

“The Guest” – Albert Camus

Colonialism

The Algerian War was the outcome of many years' resistance to French colonial rule. In the years following World War II there was a mass movement in Africa, the Caribbean, and Asia to de-colonize territories that had been ruled by European countries since the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Dozens of these former colonies sought democratic reforms and national independence. Because colonial rule had extended over several centuries, both Arabs, like the prisoner, and many European Algerians, like Daru, were natives of the country.

The Algerian War

The encounter depicted in “The Guest” takes place in “mid-October,” on the eve of the outbreak of the Algerian War. The revolt, led by the National Liberation Front (FLN) began on October 31, 1954, and lasted until July, 1962, when Algeria achieved independence. There had been scattered uprisings and nationalist movements in Algeria since the first French colonial presence in Africa in 1830. But the nationalist movement had gained considerable strength after World War II. By the time the story takes place, the revolt was imminent, so when Balducci talks of war, he is describing a realistic fear. Likewise, the positions of “us” and “them” refer not just to cultural differences, but to the now clear battle line between settlers of European origin and the Arab rebels and sympathizers. While the events and characters in the story are fictional, Camus drew on his early experience as a court and police reporter for some of the details and context of the story. The devastating effects of the drought, the crushing poverty of the villagers, the monotony of the schoolteacher's life, and the collision between Arab culture and the European justice system were all phenomena he had witnessed at close hand.

Many people describe the Algerian War as “France's Vietnam” and certainly it was as politically controversial and divisive for the French as the Vietnam War was for many people in the United States. As one of France's most distinguished writers, a man who had been active in the French Resistance, and a native Algerian, Camus was looked to for moral and political guidance. He was vehemently criticized by both the Left and the Right political factions in France, and denounced by both officials of the French government and the nationalist leaders for his refusal to take either side in the conflict. Camus believed strongly in the need for democratic reforms and greater rights for the Arab population, but he could not support a break with France and held dearly to the notion of a unified country in which both European and Arab Algerians could hold full citizenship. In connection with the war, his only clear statements sought to protect civilian lives on both sides and supported efforts to achieve a cease fire. While the story is by no means a direct reflection of Camus's views about the Algerian situation, the character of Daru captures Camus's discomfort with the idea of having to choose sides in a violent conflict and his profound humanism and sympathy for any suffering human being.

Citation:

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