

MOROCCANS, ALGERIANS, TUNISIANS...

From Africa to the Artois,

FOR the vast majority of the inhabitants of the Pas-de-Calais, the name Vimy is indelibly linked with Canada because of the battle that took place there in April 1917. The Canadian memorial appears in every history book and travel guide and is one of the main monuments in the region. In fact, Vimy is technically not even part of France, as the monument officially stands on Canadian soil.

The Moroccan monument was in fact restored a few years ago (paid for by the King of Morocco), yet passes (almost) unnoticed. So why is it here? The reason for its presence is quite easy to identify: fortified and held by the Germans since 1914, Vimy Ridge had long been coveted by France because of its strategic position, in the same way as the hill of Notre-Dame-de-Lorette.

In 1915, the French and German armies confronted each other in the Souchez sector, each embedded in successive lines of trenches. Despite its weak artillery, France's continued aim was to retake Lorette and to break through the front. On this occasion it set Vimy Ridge as its objective, even though this seemed somewhat unrealistic at the time.

On Vimy Ridge

On 9 May, the Moroccan Division went

directly on the attack, and against all the odds it broke through four successive lines of German trenches to reach the ridge an hour and a half later. Even though its losses were heavy, its success was undeniable, incredible even. So incredible, in fact, that the reinforcements which should have been following to clean up the sector, were not there...or even ready, and were too far away to react quickly. As a result, it was a question of holding the position to the death. Pierre Miquel wrote in *La Butte Sanglante (The Bloody Hill)*: *"The troops of the Moroccan Division made a mistake in winning the battle, as it then became a question of minimising their achievement [...] given that the resources to back up what had been achieved were not in place"*.

A sacrificed division

The Moroccan Division was then considered a target for enemy fire... which is another way of saying that it was sacrificed, hence the reason for the Moroccan Division's commemoration at the memorial. However, in the eyes of the sociologist Abdelmoula Souidia (Memoria Nord association): "this is not true", in the sense that it gives the impression that it honours the memory of Moroccan soldiers whereas, in fact, there were no Moroccans in the Moroccan Division.

The Division was given its name because it



The 'café' in a Moroccan camp near Aix - Noulette

Photo: Alain Jacques documentary collection

had returned from Morocco in August 1914. Subsequently reorganised, it comprised units of varying origin. In the case of the assault on Vimy Ridge, its troops were made up of Algerian soldiers, recruited in Algeria or Tunisia, as well as legionnaires, and foreigners of every description ranging from American, Polish and Czechs to Swedish and Swiss volunteers, including the writer Blaise Cendrars.

Where are the Moroccans?

Given the circumstances it's not easy to work this out. What is clear, however, is that Moroccan soldiers were engaged on the Artois front. The presence of the 1st Moroccan Infantry regiment is highlighted in May-June 1915 around Angres and Aix-Noulette. We also know that infantry regiments of Moroccan Spahis were in action in Arras and Hesdin. Abdelmoula Souidia himself talks of the caïd (lieutenant) Brick Ben Kaddour, one of the few Moroccan officers who took part in the defence of Béthune and was killed at Radinghem-en-Weppes, and of one of his friends, Abbas Ben M'Hamed, killed at Richebourg in 1914. However, without an in-depth knowledge of regimental history, it

is particularly difficult trying to find detailed information as there are no Moroccan, Algerian or Tunisian cemeteries – only the Muslim cemeteries in Lorette, and in La Targette, where Muslim tombs from 1939-45 are more numerous than those from 1914-18. Hence the question: what happened to the Moroccans who died? The answer can be found in various cemeteries of the region, and is directly linked to the composition of the different army corps. It's worth noting that more than 30,000 Moroccan soldiers (37,000 according to Pierre Miquel) left their home country to fight alongside French troops.



Algerian infantrymen, in Carency

Photo: Alain Jacques documentary collection



The memorial to the Moroccan Division

Photo: Philippe Vincent-Chaissac

Thanks to their glorious ancestors who came to fight alongside French soldiers

They are part of the history of France

Working with the Memoria Nord association, sociologist Abdelmoula Souidia regularly brings school pupils to the region's military cemeteries and memorials. "These places are full of meaning" he says. The history which these pupils learn in class is also their history. "They are a part of the history of France".



For French citizens of Moroccan origin, considerable work still needs to be done to commemorate sacrifices made. A ceremony in the Muslim section of Lorette cemetery.

France because their king asked them to do so. There was a huge response to his appeal. Moroccans came to France with their horses; they had long hair and their traditional djellaba robes flapped in the wind as they galloped across the fields. They were disliked by the Germans, who nicknamed them the *Swallows of Death*.

Photo: Memoria Nord

These visits take them away from the world of the working class, which has been their only reference point until now. "Their parents came here to work, and now all of a sudden they are heroes", continues Abdelmoula Souidia, whose father was a miner at Évin-Malmaison, a job which commands a huge amount of respect. The sociologist explains that Morocco was a protectorate (unlike Algeria, which was a colony) and that Moroccans came to fight in

Today, a significant number of Moroccans have ancestors who fought in France. This is a part of their history. Abdelmoula Souidia explains that he is often questioned by Moroccans who want to know where a particular tomb is situated. Not an easy question to answer, as there are so many unknown soldiers in the tombs. And even once they've located the tomb, they are not always likely to obtain a visa to visit France. Much remains to be done for attitudes to change in this respect. Formalities can also take a long time to be completed. This was certainly true in the case of Brick Ben Kaddour, a Muslim who had been erroneously buried under a Latin cross. Captain Josse, a former Spahi, discovered the mistake and became involved in lengthy negotiations in order for the soldier to be laid to rest under a Muslim stele. It's clear that considerable work still needs to be done to commemo-

rate sacrifices made. Mr Souidia, who is looking for financial backing for a book on the subject, reminds us that "Moroccans helped to build the French Empire". In other words, they contributed to the country's greatness. After the end of the war, these men returned to their own country with a completely different image of France.

As far as the Algerians are concerned, the historian Carl Pépin explains that the First World War helped to build their awareness of themselves as a people who aspired to independence.

These feelings were reinforced by the Second World War. For the Moroccans, who had a much older history as a nation, such reinforcement was not needed. Nonetheless, this war undoubtedly strengthened their desire to reject their status of a protectorate, which was disliked by many.