

# ALGERIA AND FRANCE

CLAUDE BOURDET

*Editor of 'France Observateur'*

THE war in Algeria has entered upon its fourth year, and the headlines continue: terrorist outrages in the towns, tortures used by the police and French army units to extract information, the burning of farms and the bombing of villages, the groups of mountain guerrillas pursued by helicopters. But behind this picture of the war, there is a whole series of economic, strategic and political facts of which the events that make front-page news are only the reflection.

Four years ago, the war involved a few guerilla bands, operating mainly in the mountain range of the Aures. Today, the insurgent army comprises some 100,000 men, distributed in small mobile groups throughout Algeria and controlling a further army of secret "reservists" in most of the villages, while the French forces have swollen to some 500,000 soldiers. Armaments have been modified—lightened on the side of the French, who have realized the uselessness of heavy arms, reinforced among the insurgents, who have replaced their hunting rifles and old German and Italian guns with the more modern weapons that they have been receiving through Tunisia and Morocco.

## The Algerian Climate

In Algeria itself, a sort of "differential" stability has been arrived at in the war. The densely populated urban areas, with their large European communities, are firmly in the grip of the repressive forces. Every European is armed, while every Muslim found armed is one corpse the more. The "suspect" Muslim walks in constant danger of death. And so a double climate exists—of terror for the Muslims and of a relative security for the Europeans, scarcely ruffled by the few outrages perpetrated by outside elements acting as suicide squads. The very widespread use of torture has recently intensified both the terror and the security. The French police networks are beginning to function again inside the towns, and the number of denunciations constantly increases.

Outside of the urban centres, however, the power of the insurgents is being consolidated. As in Indo-China, the French troops can only control the areas near where they are stationed

and then not after nightfall. The roads in the extreme south, which were free for traffic a year ago, can now be travelled only in convoy. And the attempt of the French General Staff to prevent the smuggling of arms from Tunisia and Morocco, by setting up a barbed-wire entanglement along the borders, has met with the most dismal failure. It is so easy to blow up the barrier.

Most of the rural areas are under the domination of the *Front de Liberation Nationale* (F.L.N.), simply because it is utterly impossible for the French army to control them. Is this domination freely accepted? Great emphasis is laid in French official circles on certain declarations of loyalty obtained by army units. It cannot be doubted that there is a feeling of utter exhaustion among the people. And to prevent a surrender by the rural populations to the threats of the French army, the F.L.N. has often used terrorist methods. But the French claims rest on an even shakier basis. The terror organized by the French against populations loyal to the Front—executions, the destruction of villages and the torture of suspects—leads villages to desert only through fear to the French, who appear temporarily the stronger. All the real sentiments of a population caught in a vice between terrorism on both sides were well enough expressed to me once by a taxi-driver.

“You see”, he said, “I’m not a belligerent person. All I ask is to be left alone. But be sure that one of these days some men from the Liberation army will come to my home and demand to be sheltered. If I refuse, they will kill me. And if I agree, well, the French will find out soon enough and come looking for me. So, since I shall have to die anyway, it is better I die for the sake of Algerian independence”.

The impossibility of neutrality and the final influence which the racial and national community must have in such a situation would appear to me to express the position better than the French official declarations, according to which the Front rules only by terror, or those of the F.L.N., according to which the Front draws its strength solely from popular enthusiasm.

The feelings of the Europeans are very difficult to assess exactly, though men like M. de Serigny, editor of ‘*l’Echô d’Algérie*’ and chief of the colonialist lobby in Paris, speak in their name with the greatest vehemence. In Algeria itself, one’s first impression is of a limitless loathing for the nationalists combined with the traditional contempt for indigenous people in general. Furthermore, every European suspected of activities

favourable to the nationalists, or even of some support for a peace based on independence, is automatically in danger. Many have been arrested and tortured like the Muslim "suspects". And this explains why Europeans daring to express themselves in favour of a negotiated peace are very difficult to find. All the same, some exist, and many more are recognizing, despite their present security, that the situation is becoming less pliable as the war is prolonged.

### Opinion in Metropolitan France

At the end of 1955, the French elections were fought on the issue of peace in Algeria. Not only the Communists, but also the Socialists and Radicals, at that time grouped around M. Mendès-France, had made the peace their chief election platform, and the success of the whole Left, from the Communists to the Republican Front, stemmed largely from these election promises. Demonstrations took place at the beginning of 1956, and agitation throughout the country evidenced the desire of the Left to make an end of the war.

All this, however, was rendered sterile by the government of M. Mollet, which capitulated to colonialist rioting on February 6, 1956. The Socialist Party, tied hand and foot by the powerful administrative machinery of Guy Mollet, adopted a policy of war to the death in Algeria, and the rest of the Left was thrown into exorbitant confusion.

