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Albert Camus: Camus at Combat

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CHAPTER 1

Combat Underground: March–July 1944

Articles that appeared in clandestine issues of *Combat* can at best be classified as “probably” by Camus, and it is not out of the question that he wrote others. For obvious reasons, he kept no record of what he wrote, and no firm conclusions can be drawn from either the themes or the style of what was published, since everything that appeared in the paper constituted an act of resistance and reflected goals shared by everyone who wrote for it.

***Combat*, Underground No. 55, March 1944**

*Against Total War, Total Resistance*¹

Lying is never without purpose. Even the most impudent lie, if repeated often enough and long enough, always leaves a trace. German propaganda subscribes to this principle, and today we have another example of its application. Inspired by Goebbels’s minions,² cheered on by the lackey press, and staged by the Milice,³ a formidable campaign has just been launched—a campaign which seeks, in the guise of an attack on the patriots of the underground and the Resistance, to divide the French once again. This is what they are saying to Frenchmen: “We are killing and destroying bandits who would kill you if we weren’t there. You have nothing in common with them.”

Although this lie, reprinted a million times, retains a certain power, stating the truth is enough to repel the falsehood. And here is the truth: it is that the French have everything in common with those whom they are today being taught to fear and despise. There is one France, not two: not one that is fighting and another that stands above the battle in judgment. For even if there are those who would prefer to remain in the comfortable position of judges, that is not possible. You cannot say, “This doesn’t concern me.” Because it does concern you. The truth is that Germany has today not only unleashed an offensive against the best and

¹ As Roger Quilliot and Yves-Marc Ajchenbaum have suggested, it seems more than likely that this article was written by Camus.

² Goebbels, Joseph Paul (1897–1945). After joining the Nazi Party in 1922, he devoted himself primarily to psychological action, news, and propaganda. Named head of propaganda for the Nazi Party in 1928, he became Minister of Propaganda and Information in 1933. Loyal to Hitler to the end, he and his family committed suicide by poison during the final stages of the battle for Berlin.

³ The Milice (Militia), created by Darnand in January 1943, was charged with supporting German efforts to suppress the French Resistance. [*Milice* is left untranslated throughout, but members of the Milice are referred to as “militiamen.”]

proudest of our compatriots, but it is also continuing its total war against all of France, which is exposed in its totality to Germany's blows.

Don't say, "This doesn't concern me. I live in the country, and the end of the war will find me just as I was at the beginning of the tragedy, living in peace." Because it does concern you. Take note. On January 29, in Malleval in the Isère, a whole village was burned by the Germans on the mere suspicion that compulsory labor service holdouts⁴ might have taken refuge there. Twelve houses were completely destroyed, eleven bodies discovered, fifteen men arrested. On December 18 at Chaveruche in Corrèze, five kilometers from Ussel, where a German officer was wounded in murky circumstances, five hostages were shot and two farms put to the torch. On February 4 in Grole, in the Ain, Germans, after failing to find the holdouts they were searching for, shot the mayor and two leading citizens.

These dead Frenchmen were people who might have said, "This doesn't concern me." But the Germans decided that it did concern them, and on that day they demonstrated that it concerned all of us. Don't say, "This doesn't concern me. I'm at home with my family, I listen to the radio every night, and I read my newspaper." Because they'll come after you on the pretext that somebody at the other end of France refused to go. They'll take your son, who also said it was no concern of his, and they'll mobilize your wife, who until now thought the whole business was for men only. In reality, it does concern you, and it concerns all of us. Because all the French are today bound together so tightly by the enemy that one person's act inspires all the others and one person's inattention or indifference can cost ten others their lives.

Don't say, "I sympathize, that's quite enough, and the rest is no concern of mine." Because you will be killed, deported, or tortured as a sympathizer just as easily as if you were a militant. Act: your risk will be no greater, and you will at least share in the peace at heart that the best of us take with them into the prisons.

That way France won't be divided. The enemy's effort is in fact intended to encourage Frenchmen to hesitate to do their national duty to resist the S.T.O.⁵ and support the underground. It would succeed but for the fact that the truth stands in its way. And the truth is that the combined efforts of the assassins of the Milice and the killers of the Gestapo⁶ have yielded risible results. Hundreds

⁴ *Réfractaires*: the term refers to Frenchmen who refused to leave for Germany when ordered to do so as part of the Service du Travail Obligatoire, or S.T.O., the Compulsory Labor Service. I have translated it as "holdouts."

⁵ The S.T.O. was established in February 1943 by the Vichy government acting under German pressure. The goal was to supply German factories with French labor. Many of the people drafted into the S.T.O. chose to go underground rather than depart for Germany, but 170,000 French "laborers" nevertheless answered the call.

