniper)

### Chronology:

How did the liberation of Europe occur between 1943 and 1945 in the context of WW II? What historical sociopolitical context influenced the role of the North African soldiers in WWII? How does the fight for social recognition continue in present-day France?

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<sup>3</sup> The glossary includes difficult French terms (military terminology, words coming from Arabic, etc.)

<sup>4</sup> This term refers to a historic event to which refer the two brothers, Larbi and Yassir, in the Catholic church.

<sup>5</sup> This military term refers to Messaoud’s role within his unit.

**1830:** French colonization began in Algeria, which marks the beginning of the French Colonial Empire's presence in North Africa. This year also marks the beginning of the "Armée d'Afrique."

**September 3rd 1939:** France declares war to Germany

**May 10th 1940:** France is invaded by Nazi forces

**June 22nd 1940:** The armistice is signed between France and Germany

**1943:** The French campaign in Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco to create a supplementary army capable of fighting the Nazis alongside the Allies

**June 6th 1944:** Invasion of Normandy by Allied troops

<sup>6</sup>**Summer 1944:** Battles to liberate Italy

**August 15th 1944:** Invasion of Provence by Allied troops

**September – October 1944:** Battle of the Vosges

**October 1944:** The Rhone Valley

**January – February 1945:** Alsace is liberated

**December 26th 1959:** The "crystallization" law, which legalized the French practice of freezing the pensions of the "indigenous" ex-servicemen whose countries achieved independence from France, was passed.

**1962:** The violent end to years of French colonization of Algeria.

**1996:** A Senegalese veteran, enlisted between 1937 and 1959, lays charges against the French state, citing that he received only one third of the retirement pension he would have received had he been French.

**February 25th 2005:** The law on the positive aspects of colonization is passed in France. This law was withdrawn by the President 11 months later, following the large amount of debate and demonstrations that occurred as a result.

**October 2005:** The riots in the suburbs made international headline news, drawing attention to France's socioeconomic integration problem.

**June 26th 2006:** Jacques Chirac, President of the French Republic inaugurates a memorial dedicated to the 70,000 Muslim soldiers killed in combat, while fighting for France in 1916 (during WWI).

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<sup>6</sup> These battles (Italy, Provence, Vosges and Alsace) are indicated in the film

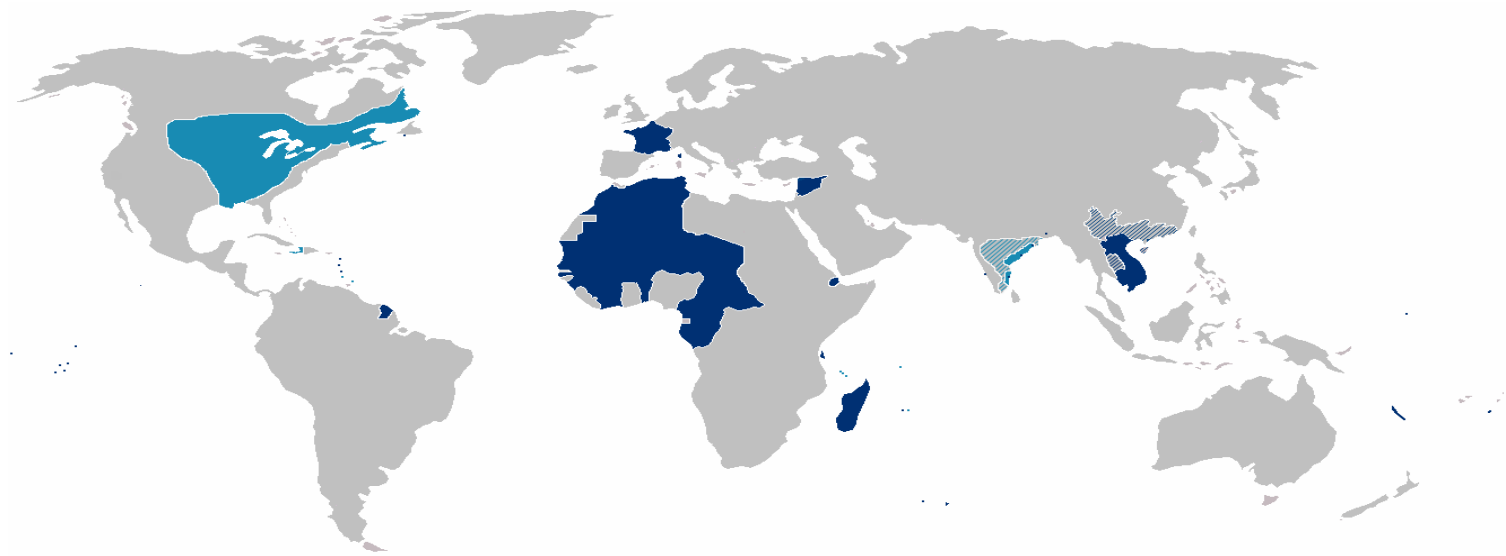
## Maps :

Document 1:



*Map of the territories liberated by the « indigènes »*

*Document 2:*



*The French colonial empire. Countries pictured in light blue signify their presence in the first colonial empire while those in dark blue are part of the second colonial empire (like the North African colonies).*

Document 3 :



Both sides of the Mediterranean/ French colonial Empire

*Document 4:*

(<http://www.agence-cinema-education.fr/indigenes-dossierpeda.pdf> pg 13)

Table of the indemnities paid to French vs. African fighters killed

*This chart shows the indemnities paid to mainland French versus those paid to the « indigènes », an example of the racism from which these forgotten soldiers suffered.*

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