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"THERE HAS NEVER YET BEEN AN ALGERIAN NATION."

Albert Camus

Algeria (1958)

Born into poverty among the French Algerian population, the novelist, essayist, and moralist Albert Camus (1913–1960) explored in his writings the problems of the alienation of the individual and the way that values such as truth, moderation, and justice can be preserved. In post-World War II Europe, Camus gained fame for his writings, earning the 1957 Nobel Prize for literature. Critical of the injustices that were institutionalized by French policies in Algeria, Camus also believed that a French Algeria was not simply a colonial fiction. In the excerpt from Algeria below, Camus defends the idea of French Algeria by responding to the claims of Algerian nationalists.

If the Arab claim, such as it is expressed today, was entirely legitimate, Algeria probably would be autonomous now, with the consent of French opinion. However, . . . the Arab claim remains equivocal. This ambiguity, and the confused reactions that it arouses in our governments and in the country, explains the ambiguity of the French reaction, the omissions and the incertitudes with which it protects itself. The first thing to do is to clarify this claim to try to define clearly an agreeable response.

A. What is legitimate in the Arab claim?

It is right, and all the French know it, to denounce and refuse

1. Colonialism and its abuses, which are already established.
2. The repeated lie of assimilation, always proposed but never realized. . . .
3. The evident injustice of the distribution of agricultural lands and of the distributions of revenues. . . .
4. The psychological suffering: an attitude often scornful or detached among many French, which produces among the Arabs (by a series of stupid measures) a humiliation complex that is at the center of the present drama. . . .

B. What is illegitimate in the Arab claim?

The desire to rediscover a dignified and free life, the total loss of confidence in any political solution guaranteed by France, and also the romanticism characteristic of very young rebels who lack a political culture have led certain combatants and their military leaders to reclaim national independence. No matter how well disposed to the Arab claim, one must recognize nevertheless that with regard to

Albert Camus, *Actuelles III: Chroniques algériennes, 1939–1958* (Paris: Gallimard, 1958), 199–206. (Translated by David Kammerling Smith.)

Algeria, national independence is a formula of pure passion. There has never yet been an Algerian nation. Jews, Turks, Greeks, Italians, and Berbers would have as much right to reclaim the direction of this virtual nation. Actually, the Arabs themselves do not form Algeria alone. The importance and the antiquity of the French settlement [in Algeria], in particular, suffice to create a problem that is incomparable with anything else in history. The French of Algeria also are, in the strong sense of the term, indigenous. It must be added that a purely Arab Algeria would not be able to accede to the economic independence without which political independence is only an alluring illusion. . . .

The Arabs, at least, are able to call on their sentiment of attachment not to a nation but to a sort of Muslim empire, spiritual or temporal. Spiritually this empire exists, its cement and its doctrine being Islam. But a Christian empire also exists, at least as important, but no one intends to introduce it into temporal history. For the moment, the Arab empire does not exist historically but only in the writings of Colonel Nasser,¹ and it could materialize only by the worldwide upheavals that would signify the soon-to-come third world war. It is necessary to consider the claim of Algerian national independence in part as one of the manifestations of this new Arab imperialism, which Egypt, overestimating its strength, asserts to lead and which, for the moment, Russia uses for some goals of its anti-Western strategy. That this claim is unreal does not hinder its strategic use—well to the contrary. The Russian strategy, which can be read on all the maps of the globe, consists of calling for the status quo in Europe—this is to say the recognition of Russia's own colonial system—and stirring up the Middle East and Africa to encircle Europe by the south. The happiness and liberty of the Arab people have little to do with this affair. . . . Russia simply makes use of these dreams of empire to serve its own designs. In any case one must attribute to this nationalist and imperialist claim, in the precise sense of the word, the unacceptable aspects of the Arab rebellion and principally the systematic murder of French and Arab civilians, killed without discrimination solely for being French or friends of the French.

We thus find ourselves before an ambiguous claim that we can approve in its source and some of its formulations but that we cannot accept in any manner in certain of its developments. The error of the French government since the beginning of these events was of never distinguishing anything and consequently of never speaking clearly. This permitted all the skepticism and overbidding among the Arab masses. The result was to reinforce on both sides the extremist and nationalist factions.

The only chance of making progress on this problem is, thus, today as yesterday, choosing clear language. . . .

Then the French government must make known clearly

1. That it is prepared to render all justice to the Arab people of Algeria and to liberate them from the colonial system.
2. That it will cede nothing on the rights of the French of Algeria.

¹ Gamal Abdel Nasser (1918–1970), president of Egypt (1956–1970), who called for pan-Arab unity.

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3. That it cannot accept that this justice, which it will consent to render, signifies for the French nation the prelude to a sort of historic death and, for the West, the risk of an encirclement that would lead to the Kadarization² of Europe and the isolation of America. . . . [T]hat she refuses, in particular, to serve the dream of an Arab empire at the expense of herself, of the European people of Algeria, and, finally, of world peace.

² János Kádár (1912–1989), Hungarian communist who led the Hungarian government under Soviet auspices after the Soviet Union invaded Hungary in 1956 and suppressed a popular revolt.

QUESTIONS FOR ANALYSIS

1. On what basis does Camus deny Algerian nationhood? How does Camus sever the link between nationhood and political liberties and forms of injustice?
2. What criticisms of French policies in Algeria does Camus make? How does his proposed declaration for the French government address those abuses?
3. How does Camus's argument against Algerian independence compare to Soustelle's argument (Source 5)?
4. How does Camus's use of cold war tensions in his argument compare to Soustelle's concerns about the Soviet Union and the United States? How does it compare to Lumumba's efforts to manipulate cold war tensions (Source 3)?

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“... THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A HAPPY AND DEMOCRATIC ALGERIA.”

Ahmed Taleb-Ibrahimi

***Letter to Albert Camus* (1959)**

Born into a politically prominent Muslim family in French Algeria, Ahmed Taleb-Ibrahimi (b. 1932) obtained a medical degree in Paris, where he became active in student organizations promoting Algerian nationalism. In 1956, he became head of the FLN branch in France, which led to his arrest and imprisonment from 1957 to 1961. While in prison, Taleb-Ibrahimi wrote numerous letters, including one to Albert Camus, excerpted below. In this letter, Taleb-Ibrahimi responds to Camus's rejection of Algerian nationalism.

[W]hat you have never wished to admit was the existence of the Algerian Nation fighting to build its own future independently. Faithful to an obsolete point of view

Ahmed Taleb-Ibrahimi, “Open Letter to Albert Camus,” in Ahmed Taleb-Ibrahimi, *Letters from Prison, 1957–1961* (1966) (New Delhi: Allied, 1988), 35–39.