⁶ The Gestapo (short for Geheime Staatspolizei, or Secret State Police) was the political police force of the Nazi Party. Created by Göring in 1933 and later led by Himmler and Heydrich, it conducted a reign of terror in Germany and the occupied countries, employing the most horrific means to persecute opponents of the regime, resisters, and Jews. At the Nuremberg trials after the war, it was condemned for crimes against humanity.

of thousands of holdouts are still holding out, fighting, and hoping. A few arrests won't change that. And that is what the 125,000 young men whom the enemy plans to deport every month must understand. For all of them are in the enemy's sights, and the '44 and '45 drafts to which the enemy refers with admirable candor as "a labor reserve" stand for France itself, which in Germany's hate-filled eyes stands united.

Total war has been unleashed, and it calls for total resistance. You must resist because it does concern you, and there is only one France, not two. And the incidents of sabotage, the strikes, the demonstrations that have been organized throughout France are the only ways of responding to this war. That is what we expect from you. *Action in the cities* to respond to the attacks in the countryside. *Action in the factories*. *Action on the enemy's lines of communication*. *Action against the Milice*: every militiaman is a possible murderer.

There is only one fight, and if you don't join it, your enemy will nevertheless supply you with daily proof that that fight is yours. Take your place in it, because if the fate of everyone you like and respect concerns you, then once again, rest assured, this fight *does* concern you. Just tell yourself that together we will bring to it the great strength of the oppressed, namely, solidarity in suffering. That is the force that will ultimately kill the lie, and our common hope is that when that day comes, it will retain enough momentum to inspire a new truth and a new France.

COMBAT

Combat, Underground No. 56, April 1944

*Outlaws*⁷

What is the Milice? To go by the Paris press, it's our greatest hope, our last chance, and this last chance had better not be missed. This helps us to understand. Because the Milice is defending something, and that something has nothing to do with the order it claims to be upholding. It is defending the lives and the interests, the shame and the calculations, of a small proportion of Frenchmen who have turned against France and who face annihilation when victory comes. It enlists crime on behalf of cowardice.

But it also enlists crime on behalf of treason. For the past four years, the enemy has not let a single day go by without trying to turn some Frenchmen against

⁷ In the view of Jacqueline Bernard, as reported by Yves-Marc Ajchenbaum in *A la vie, à la mort*, p. 80, it is unlikely that this article was written by Camus. Yet the article leads off with a question, a device used by Camus in several of his editorials (see, for example, "What Is an Insurrection?" August 23, 1944, or "What Are the Germans Up To?" September 17). The repetition of the phrase "it took four years" is similar to the repetition in the article "From Resistance to Revolution," August 21. And the mix of irony and seriousness is frequent in Camus' writing. Finally, if the Milice was obviously a frequent target of articles in underground newspapers, the attacks on these "outlaws" are quite similar to those contained in the July article, "You Will Be Judged by Your Actions," which was very likely written by Camus.

others. Everything was grist to its mill. Yet it is fair to say that it took the enemy no fewer than four years to persuade a small number of disgraced Frenchmen to bear arms against France herself and the best of her men. For during those shameful four years of madness, there were indeed among us heads of state, ministers of government, and a police force that, consciously or not, out of cowardice or out of weakness, in treason or inertia, played the German game. There were also Frenchmen willing to fight on distant battlefields and to defend the cause of the very people who were subjecting their own country to torture. But it took four whole years to recruit a troop of murderous mercenaries resolved to lend France's enemy a hand against France herself. It took four years of German propaganda to dig up a "hero of two wars" prepared to sully his decorations in the most cowardly and degrading police work.

But such men were found, and their very existence poses a problem of justice. For as is always the case, Sganarella wants to outdo Don Juan, the lackey seeks to go the master one better. On this point, convinced [*sic*] that the servants are well trained. These self-appointed guardians of order courageously kidnap an elderly couple, strip them naked in a field, and slaughter them with the most refined methods of torture. Recently in Nice these exemplary French heroes had the Germans hand over six Frenchmen arrested by the Gestapo (mostly for frivolous reasons) so that they could torture them, disfigure them, and put them to death. They portray themselves as defenders of the law, yet they bring patriots to trial before a court of bandits and send them to the firing squad a few seconds after being found guilty in a parody of judgment. The "hero of two wars" claims to be carrying on an admirable French tradition. Apparently it consists in taking hostages, killing intellectuals and workers, and relying on a servile press to heap lies and insults on the victims of torture and humiliation. In truth, however, we know this tradition well. It was born on the other side of the Rhine in the heart of another war hero. For M. Darnand,⁸ what's involved is not tradition but treason.

