



Famine in Algeria, Albert Camus

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The most obvious crisis afflicting Algeria is an economic one.

Algeria already shows unambiguous signs of this to the attentive visitor. The leading taverns serve drinks in cut-off bottles with the edges filed down. Hotels give you wire coat hangers. Bombed-out stores have fallen beams in their windows rather than glass. In private homes it is not uncommon for the bulb used to light the dining room to be moved to the bedroom after dinner. There is a shortage of manufactured goods, no doubt because Algeria has no industry, but above all there is an import crisis. We will be looking at its effects.

The news that must be shouted from the rooftops is that most Algerians are experiencing a famine. This is the reason for the serious disturbances we have heard about, and this is what needs fixing. The population of Algeria is nine million in round numbers. Of these nine million, eight million are Arabo-Berbers, compared with a million Europeans. Most of the Arab population is scattered throughout the vast countryside in douars, which French colonial administrations have combined into mixed villages. The basic diet of the Arabs consists of grains (wheat or barley), consumed in the form of couscous or flatbread. For want of grain, millions of Arabs are suffering from hunger.

Famine is still a dreadful scourge in Algeria, where harvests are as capricious as the rainfall. In normal times, however, the reserves maintained by the French administration made up the shortfall caused by drought. There are no longer any reserves in Algeria, because they were transferred to the metropolis for the benefit of the Germans. The Algerian people were therefore at the mercy of a bad harvest.

That misfortune has happened. Let me mention just one fact to give you an idea of how bad it was. Throughout the high plateaus of Algeria, there has been no rain since January. These vast fields are covered with wheat no higher than the poppies that stretch off to the horizon. The land, covered with cracks like a lava flow, is so dry that double teams had to be used for the spring planting. The plow tears at the flaky, powdery soil incapable of holding the sown seed. The harvest expected for this season will be worse than the last, which was already disastrous.

I beg the reader's indulgence if I cite some figures. Normally, Algeria requires some 18 million quintals of grain. As a general rule, its production is roughly equal to its consumption: for instance, the 1935–1936 harvest of all grains combined was 17,371,000 quintals. Last season's total was barely 8,715,000 quintals, however, which is just 40 percent of normal needs. This year's forecasts are even more pessimistic, with a maximum expectation of roughly six million quintals.

The drought is not the only reason for this terrifying shortage. The acreage devoted to grain has decreased, because there is less seed and also because fodder is not taxed, so that certain heedless landowners chose to grow it rather than essential grains. Certain temporary technical difficulties also play a part: deteriorating equipment (a plow blade that used to cost 20 francs now goes for 500), fuel rationing, and labor shortages due to the military mobilizations. What is more,

demand for grain has increased owing to rationing of other foods. Without help from the outside world, it is clear, therefore, that Algeria cannot feed its population from its own soil.

To witness the consequences of this famine is enough to break your heart. The administration was obliged to reduce the grain allowance to 7.5 kilograms per person per month (farmworkers receive 18 kilograms from their employers, but they are a minority). That works out to 250 grams per day, which is not much for people whose only staple is grain.

Yet even this famine ration could not be honored in the majority of cases. In Kabylia, in the Ouarsenis, in the South Oranais, and in the Aurès (to take widely separated regions), four to five kilograms per month was the most that could be distributed, which comes to 130 to 150 grams per person per day.

Is it clear what that means? Is it clear that in a country where sky and land are invitations to happiness, this means that millions of people are suffering from hunger? On every road one sees haggard people in rags. Traveling around the country, one sees fields dug up and raked over in bizarre ways, because an entire douar has come to scratch the soil for a bitter but edible root called talrouda, which can be made into a porridge that is at least filling if not nourishing.

The reader may be wondering what can be done. To be sure, the problem is a difficult one. But there is not a minute to waste, and no one's interests can be spared, if we want to save these wretched people and stop hungry masses egged on by criminal madmen from resuming the savage massacre in Sétif. In my next article I will indicate what injustices must be ended and what emergency measures must be taken in the economic sphere.

The End