



Italian Migration and Settlement in the Province of Constantine during the Colonial Period (1861–1911): Demographic Transformations and Economic Functions in the Context of French Colonial Policy

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Abstract:

This article examines Italian migration and settlement in the province of Constantine during the colonial period between 1861 and 1911, in the broader context of French colonial policy and the demographic and economic transformations experienced by Algeria. It seeks to analyze the place of Italian migration within the wider movement of non-French European migration, and to clarify its functional role in supporting the colonial project, particularly in a province characterized by a relatively weak French presence in terms of settlement.

The article is based on a critical analysis of statistical data issued by both the French colonial administration and the Italian authorities, comparing them in order to uncover the dynamics of migration and settlement and to explain the reasons for discrepancies in the figures. It also discusses the economic and social factors that drove Italians—especially those from southern Italy and the Po Valley—to migrate to Algeria in the context of economic crises, unequal land distribution, and political upheavals.

The findings show that the province of Constantine formed a major pole of Italian settlement. Italians were concentrated primarily in coastal towns and in areas connected to ports and mines, where they worked in key economic sectors such as fishing, mining, public works, and construction. The article concludes that Italian settlement was not merely a demographic phenomenon, but rather a structural element that contributed to reshaping the province's demographic and economic fabric within the framework of French colonial policy.

Keywords: Italian migration; Italian settlement; Province of Constantine; colonial Algeria; French colonial policy...



Introduction

During the period of French colonial rule, Algeria witnessed profound demographic transformations linked to the inflow of waves of European migrants. These migrants were not limited to the French alone, but also included several Mediterranean nationalities, foremost among them Spaniards, Italians, and Anglo-Maltese.

Although, in the early years of the occupation, the colonial authorities did not adopt a coherent policy to organize and direct these migrations, the limited scale of specifically French settlement on the one hand, and the administration's desire to build a European population bloc supporting French sovereignty on the other, soon made non-French European migration a key demographic resource. This resource was gradually harnessed within the project of "*making Frenchmen*" through legal and legislative mechanisms that eventually incorporated wide segments of foreigners into the French settler body.

Within this context, the province of Constantine stands out as a particular case when compared with the provinces of Algiers and Oran. Statistical data indicate that, although Constantine attracted fewer non-French European migrants overall, it recorded the highest concentration of Italian migrants and settlers.

This made Italians a significant demographic and functional component of the local colonial economy. Their presence was linked to specific economic spheres, notably fishing, mining, public works, and construction, confirming that Italian settlement was not simply a matter of residential stability but part of a broader colonial dynamic aimed at exploiting natural resources, expanding infrastructure, and integrating the coastal zone with the interior.

Accordingly, this study poses a central question regarding the nature of Italian migration and settlement in the province of Constantine between 1861 and 1911, and the extent to which these movements were connected, on the one hand, to the economic and social crises in Italy, and, on the other, to the requirements of the French colonial project.

Problematic: *To what extent can this migration be seen simultaneously as a demographic phenomenon produced by internal pressures in the country of origin, and as a functional tool that contributed to reshaping the province's demographic and economic structure within the framework of French colonial policy?*

1. European Settlement in the Province of Constantine

European migration to Algeria in the early years of the French occupation did not initially result from a clearly defined colonial policy. In the first phase, the French authorities focused exclusively on encouraging French migrants to come. However, the limitations of this approach and its failure to provide the European population density deemed necessary to consolidate colonial control soon led the Government-General to regard non-French European migrations as an essential demographic reservoir for populating the colony with French nationals.



This orientation became clearer from the 1860s onward through a series of legal measures aimed at integrating European foreigners into the French settler body. The most prominent of these were the *Sénatus-consulte* decree of July 1865 and the law of June 26th, 1889, which established the principle of *jus soli* (right of the soil) and granted French nationality automatically to children of foreigners born in Algeria. This policy helped transform large numbers of European migrants into French settlers, thus serving the goal of reinforcing French sovereignty in the face of the demographic growth of the Muslim Algerian population.

