

Primary Source: Ferhat Abbas



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Key Facts

"On the Edge
of Nationalism:
France is Me!" Feb-
ruary 1936

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- Ferhat Abbas was a Berber born in the mountains of Kabylia in 1899
- After receiving a French education, he became an intellectual, a writer, and a journalist
- Although he was not a French citizen, he identified very closely with French culture and struggled to balance French and Algerian identities until his death in 1985
- Although firmly committed to assimilationism, he became active in the militant nationalist movement founded in the 1950s, called the National Liberation Front (Front de libération nationale, FLN)

"On the Edge of Nationalism: France is Me!"

February 1936

Abbas wrote the text below in 1936, after the Young Algerian movement had split into moderate and radical factions. As you read, look for a tension between his cherished ideals of Algerian participation in an equitable France and his recognition of the gap between his ideals and the harsh realities of French rule. What does this essay reveal about the mindset of the secular intellectual elites?



Ferhat Abbas

With the lightness of gesture and thought [that characterizes] those who are poorly informed, the journal *Le Temps*, doubtless inspired by high colonial finance or the madness of certain political men, reopens hostilities against Muslim Algeria by throwing in its face all of the stale ideas that the colonial arsenal has used periodically for over fifty years: nationalism, religious fanaticism, Wahhabism, etc.¹

We can recall the campaign led against us in 1935 and the visit of the Minister of the Interior that resulted. With the rare intelligence of a man who knows how to see, M. Regnier observed the character of our action[s] and, even better, the soul of the populations that represent us. He scrutinized all horizons and all hearts. And, his conviction

made, he returned to Paris to declare with force and solemnity, from the height of the tribunal of the Senate, "I trust the *indigènes*."²

We believed that these magnificent words would be heard by the entire world and, placing our confidence [both] in the government of the Republic and . . . in our former enemies, we waited for the hour of reforms and concrete achievements. We hoped for the end of the Algerian malaise. [Oh, the] naïve candor of those who combine sentiment in [their] action[s] and honor in [their] politics! And we, sleeping on the beautiful promises that were made to us, we entered into the game of our detractors by leaving the field open to slave drivers, to secret alliances and powerfully organized interests.

These powers have just carried out a maneuver in grand style by violating the decision of the arbitrator. The truce is broken. It doesn't matter! We defended ourselves in 1935. We are defending ourselves today. You want to talk politics? Let's talk politics. You want to slander [us]? The truth, once again, will triumph over the lie. On all fronts, we are ready, and on all fronts, with the help of God and men, we shall overcome.

1. To Abbas, the term "nationalism" is derogatory. In contrast to "patriots," "nationalists" were a fringe group of extreme right-wingers, partially made up of former royalists. From the French perspective, "nationalism" for colonial Algerians is an especially negative word because nationalists were enemies of French rule. Wahhabism refers to a Sunni reform movement calling for a strict but simplified form of Islam.

2. *Indigènes*: A word that is usually translated as "natives." The original French highlights the particular legal, social, and economic barriers for our authors.



Young children in Aumale, 1930

It is not within my competence to defend the Cheikh Ben Badis and Cheikh El-Okbi and with them all of the *oulémas*.³ The question that holds my interest is that of the teaching of Arabic, raised by *Le Temps*. This language is for the Muslim religion what the church is for the Catholic religion. She could not live without it. The belief of the ignorant [i.e., illiterate] Muslim is a fabric of undigested superstitions. The mosque

for us is nothing. The reading of the holy scripture is everything. It constitutes the cement of the faith. Is it necessary, in these conditions, to justify our attachment to the teaching of the Arabic language, the basis of our beliefs?

This teaching is tightly linked to liberty of conscience. To persecute or simply to hinder th[e] study [of Arabic] is a declaration of war against the Muslim religion. In addition, it is a declaration of war against education. We must see things as they are: Wahhabism and pan-Arabism are the fragile smoke screens behind which operate the true designs of our bigshot colonial educators. The mass[es] to whom they have refused French schooling must also be deprived of Arabic schooling. Neither French culture nor Arabic culture. An army of born servants and [men] without faith who will allow themselves to be exploited with docility [or] go off . . . to fill the gambling dens and the prisons.