For M. Mendès-France, the elections had been a personal success. But he had to share this success with Guy Mollet on the one hand, and, on the other, with a mass of Radical deputies who had hoisted the flag of "Mendessism" only to gain popularity. Though the majority of his *party* supported him, he did not dare use his still very great prestige to pick a fight with an alliance of the Socialists and the majority of his *parliamentary group*. He thus lost precious months, let himself be tripped up on government loyalty, and ended by leaving the government on tip-toe. Then at the beginning of 1957, when he wanted to take up the struggle against what is now called "National Molletism", he was too late, his partners were discouraged, and his position in his own party had been thoroughly undermined.

The Communists meanwhile, were so obsessed by the mirage of a possible alliance with the Socialists, that they put a brake on the demonstrations late in 1955 of young soldiers and conscripts leaving for Algeria. In the same way, after the 6th

February, they continued to hope for the revival of a Socialist policy, and, in order not to cut themselves off from the S.F.I.O., voted for the special powers which helped in large measure to establish a totalitarian police regime in Algeria. This absence of leadership on the part of Mendès-France, together with the temporizing tactics of the Communists, discouraged a large section of the workers and active elements in the Left.

The movement into Algeria of a large percentage of the French youth, either on military service or as "conscripts", has had various effects. A relatively small fraction seems to have identified itself with the most extreme repression. A much more important group comes back from Algeria with a nihilist attitude: full of contempt for the natives, the "ratons" or little rats as the Algerian French call them, but with no sympathy for the Europeans they went to defend and who irritated them by their prodigious egotism. Finally, a last group returns stupified and revolted by the massacres and tortures. Many of these are Christian militants, of whom perhaps the best known example was the young leader of the Catholic Scouts, Jean Muller, killed in an ambush in Algeria, whose diary the paper 'Christian Witness' published, together with a pledge that fourteen of his comrades would testify in a court of law if any doubt were cast upon the charges contained in the diary.

One can thus sum up the course of public opinion: inertia and discouragement among the greater part of the militant Left, moral corruption of a youth which has been led to commit, and treat as customary and normal, war practices that we reproached the Nazis for—and, on the other hand, the reawakening of all the sections of public opinion most sensitive to the moral aspect of events. Let us add that up to now the mass of the French people has not really felt the war. The constant increase in production (45% up on 1950, 70% on 1938) has doubtless allowed for only a small increase in the living standard of the working class, instead of the great improvement which should have taken place. But discontent is not based upon progress "*less great than it ought to be*". The middle-class and big business have done well up till now. And fatalities among French soldiers have been relatively few.

### **Present Developments.**

However, the internal climate has recently changed. It is as if the cancer of Algeria, after being able to damage a healthy

organism only superficially, has now reached some vital region. The economic disequilibrium created by the demands of the war has given rise to an expected dilemma. The Right is anxious to continue the war, but doesn't wish to pay for it. This could be seen when, at the behest of the big employers, the Mollet government was overthrown because it proposed taxing the companies. On the other hand, of course, the S.F.I.O. Socialist Party could hardly allow a system to be imposed which would make its own electors pay the cost of financing the war. It was this impasse that overthrew the Mollet government and undermined that of Bourges-Maunoury. So, for lack of a solution, the country is thrown into an inflationary cycle which gives rise to more and more wage claims and has, for the first time, awakened the majority of the workers to the deterioration in their situation caused by the Algerian war.

Be it the awareness of this impasse, or the influence of constant relations between the American and the French business worlds, but among certain directors of French capitalism there is a steady movement towards a more realistic approach. Since the beginning of the war, a few far-seeing and important financiers have been alone in resenting the enormous economic stupidity of squandering French resources upon a seemingly futile war. Their number is growing, and Raymond Aron, correspondent on the great Right-wing daily 'Le Figaro,' appears to have become their spokesman and adviser. But the politicians Right of Centre in general refrain from making such statements in public. Instead, all suggestions tending towards independence for Algeria are immediately condemned as "defeatist".

### **An Unstable Situation**

That is why everything depends upon the volume and duration of the spate of workers' demands which began to develop early in the autumn of 1957. This movement has already led to widespread strikes and serious incidents in the region round Nantes on the Atlantic. It affects all the main centres, and is led as actively by the Confederation des Travailleurs Chrétiens (Federation of Christian Workers) as by the Communist C.G.T. If this new working class unity lasts long enough and intensifies, it will lead to a double phenomenon. On the one hand workers' militancy will tend to be diverted towards political affairs and to take up the campaign against the war once more. On the other hand, and above all, workers' pressure will en-

danger all attempts to divert the financial weight of the war onto wages by raising prices and taxation. Given, further, the absolute refusal of the owning classes to meet the cost of the war, this will continue to exercise a degenerating influence upon the economic balance of the country, and the tendency to apathy among the directors of the economy will be accentuated.

It is, however, equally possible that the combination of *political stalemate* and *economic drain* may force an appreciable section of the French bourgeoisie into authoritarian solutions. The idea of the "strong man" is making progress, not only on the Right-wing, but in the midst of the liberal bourgeoisie, in the form of ideas borrowed from General de Gaulle.

