

CHAPTER ONE

ALGERIA : THE BACKGROUND

Algeria is a country which covers a total area of 847,500 square miles, or about the same area as Ontario, Manitoba and Saskatchewan combined. Like Canada, its populated area is infinitely smaller, extending for a depth of not more than 50 miles along a coast about 750 miles in length. Beyond this is the desert, with a population of only 642,000 out of a total population in 1936 of 7,234,684 -- a figure which has considerably increased in the intervening years, and which now stands at over eight million. The European population, now over one million, was 987,252 in 1936, while the native population is made up mainly of Berbers, an ancient race of Hamitic extraction, and of Arabs.

The country is bounded on the West by Morocco, on the South by an artificial administrative boundary with French West Africa, and on the East by Libya and Tunisia. In structure, however, the country is greatly divided within itself. In most parts of the country, the mountains of the Tell Atlas group reach the sea, leaving coastal plains only in the neighbourhood of Oran and Algiers. These mountains reach their highest points, sometimes over 7,500 feet, immediately south-east of Algiers. Upon passing over this series of mountains, one reaches the High Plateau, which is generally between 2,500 and 3,000 feet in height, and is in some areas strangely reminiscent of the foothills of the Canadian Rockies. South of this again is the Saharan Atlas, and beyond that the vast expanse of desert, often mountainous, nearly always rocky, and only in some areas conforming to our usual conception of limitless sands and shimmering dunes.

Along the Mediterranean coastal zone, the mountains act as a catchment area for rain, and mean average rainfall is in the neighbourhood of 28 inches, increasing towards the East to 36 inches. Most of this rain falls in November, December and January. In the High Plateau area, rain is still between 10 and 20 inches yearly; the effect of the rain is increased by means of streams coming down from the mountains. South of the Saharan Atlas, rainfall averages between 2 and 6 inches per year in the Northern Sahara, and drops down to nil in many parts of the southern desert.