But all this explains why the problem of justice is easily resolved. For while it is desirable in the case of other traitors that the forms of justice be respected, the Milice has placed itself outside the law. It must be made quite clear that each militiaman, in signing his enlistment papers, is ratifying his own death sentence. By turning against France, these people exclude themselves from France. Rotten branches cannot be left attached to the tree. They have to be lopped off, reduced to sawdust, and scattered on the ground. That is the fate awaiting each of Darnand's murderers. Courts-martial would be pointless, moreover. The Milice is its own tribunal. It has judged itself and sentenced itself to death. Those sentences will be carried out.

⁸ Darnand, Joseph (1897–1945) fought in World War I as a heroic commando and then became an active militant in the extreme right-wing Action Française between the wars. A champion of collaboration with Germany, he served as secretary of state for the interior in the government of Vichy and founded the Service d'ordre légionnaire and the Milice, which he directed for the purpose of combating the Resistance. After fleeing to Sigmaringen with Pétain and later to Italy, where he was arrested, he was sentenced to death and shot on October 10, 1945.

Combat, Underground No. 57, May 1944*For Three Hours They Shot Frenchmen*⁹

The truth must be told: we are vaccinated against horror. All those faces disfigured by bullets and heels, all those crushed bodies, those murdered innocents, at first filled us with the revulsion and disgust we needed in order to know what we were fighting for. Now the daily struggle has colored everything, and although we never forget the reasons for it, we may at times lose sight of them. But the enemy is there, and as if to make sure that no one avert his eyes, he is increasing his efforts, outdoing himself, each time descending a little deeper into infamy and a little further into crisis. Today, in any event, he went beyond what anyone could have imagined, and the tragedy of Ascq reminds all Frenchmen that they are engaged in a general and unremitting struggle against a disgraced enemy.

What are the facts?

On April 1, 1944, during the night, two explosions severed a railway line and led to the derailment of two cars of a German troop train. The line was blocked. No one on the train was killed.

At around 11 that night, M. Carré, the station chief at Ascq, having been awakened at his home by night shift personnel, was on the telephone dealing with the situation when a German transportation officer entered his office screaming, followed by a number of soldiers who used their rifle butts to beat M. Carré along with M. Peloquin, a senior clerk, and M. Derache, a telegrapher, who also happened to be on the premises at the time. The soldiers then withdrew to the office doorway and from there fired on the three prostrate employees with submachine guns. Carré and Peloquin were gravely wounded in the stomach and thighs. Then the officer led a large contingent of troops into the town, broke down the doors of the houses, searched them, and rounded up some sixty men, who were marched to a pasture opposite the station. There they were shot. Twenty-six other men were also shot in their homes or thereabouts. Among the eighty-six people shot, some lay wounded.

The telegrapher, Derache, managed to alert district headquarters in Lille, which notified the Prefecture of the Nord. The prefecture called the Oberfeldkommandantur.

The executions did not stop until officers of the general staff arrived on the scene. The killing went on for more than three hours.

Whether it is possible to conjure up vividly enough an image of a scene described in such blunt language I do not know. But is it possible to read this report without being overcome by feelings of revulsion and disgust at the mere sight of the numbers: eighty-six men, three hours?

⁹ Like the article of March 1944, this one is unanimously attributed to Camus (see Y.-M. Ajchenbaum, *op. cit.*, p. 80). Indeed, the vigor of the style, the visionary realism, and, once again, the central idea of solidarity leave little room for doubt.

Eighty-six men¹⁰ just like you, the readers of this newspaper, passed before the German guns. Eighty-six men: enough to fill three or four rooms the size of the room you're sitting in. Eighty-six faces, drawn or defiant, eighty-six faces overwhelmed by horror or by hatred.

The slaughter continued for three hours, a little more than two minutes for each victim. Three hours, the amount of time that some of you will have spent that day at dinner or talking quietly with friends, while elsewhere people watched a film and laughed at made-up adventures. For three hours, minute after minute, without letup, without a pause, in a single French village, shots were fired one after another and bodies fell writhing to the ground.

This is the image that must be kept in mind so that nothing is forgotten, the image that must be shown to any Frenchman who remains on the sidelines. For among those eighty-six innocents were many who thought that, having done nothing to oppose the German forces, nothing would be done to them. But France is one, there is but a single wrath, but a single martyr. And when M. de Brinon¹¹ writes to the German authorities not to complain about the massacre of so many Frenchmen but to whine that his work with the vice squad is being hampered, he is responsible for that martyrdom and guilty before that wrath. For the question is not whether these crimes will be forgiven; it is whether anyone will pay for them. And if we were inclined to doubt it, the image of this village soaked in blood and from this day forth populated solely by widows and orphans should suffice to assure us that someone will pay for this crime, because the decision is now in the hands of all the French, and in the face of this new massacre we are discovering the solidarity of martyrdom and the power that grows out of vengeance.

