

A Truce for Civilians, Albert Camus

A Truce for Civilians

Not a day goes by without terrible news from Algeria arriving by mail, newspaper, and even telephone. Calls for help—nay, cries for help—ring out everywhere. In one morning I received a letter from an Arab schoolteacher whose village witnessed the summary execution of several men by firing squad and a call from a friend on behalf of French workers killed and mutilated at their workplace. And one has to live with this news in a Paris buried under snow and filth, each day more oppressive than the last.

If only the escalation could be stopped. What is the point of each side brandishing its victims against those of the other? All the dead belong to the same tragic family, whose members are now slitting one another's throats in the dead of night, the blind killing the blind without being able to see who they are.

The tragedy has not left everyone in tears, moreover. Some exult about it, albeit from afar. They deliver sermons, but beneath their grave mien the cry is always the same: "Hit harder! See how cruel that fellow is! Gouge his eyes out!" Unfortunately, if there is anyone left in Algeria who has not kept pace with the escalating killing and vengeance, he will soon catch up. Before long, Algeria will be populated exclusively by murderers and victims. Only the dead will be innocent.

There is a priority of violence: I know that. The long years of colonialist violence explain the violence of the rebellion. But that justification is applicable only to the armed rebellion. How can one condemn the excesses of the repression if one ignores or says nothing about the extremes of the rebellion? And conversely, how can one be outraged by the massacres of French prisoners if one tolerates the execution of Arabs without trial? Each side uses the crimes of the other to justify its own. By this logic, the only possible outcome is interminable destruction.

"Everyone must choose sides," shout the haters. But I have chosen. I have chosen a Just Algeria, where French and Arabs may associate freely. And I want Arab militants to preserve the justice of their cause by condemning the massacre of civilians, just as I want the French to protect their rights and their future by openly condemning the massacres of the repression.

When it becomes clear that neither side is capable of such an effort, or of the lucidity that would allow them to perceive their common interests, and when it becomes clear that France, caught between its money machine and its propaganda machine, is incapable of developing a policy that is both realistic and generous, then and only then will we give up hope. But these things are not yet clear, and we must fight to the end against the consequences of hatred.

Time is of the essence. Every day that goes by destroys a little more of Algeria and promises years of additional misery for its population. Each death drives the two populations a little farther apart. Tomorrow, they will face each other not across an abyss but over a common grave. Whatever government is chosen a few weeks from now to deal with the Algerian problem, there is a danger that by then there will be no way out of the current impasse.

It is therefore up to the French of Algeria to take the initiative themselves. They are afraid of Paris, I know, and they are not always wrong to be afraid. But what are they doing in the meantime? What are they proposing? If they do nothing, others will do for them, and what grounds would they then have to complain? I am told that some of them, suddenly enlightened, have chosen to support Poujade.¹ I am not yet prepared to believe that they would choose a course tantamount to suicide. Algeria needs creative thinking, not shopworn slogans. The country is dying, poisoned by hatred and injustice. It can save itself only by overcoming its hatred and with a surfeit of creative energy.

It is therefore necessary to appeal once again to the French of Algeria: "While defending your homes and your families, you must find the additional strength to recognize what is just in the cause of your adversaries and to condemn what is unjust in the repression. Be the first to propose ways of saving Algeria and establishing fair cooperation among the various sons and daughters of the same soil." And Arab militants must be addressed in similar terms. While fighting for their cause, they must at last disavow the murder of innocents and propose their own plan for the future.

And all must be enjoined to seek a truce. A truce until solutions can be found, a truce in which both sides will refrain from killing civilians. Until the accuser sets an example, all accusations are useless. French friends and Arab friends, I urge you to respond to one of the last appeals for an Algeria that is truly free and peaceful and soon prosperous and inventive. There is no other solution. There is no solution but the one we are proposing. Apart from it, there is only death and destruction. Movements are forming everywhere, I know, and courageous people, both Arab and French, are regrouping. Join them. Aid them with all your might. They are Algeria's last and only hope.

1. Pierre Poujade (1920-2003), a right-wing populist politician and leader of the Poujadiste movement.—Trans.

The End