From the mid-1860s until the eve of the Second World War, Algeria experienced a continuous influx of European migrants who gradually integrated into the French settler society. However, their distribution remained uneven among the three provinces. Statistics from 1911 show that migrants arriving from Mediterranean countries formed the largest share of all European migrants.

Table (01-18): Distribution of European Migrants among the Three Northern Algerian Provinces in 1911 (M.I, 1911, pp. pp.864-865)

<i>Administrative Province</i>	<i>Spaniards (n)</i>	<i>Italians (n)</i>	<i>Anglo-Maltese (n)</i>	<i>Total Migrants (n)</i>
Province of Algiers	39,456	13,607	1,526	58,174
Province of Oran	92,986	3,085	168	101,009
Province of Constantine	2,304	19,969	5,209	28,755
Total	134,746	36,661	6,903	187,938

Table (01-19): Development of European Migration in the Province of Constantine, 1872–1921 (The author, 2026)¹

* The table is prepared by the researcher on the basis of:

G.G.A, *Tableau Général des Communes de L'Algérie 1884*, op. cit., pp. 86–87.

M.A.C, *Annuaire Statistique de la France 1888*, Onzième Année, Imprimerie Berger-Levrault et Cie, Nancy, 1888, pp. 472–473.

G.G.A, *Tableau Général des Communes de L'Algérie 1892*, op. cit., p. 206.

G.G.A, *Tableau Général des Communes de L'Algérie 1897*, op. cit., p. 198.

G.G.A, *Tableau Général des Communes de L'Algérie 1902*, op. cit., p. 206.

M.I, *Dénombrement De La Population 1906*, op. cit., p. 853.

M.I, *Dénombrement De La Population 1911*, op. cit., p. 871.

M.A.C, *Annuaire Statistique de la France 1923*, Trente-Huitième Volume, Imprimerie Nationale, Paris, 1923, p. 370.

Victor Demontés, *Le Peuple Algérien...*, op. cit., p. 43.



<i>Year</i>	<i>Number of European Migrants (n)</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>Number of European Migrants (n)</i>
1872	25,883	1896	35,072
1876	35,799	1901	33,207
1881	39,722	1906	25,972
1886	41,472	1911	28,755
1891	39,453	1921	24,275

The data in Table (01-18) indicate that the province of Oran attracted the largest share of non-French European migrants, at roughly 54 percent, followed by the province of Algiers with 31 percent, and finally the province of Constantine with only 15 percent. Spaniards formed the largest group among these migrants, accounting for 71.69 percent of all European migrants, with the overwhelming majority of them concentrated in the province of Oran (92.05 percent). Italians ranked second at 19.50 percent, but recorded their highest concentration in the province of Constantine, where 69.44 percent of them were settled.

Anglo-Maltese migrants represented a small share, not exceeding 3.67 percent, yet the province of Constantine alone attracted 75.45 percent of their total number. The data also show that European migrants of other nationalities (Germans, Swiss, Belgians, English) were concentrated mainly in the province of Oran. On this basis, the province of Oran can be regarded as the main destination of non-French European migration, whereas the province of Constantine is distinguished by a clear specificity: the high proportion of Italian migrants. This particularity justifies focusing, in this study, on Italian migration and settlement in the province of Constantine.

2. Italian Migration in the Province of Constantine

2.1. Motives and Phases of Italian Migration to Algeria

It is essential to investigate the motives behind the mass migrations of people coming from Italy, most of whom originated from coastal regions, especially Sicily and Calabria, in order to understand the real background of this phenomenon. Was the mother country, as some researchers have suggested, incapable of feeding its population? Or were these migrations linked to a more complex set of economic, social, and political factors?

The harsh living conditions experienced by Italy during the nineteenth century pushed increasing numbers of its inhabitants to migrate. This period was marked by a sharp decline in wages (Grange, 1994, p.554), which led to constant movement of labor in search of better employment opportunities.

The situation was further aggravated by a series of health disasters, particularly the spread of malaria, and by increasingly complex social conditions resulting from rapid population growth and highly unequal distribution of land ownership. Agricultural lands were concentrated in the



hands of a small number of large landowners who leased them out to peasants for high rents, forcing these peasants into extreme poverty, disease, and social exploitation (Grange, p.555).

