

Group D

World Wars and Independence

As a colony of France, Morocco participated – on the Allied side – in both world wars. Connections between Morocco and Europe have continued even after Morocco regained its independence.

In World War I, from 1914 to 1918. Moroccan troops fought alongside the French in the French Army of Africa, which also included troops from other French colonies in the region, such as Algeria and Senegal. The Moroccan troops fought in many major battles on the Western Front. (Interestingly enough, Moroccan soldiers did not seem to be used against their Ottoman co-religionists in the east.) Approximately 45,000 Moroccans fought in the war. 9,000 were killed or missing in action; 17,000 others were wounded or suffered from disease. In addition, there were 38,000 civilian workers (not soldiers, but people who dug trenches and did other kinds of labor) involved in the conflict.

Participation in the Great War brought greater awareness of discrimination suffered at the hands of the French. Some Moroccans also felt that they had sacrificed for the cause and deserved recognition – and independence. Thus, participation in World War I led to the spread of nationalist ideas in North Africa.

Morocco was even more directly involved in World War II. As a ‘protectorate’ of France, Morocco fell under Nazi control following the fall of France in May 1940. As a result of that defeat, France was divided into two parts: a region directly occupied by the German army and another (Vichy France) which was supposedly an independent French state but was actually a puppet of Germany. Much of Morocco fell under the control of Vichy France until 1943 – though most Moroccans supported the Free French forces of Charles de Gaulle, who were fighting against the Germans in North Africa.

Under the Vichy government, life became more difficult for Morocco’s 250,000 Jews. Luckily, they were protected from the worst Nazi atrocities, partly because of their relative distance from the center of persecution (Central/Eastern Europe), partly because of support from the Moroccan sultan himself (who famously told Nazi supporters, “There are no Jews in Morocco. There are only Moroccan subjects.”).

The war soon brought new players to the Moroccan political scene: the British and the U.S. In November 1942, the western Allies launched ‘Operation Torch,’ an invasion of Morocco and Algeria. The goal was to open a second front against the Axis forces. (The Soviet Union was fighting to the East, and Britain and the U.S. were as yet unable to launch an attack on German forces from Western Europe. Therefore, the Allies sought to spread out German and Italian forces by attacking from the south: in North Africa.) The invasion was launched through Casablanca, a Moroccan port city on the Atlantic coast. Most Moroccans supported the Allies.

In January 1943, British leader Winston Churchill and U.S. leader Franklin D. Roosevelt, along with their advisors, met in Casablanca to discuss war efforts. (An interesting footnote: The Germans learned of the meeting in advance. However, because 'Casablanca' means 'white house' in Spanish, they assumed the meeting would be at the U.S. president's residence in Washington DC: the White House. Germany was, thus, unable to prevent or disrupt the meeting.) While in Morocco, Roosevelt met with Sultan Mohammad V and encouraged him to seek independence from France and Spain.

When the war ended in May 1945, Morocco remained under French rule. However, the U.S. continued to be involved in Morocco and fully supported the country's independence a decade later.

Following World War II, Moroccan demands for independence from France grew increasingly strong. (In fact, the U.S. encouraged Morocco's desire for independence.) In 1947, Sultan Mohammed V, previously shy and willing to play the role of a figurehead under French rule, gave a speech about Moroccan unity and Morocco's "Arab-Islamic destiny." He became an even more admired national symbol. In 1953 the French sent him and his family into exile in Madagascar, a French colony off the southeastern coast of Africa which was about as far from Morocco as one can get and still remain in Africa.

In Morocco, two years of violence and revolt followed, and France came under international pressure to allow the sultan to return home. In late 1955, he made a triumphant entry into Rabat, Morocco's capital. Less than five months later, on March 2, 1956, Morocco was officially granted independence, and the sultan became KING Mohammed V.

Research Topics

1. How did African troops and civilians serving with the French in World War I contribute to the Allied victory in the war? (Which of today's countries did they come from? What jobs did they do? What battles did they fight in or contribute to?)
2. What was Morocco's experience during World War II? What effects would the war have on Morocco's future?
3. What kind of relations did the U.S. have with Morocco during World War II? (What was the context for this relationship – previous relations with the U.S.? What effects did the wartime ties have on future relations between the two countries?)
4. How did the Jews of North Africa fare during the Holocaust? (Consider Nazi activity in Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia following the fall of France – and the local people's reaction. Also, consider the resistance activities of Muslim leaders of North African origin in the Grand Mosque of Paris.) What factors – both local and external – affected the fate of North African Jews during this time period?
5. Why was Morocco able to achieve independence in 1956? (How did Moroccan contributions to the Allied cause in both world wars affect the Moroccan nationalist movement? What migration of ideas had occurred from American, European, and Algerian sources? Why do you think Morocco was able to gain its independence sooner and with much less violence than neighboring Algeria?)