

Migratory controls with deadly consequences: The “Sidi Ferruch tragedy”, April 1926

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ABSTRACT

While the “freedom of travel” was recognized for “indigènes” (indigenous persons) by the law of July 15, 1914, the Chautemps circulars of 1924 established a new system of migratory control between the departments of Algeria and the metropole. Some travellers circumvented these provisions by travelling secretly, with crossings sometimes taking a tragic turn, as in the “Sidi Ferruch tragedy” of April 1926.



Acknowledgement of application for an identification card issued by the Marseille port authority, which was blamed for its propensity to resolve the administrative status of Algerian and Moroccan “stowaways” in exchange for money. Archives départementales des Bouches-du-Rhône, 4M 2361.



"The horrible Sidi Ferruch tragedy," *Le Petit journal illustré*, May 16, 1926.

While the "freedom of travel" was recognized for "*indigènes*" (indigenous persons) by the law of July 15, 1914, the Chautemps circulars of 1924 established a new system of migratory control between the departments of Algeria and the metropole. As the promises of equality formulated at the end of the First World War faded, arguments supporting greater control over movement were heard. However, "Algerian Muslims" were the only passengers targeted by the implementation of travel permits for the crossing, which were officially intended for individuals travelling in 3rd or 4th class. Until the (temporary) elimination of these provisions in the summer of 1936, some travellers circumvented them by stowing away in the holds of ships, with their journeys often ending in tragedy, offering a reminder that migratory controls should be resituated within the long history of attempts to hinder human circulation.

A "tragedy" covered by the media

There are few traces of these deadly Mediterranean crossings, although the press gave significant coverage to the "horrible *Sidi Ferruch* tragedy" of April 27, 1926, when following a denunciation eleven undocumented Moroccan passengers who had boarded in Algiers were found asphyxiated in the holds of the boat of the same name when it stopped over in Marseille. They had been hidden "in the ship's ballast, beneath the machines," where the temperature could rise as high as 70°C. Nineteen other "passengers" were found safe and sound in the coal hold, although uncertainty remained regarding the fate of other potential stowaways, who may have been buried under the 285 tons of fuel stored in the ship's holds. The *Sidi Ferruch* left for Béjaïa before a thorough search could be conducted, and the survivors were questioned and then sent back to Algiers, where they had boarded. Four sailors identified as Corsican in police records, who had overseen the boarding process, were placed under a committal order, while the suspects ("Moroccans," "Algerians," and "Europeans") operating in Algiers as smugglers or organizers for the trafficking operation were sought, apparently unsuccessfully. Aside from the appointment of an examining magistrate, the legal consequences of the affair remain unknown.

The coverage given to the "*Sidi Ferruch* tragedy" revealed that these cases of death during migration were not

isolated. For example, on April 9, 1926, the steamship *Anfa*, a mail ship that left from Casablanca, was also at the center of an affair involving stowaways, one that required more extensive investigation than simply expelling the “*indigènes*” discovered upon their arrival. Twelve undocumented passengers hidden in lifeboats were forced to disembark in Tangier, but those hidden in the hold were only found on the high seas, with two of them having died of suffocation. The Corsican helmsman denounced by the survivors confessed immediately, and apparently committed suicide with his own weapon. The special commissioner of Marseille, without showing any surprise or desire to investigate, reported to his hierarchical superiors at the Sûreté générale that these three bodies had been “dumped at sea” before the ship’s arrival in Marseille. Given these conditions, one imagines the ease with which ship captains, who were genuine “masters on board,” could have the bodies of stowaways disappear without anyone being bothered.

Nameless victims

In this case, like that of the *Sidi Ferruch*, the identity of the Moroccan victims was never established: the absence of identification documents was enough to justify anonymity, with no testimony whatsoever being sought out, including among the survivors who were promptly turned away to their port of embarkation. In all probability, the corpses that were not dumped at sea were subject to “administrative burial” (inhumation in an anonym pauper’s grave) in a Marseille cemetery.

It is therefore impossible to establish any estimate of the number of “deaths in the Mediterranean” brought about by introducing “the offense of stowing away” (law of May 30, 1923), or restrictions on circulation between Morocco (1924) and Algeria (later in 1924) and the metropole. However, the “*Sidi Ferruch* tragedy” cannot be considered an isolated event, even though it is the only one that attracted the attention of major press outlets. For example, in the ensuing months, activists from the colonial secretariat of the CGTU denounced the reoccurrence of these events: the 1928 pamphlet entitled *L’indigénat, code d’esclavage* (The native code, a code of slavery) pointed out multiple cases of Algerians emerging “in agony,” or North Africans disembarking from boats “in alarming states of health.” Most especially, it indicated that in order to escape controls, these undocumented passengers avoided ports and squeezed into sailboats: four deaths from malnutrition, after 23 days of travel, were discovered on February 25, 1927 in Port-la-Nouvelle (Aude).

Ten years later, Saïd Faci suggested, in his *L’Algérie sous l’égide de la France* (1936), that deaths at the bottom of holds were much more frequent than the few cases that had been identified: “Little does it matter if *indigènes* die, as long as Algerian colonists have cheap labor,” he wrote in denouncing the deadly consequences of restrictions on the freedom of movement between Algeria and the metropole. Official reactions were predictable, even before the relative emotion sparked by the corpses from the *Sidi Ferruch* had faded away: Octave Depont, who served as the primary expert at the time on “North African emigration,” informed the press that “indigenous undocumented immigrants should be sent back to Algeria.” The stated objective was to “stop undocumented immigration, which has developed considerably in recent times,” all while avoiding “the hundreds of deaths” that Depont mentioned, without providing any details (*Le Petit Versaillais*, May 1926). His call for a more severe crackdown was heeded, and sentences in connection with the law of May 30, 1923, which established the offense of stowing away, were made harsher (law of December 17, 1926).

Circumventing migratory controls

Bypassing controls does not seem to have decreased in the ensuing years, although most candidates for departure sought to avoid the most dangerous methods, especially stowing away in holds. A number of Moroccans, who passed through Oran without being able to assemble the false documents and other authorizations for sale—which would have given them the appearance of Algerians with their papers in order—nevertheless had to resolve to do just that. Algerians with false papers were also questioned in Marseille, and immediately turned back, although

most of these *harragas* benefited from complicity, which allowed them to avoid controls upon their arrival.

Once the political and media frenzy sparked by the *Sidi Ferruch* affair subsided, the trafficking of ID documents and the act of “stowing away” surfaced from time to time, especially in connection with mobilizations supporting a tougher stance on controls. This politicization makes it all the more difficult to assess the scope and consequences of “undocumented immigration.” Relatively few people (on the order of a few dozen per month) were turned away in Marseille, and it was clearly in the interest of ship captains to have undocumented immigrants found at sea discreetly disembark rather than be denounced, at the risk of having to assume responsibility for their return voyage. The most clear-headed police officers recognized that the number of “undocumented immigrants” and the risks they were ready to undertake depended first and foremost on the rigor of the legislation and controls in effect. However, these observations were hardly used in arguments supporting the freedom of travel, other than by anticolonialist activists who saw these controls and their tragic human consequences as offshoots of the “odious Code de l’indigénat.”

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