Taken together, these factors were among the main reasons that drove European migrants of Italian origin to head toward Algeria, which appeared as a new space offering employment opportunities, especially in the context of French colonial expansion.

Table (01-20): Development of Italian Migration to Algeria, 1833–1921 (French Statistics)²

<i>Year</i>	<i>Italian Migrants (n)</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>Italian Migrants (n)</i>	<i>Year</i>
1833	1,122	1856	9,113	1886
1836	1,845	1861	10,852	1891
1841	3,258	1864	12,000	1896
1845	7,738	1866	16,655	1901
1846	8,175	1872	18,351	1906
1847	8,115	1876	25,759	1911
1853	7,573	1881	33,693	1921

Table (01-20) shows the development of Italian migration to Algeria between 1833 and 1921, according to French statistics. It is clear that this migration was not steady but experienced distinct fluctuations linked to economic and political contexts in both Italy and Algeria.

On the basis of these data, Italian migration to Algeria can be divided into three main phases:

First Phase (1830–1860)

This phase was characterized by relatively small numbers of Italians residing in Algeria. Their presence was limited mainly to traders and craftsmen. The period also witnessed a notable decline in their numbers between 1845 and 1853, a trend attributed to the economic crisis and the spread of cholera in 1849 (Loth, p.118), in addition to a policy of agricultural colonization reserved exclusively for the French. Customs duties imposed on Italian fishermen's products, reaching about 25 percent (Claude, 2008, p.10), further discouraged Italian migration. Overall, Italian migration during this phase remained relatively limited.

* The table is prepared by the researcher on the basis of:

M.A.C, *Annuaire Statistique de la France* 1885, op. cit., p. 607.

G.G.A, *Résultat Statistique du Dénombrement de la Population effectué le 31 octobre 1948*, op. cit., p. 15.

Gaston Loth, *Le peuplement Italien en Tunisie et en Algérie*, Librairie Armand Colin, Paris, 1905, pp. 108–117.

Antonio Cortese, *L'emigrazione Italiana Nell'Africa Mediterranea*, working paper (Dipartimento Di Economia Università Degli Studi Roma Tre), Università Degli Studi, no. 149, 2012, p. 26.



Second Phase (1860–1886)

This phase saw a rapid and substantial increase in the number of Italian migrants, who exceeded 44,000 persons by 1886. This surge was closely linked to the strengthening of the French colonial presence, especially through the launch of major infrastructure projects, foremost among them the railway project approved on 12 July 1865, which connected coastal regions with the interior and with mining areas. Land reclamation and swamp-draining projects also helped draw in Italian labor (Ben, 2023, p.47).

During the same period, Italy was undergoing severe economic and social distress, particularly after its unification in 1861. The new state inherited a weakened economy and internal and external conflicts that persisted for decades. Southern Italy suffered from acute poverty, social underdevelopment, and mounting debt. The sale of agricultural lands further deepened the crisis of the peasantry, prompting many to emigrate in large numbers.

Third Phase (1886–1921)

This phase was marked by a gradual decline in the numbers of Italian migrants after the peak of 1886. Several factors contributed to this downturn, most notably the promulgation of the Maritime Fisheries Law of 1 March 1888, which banned foreigners from fishing in Algerian territorial waters, and the law of 26 June 1889, which introduced automatic naturalization of foreigners. In addition, from 1911 onward, substantial numbers of Italians were redirected toward Italy's new colony, Libya, while the First World War and its consequences also had a significant impact.

Table (01-21): Development of Italian Migration to Algeria According to Italian Statistics, 1876–1920

<i>Year</i>	<i>Italian Migrants (n)</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>Italian Migrants (n)</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>Italian Migrants (n)</i>
1876	1,472	1891	718	1906	5,223
1877	385	1892	805	1907	7,031
1878	1,493	1893	1,054	1908	1,576
1879	1,419	1894	810	1909	1,512
1880	1,390	1895	956	1910	1,711
1881	1,552	1896	1,304	1911	1,295
1882	3,325	1897	936	1912	1,445
1883	2,882	1898	1,074	1913	1,460
1884	1,636	1899	1,150	1914	737
1885	3,423	1900	1,054	1915	657
1886	2,243	1901	1,899	1916	395
1887	1,375	1902	2,620	1917	245



1888	751	1903	2,260	1918	183
1889	765	1904	9,645	1919	1,986
1890	744	1905	7,051	1920	1,229

Tracking the data presented in this table shows that Italian statistics for the period 1876–1920 confirm that a very large proportion of migrants reached Algeria via routes that were difficult to control, and that the volume of Italian migration to Algeria was tied to conditions inside Italy, to international circumstances, and to French policy.