In reality it is probable that General de Gaulle is more realistic than the Socialist politicians, and that he understands that the hour of independence of the North African peoples has sounded; but, all the same, partly through personal ambition, partly because he has no confidence in the Republic's power at this moment to maintain the bonds of a "Commonwealth of Independent Nations", the General does not want his prestige to be used by others in the cause of peace in Algeria.

### External Factors

Such is the French situation in general. But there are a certain number of external factors in play. First, of course, is the attitude of the Algerian nationalists. At the beginning of 1956, the F.L.N. leaders were quite ready to negotiate. A series of meetings took place in Rome, Cairo and Belgrade between representatives of the Front and M. Mollet's official delegates. This was well on the way to preparing a peace settlement which would have flowed quite naturally from the Tunis Conference, where a plan for Maghreb unity should have resulted from the meeting of the Sultan, Bourguiba and the Algerian leaders, with French observers present. The "bitter-enders", however, torpedoed the Conference by kidnapping Ben Bella and Khidder, the main leaders of the insurrection, in a Moroccan aeroplane flying from Rabat to Tunis. The operation was a double success, first because it obliged the weak Guy Mollet to repudiate his own peace-feelers and to cover up the scandalous kidnapping which he had been unable to prevent—and then because it discouraged the moderate Front leaders and eliminated the two men with the greatest political acumen and authority from the Algerian leadership.

But, on the other hand, as among the French people, some fatigue has developed among the insurgents. Further, Bourguiba and the Sultan of Morocco, on whom the insurgents depend for supplies and who have an absolute interest in ending the war and resuming normal relations with France, exert constant pressure in favour of conciliation. The Bourguiba—Mohammed V proposal, approved by the General Assembly of the United Nations, envisages Tuniso-Moroccan mediation. This has not been refused by the Front, and it would be difficult for the French government to reject it indefinitely. Thus conditions appear to be improving for a resumption of contact—on condition that the Algerians are confronted by a government forced by French opinion into accepting the idea of a peace.

Another important factor is international opinion. It is certain that French stubbornness over Algeria progressively upsets not only popular opinion in many countries, but even their governments. In the United States itself, public opinion has become increasingly aware of the gravity of the Algerian problem. A speech by Senator Kennedy of Massachusetts, a very probable Democratic candidate for the Presidency of the United States, burst like a bomb on the ears of many French apologists who were convinced that they were defending “the free world” in Algeria.

If American-Russian relations really improve, the American and Soviet governments would naturally tend to impose a solution of the Algerian war on France. But, for the moment, the policies of the two world giants are themselves at a stalemate. The United States takes very great account of opinion in Arab countries, but events in the Middle East have made it fear the progress of Left and Neutralist ideas in Arab countries attaining independence; and French government propaganda naturally plays upon this theme. The Russians, on the other hand, are obliged to take into the greatest consideration the views of the Bandung peoples, and especially those of China, but they fear that an independent North Africa might fall into the hands of the United States and consider the presence of the French in the Maghreb as the lesser evil.

Despite all this, it remains true that even if in both the United States and Russia these considerations militate against the complete eviction of the French from the Maghreb, they do not militate against a Franco-Algerian settlement. And it is this settlement that is most to be desired. Until now French

diplomacy seems to have succeeded to a certain extent in persuading both the Kremlin and Washington that a "solution" was imminent. But this smoke-screen cannot for long hide the reality. The growing influence of Moroccan and Tunisian diplomacy will contribute more and more towards persuading world governments that the Algerian war is not solely a Franco-Algerian affair. The 1957 UNO session, even if it disappointed the Algerians, was no success for French diplomacy, and the French government was scandalized to see Eisenhower and Dulles, during the NATO meeting in Paris, refuse a declaration giving them a "free hand" in Algeria.

For liberal circles in all countries, the Algerian war has an incalculable importance: directly first, because *it can at any moment overflow its borders* as a result of some unfortunate move by the French, the insurgents, or either one of the Great Powers. And indirectly, because it corrupts French foreign policy and has already led the government to associate itself twice with Mr. Adenauer in effectively sabotaging hopes of American-Russian agreement. For if a real entente were to come about, it would mark at the same time the decline of the German chancellor and the end of French colonialism. In the summer of 1957 at the Disarmament Sub-Committee meetings in London, the French and Germans forced Mr. Stassen to abandon the gradual method of agreement on partial questions, blocking everything with a comprehensive Western plan which they knew the Russians would not accept. And it produced also a new agreement between M. Gaillard and Mr. Adenauer at the end of December 1957, to reject the Polish plan for the nuclear neutralization of Central Europe.

Finally, the *internal* political corruption of France is a serious matter for other countries: if the French Left were incapable of showing sufficient militancy, the Algerian war could lead to a militarist authoritarian regime in France which would be dangerous for democracy throughout the world.

*Translated from the French*