

# The New York Times

Wednesday, December 6, 2006 Last Update: 5:33 AM ET

## ***MOVIE REVIEW | 'DAYS OF GLORY'***

### ***MORE ON 'Days of Glory'***

## **Yes, Soldiers of France, in All but Name**

[“Days of Glory,”](#) the English title of Rachid Bouchareb’s new film — called “Indigènes,” or natives, in French — has a rousing, somewhat generic war-movie ring. And Mr. Bouchareb, a French director of Algerian descent who has made four previous features, sticks close to the conventions of the genre as he follows a small group of World War II infantrymen from North Africa through Italy and across France into Alsace. His combat sequences are filmed with exquisite precision and edited with admirable economy, and the quieter moments that allow the characters of the men to emerge find a perfect balance between dramatic impact and psychological authenticity.

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Tessalit Productions

Sami Bouajila, left, and Jamel Debbouz in Rachid Bouchareb’s film “Days of Glory,” set in World War II.

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Tessalit Productions

Aurélie Eltvedt and Jamel Debbouze in “Days of Glory.”

In many ways “Days of Glory,” Algeria’s official Oscar submission for best foreign language film, fits comfortably into a proud and apparently inexhaustible cinematic tradition. It is a chronicle of courage and sacrifice, of danger and solidarity, of heroism and futility, told with power, grace and feeling and brought alive by first-rate acting. A damn good war movie.

What makes “Days of Glory” something more — something close to a great movie — is that it finds a new and politically urgent story to tell in the well-trodden (and beautifully photographed) soil of wartime Europe. That English title also evokes the opening lines of [“La Marseillaise.”](#) which announce that the day of martial glory has arrived for “the children of the fatherland.”

The soldiers in Mr. Bouchareb’s film, from Algeria and other French colonies in North Africa, are fighting for France, but the nature of their patrimony is painfully ambiguous. Their stories are hardly unique: hundreds of thousands of “indigenous soldiers” fought against the Axis under the French flag, but their experiences have had at best a marginal place in popular histories of the war.

The soldiers in Mr. Bouchareb’s film are told again and again that ridding France of its German occupiers is a patriotic duty, but again and again they confront their status as second-class citizens (if that) of a republic consecrated to liberty, equality and fraternity. Some of the indignities seem trivial — black and Arab soldiers are denied fresh tomatoes in the mess hall — but they are part of an unmistakable pattern. Promotions go to native-born Frenchmen; the African troops fight for months without leave; and the assumption that they are unsuited for command and more easily expendable than the others seems written on every white officer’s face.

The present-day relevance of this story hardly needs to be spelled out. At least since 1789, the idea of France has represented, at least in theory, both a set of universal aspirations (enshrined, for instance, in the revolutionary Declaration of the Rights of Man) and a particular national identity. “Days of Glory” shows just how acute, and how intricate, this contradiction can be. Some of the North African soldiers, even as they resent the brutal colonial subjugation of their lands, persist in believing the old republican slogans, trusting that their valor on the battlefield will force their colonial masters to recognize them, at long last, as equals.

Some of the French, soldiers and civilians alike, seem willing to extend this recognition. At one point, the sergeant who commands a troupe of North African soldiers tells one of his superiors not to refer to the soldiers as “natives.” He also says that [“Muslims”](#) is not an appropriate name. “What should I call them, then?” the captain asks.

“The men,” the sergeant responds. “The men.”

The actors who play those men — along with Bernard Blancan, who plays that sergeant, a pied noir (a Frenchman born in North Africa) named Martinez — shared the prize in Cannes last year for best male performance. In departing from the usual practice of singling out individual achievement, the jury acknowledged the film’s great strength, which is that its political ideas and historical arguments are embedded in the distinct fates and personalities of its characters, none of whom bears the burden alone.

In some ways the central figure is Abdelkader (Sami Bouajila), a corporal better educated than most of his comrades. His thoughtful nature makes him both a true believer and a potential rebel; his devotion to French ideals intensifies his resentment of French practices.

Yassir (Samy Nacéri) and his younger brother Larbi (Assad Bouab), Berbers from Morocco, have fewer illusions. Their families suffered terribly during the pacification campaigns of earlier decades, and the brothers fight not out of loyalty to France but for each other, for family honor and for material gain.

Saïd ([Jamel Debbouze](#)), who comes “from total poverty,” as he puts it, is both proud and servile, misjudging the sergeant’s affection for him and refusing all offers of promotion or advancement. Messaoud (Roschdy Zem), an ace marksman with “bad luck” tattooed on his chest, has a quiet, sorrowful air. He tests the tolerance of French society and the military bureaucracy by falling in love with a Frenchwoman, a Marseillaise, as it happens, who loves him back.

The tensions and friendships among the men unfold episodically, and their confrontations with the varieties of French racism — and the occasional manifestations of French decency — are punctuated by bloody encounters with the German enemy. Mr. Bouchareb, working from a packed, efficient script by Olivier Lorelle, has an impeccable sense of narrative rhythm. For all of its characters and incidents, “Days of Glory” rarely feels crowded or hectic, and its occasional didacticism never prevents you from appreciating the excellence of the filmmaking. Mr. Bouchareb makes every shot count.

The movie ends, true to Greatest Generation form, with a survivor’s visit, 60 years after the war, to a cemetery, where rounded, tapered Muslim headstones are at least as numerous as white crosses. “If I liberate a country, it’s my country,” Saïd declared earlier, in a moment of postbattle exuberance. The last scenes suggest a grim corollary: If you die in a country, it’s your home.

But the contradictions persist. The children and grandchildren of Saïd, Abdelkader and their comrades, are still not entirely at home in France, which shed its colonies grudgingly (and in the case of Algeria, brutally) in the decades after the defeat of fascism. The “indigenous” soldiers saw their military pensions frozen in 1959 as their countries moved toward independence. A law passed in 2002 promised them restitution, but no funds were authorized until this year, when [Jacques Chirac](#), the president of the republic, attended a screening of “Days of Glory,” a powerful exploration of injustice and resilience that arrived six decades too late, and just in time.

“Days of Glory” is rated R (Under 17 requires accompanying parent or adult guardian) for combat violence and some profanity.

## DAYS OF GLORY (INDIGÈNES)

Opens today in Manhattan.

Directed by Rachid Bouchareb; written (in French, with English subtitles) by Olivier Lorelle; director of photography, Patrick Blossier; edited by Yannick Kergoat; music by Armand Amar Khaled; art director, Dominique Douret; produced by Tessalit Productions; released by

the Weinstein Company and IFC Films. At the Angelika Film Center, Mercer and Houston Streets, Greenwich Village. Running time: 120 minutes.

WITH: [Jamel Debbouze](#) (Saïd), Samy Nacéri (Yassir), Roschdy Zem (Messaoud), Sami Bouajila (Abdelkader), Bernard Blancan (Sergeant Martinez), Mathieu Simonet (Leroux), Benoît Giros (Captain Durieux), Mélanie Laurent (Marguerite), Antoine Chappey (the Colonel) and Aurélie Eltvedt (Irène).