This is not what we want.

In a country where more than eight hundred thousand children are deprived of schooling, all of our concern will focus on education. This concern is expressed by [our] incessant demands made to the public powers for the creation of schools. It is equally expressed by the gratitude that we have for private initiatives and in particular toward the oulema for the considerable number of children that they have shielded from the unfortunate example of the street[s].

[Would] this commendable effort . . . [be so offensive to] our rulers if the word “education” was not a joke for certain [men] among them?

If the oulemas are “racists” [and] “pan-Islamists,” [then] we, the political friends of Doctor Ben-Djelloul, we are nationalists. The accusation is not new. I have engaged in debate with diverse personalities on this question. My opinion is known. Nationalism is that sentiment which drives a people to live on the inside of territorial frontiers, that sentiment which created this network of nations. If I had discovered the “Algerian nation,” I would be a nationalist and I would not turn red as if it were a crime. Men who die for the national ideal are honored and respected daily. My life is worth no more than theirs. Nevertheless, I would not sacrifice myself for the national ideal. Algeria as a *patrie*⁴ is a myth. I have not

3. The French word *ouléma*, or in English usually *ulama* or *ulema*, refers to a scholar of Islamic law.

4. As a country, homeland, or fatherland.

discovered it. I have interrogated history, interrogated the dead and the living; I visited the cemeteries: No one spoke of it to me. Of course I found the “Arabic Empire” and the “Muslim Empire” that honor Islam and our race, but these empires have passed away. They correspond to the Latin Empire and the Holy Roman Empire of the medieval era. They were born for an era and a humanity that are no longer ours.

Would an Algerian Muslim seriously dream of fighting the future with the dust of the past? The Don Quixotes are no longer of our century. You cannot build on air. We have, therefore, done away, once and for all, with the clouds and the chimeras in order to definitively bind our future to that of the French oeuvre⁵ in this country. We have written it. The safeguard of this work is the pivot of our political action . . .

But enough of this. Our gestures and our thoughts are in agreement. And no one believes that we are nationalists. Behind this word, what they are trying to fight against is our economic and political emancipation. And this double emancipation, we desire it with all the force of our will and of our social ideal[s].



City and harbor of Algiers, c. 1921

Six million Muslims live on this land [which has] become French in the past one hundred years, housed in hovels, barefoot, without clothing and without bread. Out of this starving multitude, we want to construct a modern society, through schools, the defense of the peasantry, and social assistance. We want to elevate [our society] to the dignity of man, in order to make it French.

Is there another policy more fecund than this? [If not, then] let us not forget it. Without the emancipation of the indigènes there will not be a durable French Algeria. I am France because I am the multitude, I am the soldier, I am the worker, I am the artisan, I am the consumer. To exclude my collaboration, [ignore] my well-being and [dismiss] my tribute to [our] common work [would be] a vulgar heresy. The interests of France are our interests, starting from the moment when our interests become those of France.

This serenity of action and of thought, this [is what stands as a] barrier to the Algerian feudal system. The provocations of the latter are multiplying. They make us resentful of having taken our school manuals seriously. They would perhaps like to return to the past. It is too late. We are the sons of a new world, forged of the [French] spirit and the French effort. Our motto is “Onward”!

Setif, this 23 of February 1936

Image Citations

Page 1:

Ferhat Abbas, 1950, in “1945, derniers secrets: Sétif, le massacre occulté,” *L'Express*, Fair Use, https://www.lexpress.fr/monde/afrique/1945-derniers-secrets-setif-le-massacre-occulte_1706888.html

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Page 4:

The city and harbor of Algiers, Algeria, 1921, Collier's New Encyclopedia, Vol. 1 (1921), opposite page 58, panel J., Public Domain, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Algiers_CNE-v1-p58-J.jpg