Like any researcher working on the history of migration to and from Algeria, this study encountered major difficulties in assessing the scale and movements of Italian migration toward Algeria because of the discrepancies between statistics provided by the Italian authorities and those issued by the French colonial administration. The main reasons include (Romain, pp.46-47):

- **Free migration:** Movement between Italy and Algeria was at first free, without requiring individual passports. The passport of the head of household sufficed for him to travel with all his family members, including servants, without the names of all family members being listed in the passport.
- **Seasonal migration:** Italian migration to Algeria was characterized by circulation, with many Italians' traveling to work temporarily and then returning to Italy.
- **Multiple and complex migration routes:** Italians used several routes to reach Algeria, including:
 - Travel as crew members on fishing boats or commercial ships in exchange for work on board; such migrants were not recorded in official Italian data.
 - Migration from third countries such as Austria-Hungary (the Venetian region) and the Papal States (Lazio and Rome). Even after Italian unification, the new state showed little concern for supporting or organizing emigration, treating it as a private choice in which it preferred not to intervene.
 - Irregular migration for political reasons, such as evading compulsory military service and deserting the army. Antonio Cortese notes that some 2,000 soldiers deserted from the Sardinian army during the first thirty years of the occupation, most of whom joined the Foreign Legion and actively participated in the occupation and colonial expansion (Cortese, p.10).

2.2. Development of Italian Settlement in the Province of Constantine

Table (00): Development of Italian Settlement in the Province of Constantine, 1861–1911

<i>Year</i>	<i>Italian Settlers (n)</i>
1861	3,927
1864	6,000
1866	9,326



1876	16,740
1881	21,055
1896	20,800
1901	20,810
1906	18,023
1911	19,958

Table (00) shows the development of the number of Italian settlers in the province of Constantine between 1861 and 1911. This evolution reflects the general trajectory of Italian settlement and its interaction with the economic and political transformations the province experienced under French rule. The number of Italian settlers rose rapidly from the 1860s onward, indicating the growing importance of the province as a destination for this settler group.

In 1861, Italian settlers numbered 3,927. By 1864, their number had risen to 6,000, and by 1866 it had reached 9,326, reflecting the emergence of a clearly identifiable Italian settler nucleus in the province. This swift growth was linked to the expansion of the colonial economic sector, particularly in the fields of major public works, construction, and mining, which attracted increasing numbers of Italian workers.

Over the following decades, Italian settlement continued to grow at a steady rate, reaching 16,740 in 1876 and peaking at 21,055 in 1881. This increase highlights the pivotal role played by Italians in supporting the colonial economy in Constantine, especially given the relative weakness of French settlement compared with the other provinces. This situation led the colonial authorities to rely increasingly on Italians to meet the demand for European labor.

Toward the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, this dynamic experienced a relative stabilization. The number of Italian settlers hovered between 20,800 and 20,810 during 1896 and 1901. This stabilization can be explained by the maturation of the major economic projects and the initial impact of legal and regulatory measures that re-organized migration and settlement flows.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the number of Italian settlers declined markedly, dropping to 18,023 in 1906, before rising slightly again to 19,958 in 1911. This temporary decline reflects the impact of several factors, including tighter legal restrictions, the orientation of some Italians toward other colonies—especially Libya—and broader international developments in the lead-up to the First World War. Nevertheless, the persistence of a substantial Italian population demonstrates the lasting incorporation of this group into the demographic fabric of the province of Constantine.



3. Distribution of Italian Settlers in the Province of Constantine

3.1. Geographical Distribution

The geographical distribution of Italian settlers in Algeria shows that geographical proximity to the Italian peninsula played a decisive role in shaping their patterns of settlement, in a way similar to what was observed for Spanish settlers—who concentrated heavily in the province of Oran. In this regard, census data from 1901 indicate that the province of Constantine accommodated 20,810 Italian settlers out of a total of 38,791 Italians in Algeria, that is, 53.64 percent of all Italian settlers in the colony. This underscores the special importance of the province as a principal center of Italian settlement (Grange, p.542).

Within the province of Constantine, the distribution of Italian settlers broadly mirrored that of the French settlers, although the latter had a broader presence in the interior (Loth, p.121).

Italians were particularly concentrated in coastal towns and villages that belonged to the three administrative districts of Annaba, Skikda, and Béjaïa. Out of 20,810 Italian settlers in the province, 13,503 were recorded in the fully-fledged municipalities of these districts, representing 64.88 percent of all Italian settlers in Constantine. This reflects their strong attachment to maritime and commercial activities.

These coastal settlers were distributed among several towns and municipalities, notably Annaba (6,048), Skikda (3,566), El Kala (1,127), and Béjaïa (451), in addition to smaller numbers in Stora, El-Qul (Collo), and Jijel. Altogether, these centers accounted for about 11,593 Italian settlers, most of whom were engaged in fishing and trade.

To this must be added roughly 2,000 Italian settlers who lived in interior municipalities close to the coast and administratively attached to the same coastal districts, such as Aïn Mokra, Douzville, Duvivier, Mendovi, Maurice, Randon, and Bigeaud. Their presence in these areas was tied to the port of Annaba, and they generally worked in activities connected with fishing or as laborers and small traders.

In the mixed municipalities, there were around 500 Italian settlers in areas such as Beni Salah, the Edough, and El Kala, mainly employed in the forestry sector. In addition, about 400 Italian settlers were concentrated near mines and quarries in the Petite Kabylie region, especially around Jijel, where their presence was closely linked to the exploitation of natural resources.

In the interior regions of the province, the Italian presence remained relatively limited. Settlers were spread among Constantine (865), Morsott (877), and Tebessa (240). Their presence in these areas, distant from the coast, is explained by the development of phosphate and other mining activities. In other interior localities, Italian settlers never exceeded small groups, often fewer than one hundred individuals, as in Oum El Bouaghi, Oued Zenati, Aïn Beïda, Batna, Guelma, Sétif, and Souk Ahras, where their presence was largely tied to mining activity.

Overall, Italian settlers constituted 23.39 percent of all European settlers in the province—a significant proportion in a region known for its relatively weak European settlement compared



with the other provinces. Most of these settlers came from southern Italy, especially Campania and Calabria, as well as from the Po Valley (Piedmont). They were characterized by a semi-itinerant lifestyle and a close association with large-scale public works, giving Italian settlement in the province of Constantine a distinctly economic and functional character (Loth, p.542).

3.2. Occupational Distribution

Italian settlers in the province of Constantine were spread across a range of key economic sectors that formed the backbone of the colonial economy. Chief among these were fishing, mining, construction, and public works, in addition to trade and handicrafts. This occupational distribution reflected the nature of Italian migration, which was primarily geared toward supplying specialized labor and contributed directly to the economic projects and infrastructure implemented by the French colonial administration.

The fishing sector was one of the earliest activities practiced by Italians in Algeria. Most historical studies indicate that the first Italians to set foot on Algerian soil from 1830 onward were fishermen from Naples and Sicily who worked along the Algerian coasts long before French settlement had consolidated.

Initially, this activity was seasonal, but it gradually transformed into permanent settlement as Italian fishermen brought their families to join them. Their presence was concentrated mainly in coastal towns. In this sector, Genoese, Livornese, Neapolitans, and Sicilians predominated—that is, people originating from Italian coastal regions with deep maritime traditions.

Mining was another vital area that absorbed Italian labor, particularly unemployed metalworkers from Sicily and Sardinia. From the 1840s, iron, hematite, and lead mines began to be exploited in eastern Algeria, especially in the Beni Addoun region near Guelma. In 1856, a lead mine was opened at Kef Oum Teboul near El Kala.

A consular report from 1870 refers to around one hundred Italian workers from Piedmont and Lombardy who earned daily wages of between 5 and 9 lira and remitted a substantial portion of their earnings to their families in Italy. During the last quarter of the nineteenth century, mining activities expanded to include iron and phosphate deposits in Souk Ahras and Tebessa, as well as deposits at Aïn Mokra near Annaba and mines and quarries in Jijel, close to Béjaïa. On the eve of the First World War, the discovery of the Ouenza deposits attracted additional Italian workers; statistics from 1902 show that, in 16 mining centers in the province of Constantine, 712 European workers—most of them Italians—and 634 Algerian workers were employed.

In the construction sector, Italians almost monopolized the trade in the province of Constantine until 1905, facing virtually no competition from French workers. In Béjaïa, about fifteen families of Italian construction workers had settled by 1868, later spreading across the Soummam valley, moving inland from the coast. In Skikda, three out of four contractors were Italian. Construction activity was closely linked to other trades in which Italians excelled, such as plastering, brick-making, marble-working, and tiling. They imported building materials—such as



ceramics and pozzolana—from Trieste, and contributed to the discovery and exploitation of marble deposits, including black marble at Sidi Yahia near Béjaïa. Italians played a substantial role in building new European quarters in the towns of Annaba, Béjaïa, Skikda, Constantine, and Tebessa, and even in transforming some indigenous villages into towns with a European character.

Italians also played a central role in the public works sector, especially between 1860 and 1900, when Algeria became, in effect, a huge building site. As railway projects accelerated, particularly after the application in 1879 to Algeria of the law of 12 July 1865 on railways of national importance, the demand for Italian labor increased sharply.

In Annaba alone, the Italian consul issued no fewer than 1,082 workbooks in 1879, followed by 1,215 more in 1880, to the point that the town was described at the time as an Italian city in eastern Algeria. In his report of July 1892, the Italian Consul-General in Algeria, Braschi, stated that Italian workers had helped construct around 2,000 km of national roads, 1,700 km of regional roads, and 800 km of railways under the supervision of French engineers. Historian Gaston Loth even contends that the French government could not have carried out its extensive public works program without relying on Italian labor.

In addition to these core sectors, Italians also worked in trade and handicrafts. Shoemakers from Palermo were renowned for their skills, while Tuscan artisans were known for their excellence in making plaster statues. Large-scale agriculture, by contrast, remained largely dominated by Spanish settlers, although Italians were employed as laborers in vineyards in the Annaba district and in cork-oak forests in the Skikda district.

Italian workers also participated in land reclamation projects, particularly in the Annaba district, where they were recruited to drain marshlands under difficult sanitary conditions. A report by the Italian Vice-Consul in Annaba, Castellani, in 1894 notes that these marshlands were transformed, thanks to Italian labor, into fertile agricultural lands.

Conclusion

The study of European settlement in the province of Constantine shows that non-French European migrations were not simply a natural by-product of Mediterranean mobility. Rather, they gradually became a demographic resource deliberately used by the French colonial administration to consolidate its control, whether by encouraging permanent settlement or by integrating foreigners into the settler community through legal channels that often led to naturalization and assimilation.

Within this framework, Italian migration and settlement in the province of Constantine clearly stands out as a specific case. The province recorded the highest concentration of Italians compared with the other Algerian provinces, and their presence was closely linked to a colonial economic structure that needed specialized labor in fishing, mining, construction, and public works. The data further reveal that their geographical distribution was not random but skewed



toward coastal towns and municipalities with commercial and port functions, with only a limited extension into the interior where mines and extractive centers were located.

The gap between French and Italian statistics underlines the difficulty of accurately capturing the dynamics of Italian migration because of its seasonal nature, multiple routes of passage, and the existence of irregular forms of movement and settlement. This complexity requires a critical approach to official figures and their contextualization within broader economic and political conditions. On this basis, Italian settlement in the province of Constantine can be seen not merely as a matter of demographic presence, but as part of a wider colonial dynamic that reshaped the province's economic and social space and reflected the intersection between the migrants' own motives and the functional roles they were assigned within the French colonial project.

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