Combat, Clandestine No. 58, July 1944

The Murderers' Great Fear

On the walls and urinals of Paris, Darnand displays his prose. He addresses his own men, demands absolute obedience, and promises exemplary punishment for those who fail to comply. So there are disobedient militiamen! Will anyone be surprised by the news?

When the Germans burned villages and captured patriots, the militiamen carefully delayed their arrival until it was time to take charge of the prisoners. They stared at the silent captives and grew angry. Nothing is more irritating than the sight of a man to those who have deliberately ceased to be men. And then their work began. Their job was to prove that human dignity is a lie and that the idea of a self-conscious individual, master of his own fate, is but a democratic myth.

¹⁰ The text continues on page two under the headline "Slaughter at Ascq."

¹¹ Fernand de Brinon (1885–1947). An active proponent of collaboration, he represented the Vichy government before the German authorities in Paris and later served as secretary of state. After the Liberation he was sentenced to death by the High Court of Justice and executed.

They heaped insults on their victims to whet their own appetites, to debase their prisoners with words and to debase themselves a bit further. Then they plucked out a few fingernails, stomped a few chests. The goal was to extract a cry of suffering from the gasping victim, a confession, a renunciation. If they succeeded, they breathed a little easier. They thought, We're all alike, those people won't be thumbing their noses at us anymore. They were happy to have transformed their silent judges into accomplices of their own degradation. Malraux says somewhere that it is impossible to aim a flamethrower at a man who is looking you in the eye.¹² So imagine, then, what a militiaman must be like to take pleasure in torturing a man whose eyes are open. These torturers have a very specific mission: it is to wipe out anything that isn't vile, anything that isn't cowardly, and to demonstrate by their own example and by making an example of others that man is made to live in chains and terror. If they were to succeed, there would be no more witnesses, and their own personal ignominy would be identified with the flaws of human nature.

Today, though, some would assign these people a new role. The Germans, occupied elsewhere, are no longer there to defend them. A resistance army has arisen out of the earth. The torturers are being asked to fight like men, rifle against rifle. And that is profoundly unjust. Where would anyone expect them to find the courage? They would need precisely those qualities that they were previously asked to destroy in themselves and others: confidence in man, confidence in the individual. Darnand¹³ knows this. That is why he is making threats. But it is too late. There is no threat terrible enough to make a man out of a member of the Milice.

Combat, Clandestine No. 58, July 1944

*You Will Be Judged by Your Actions*¹⁴

Now that the final battle is getting under way, Pétain¹⁵ and Laval¹⁶ have raised their discordant voices and sought to gain favor for their common policy by seeming to speak in two different keys. Both addressed the country, and in

¹² In *L'Espoir (Man's Hope)*, during the fighting in the Alcazar of Toledo, one of the republican fighters, the Negus, finds himself face-to-face with a fascist holding a flamethrower. Because the man hesitates "a quarter of a second" before aiming the flamethrower at him, the Negus has the time to fire a shot at him. Later he remarks: "It must be difficult to burn alive a man who's looking you in the eye." (*Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 2, Pléiade, Gallimard, 1996, p. 113.)

¹³ See n. 8 above.

¹⁴ The insistence on commitment through words and on justice; the use of expressions such as "the flesh of France," which anticipates a chapter title in *Actuelles*, and "the war has become total," which echoes the idea of the March 1944 article; and the very tone of this article, perfectly in line with those that went before, all argue in favor of attributing it to Camus.

¹⁵ Pétain, Philippe (1856–1951). Marshal of France in 1918 and regarded as the victor of Verdun, he served as Minister of War for a few months in 1934. Close to Maurras and the Action Française, he became ambassador to Franco's Spain in 1939. He served as Vice-President of the Council of Ministers under Paul Reynaud in March 1940 and became President when Reynaud resigned on June 16, 1940, whereupon he asked for an armistice with Germany and became head of the French state—l'Etat français, which replaced the Republic after the vote of the National Assembly on July 10, 1940. He installed his

keeping with their traditional division of labor, Laval spoke of Germany, while Pétain pretended to speak of France. In truth, however, both spoke of treason, albeit in tones of sadness, as though that treason had suddenly become clairvoyant. This has been going on for years. Ever since Pétain laid the groundwork in Vichy for a regime that rationed everything it gave us except humiliation and shame, he has played what he takes to be a shrewd game, so that he remains our supreme symbol of compromise and confusion. When compromise reigns supreme, however, it suffices to speak plainly. We have reached a stage where there is no shrewd strategy other than courage and plain speaking. As usual, moreover, it is the French Resistance that speaks a language in which France can recognize herself. And since the hour for appeals is on us, the Resistance, too, is issuing an appeal to the people of this country. It is saying that there is nothing more to think over, weigh, or evaluate. Pétain's secret thoughts, if he has any, and Laval's tricks are of no importance: neutrality is no longer possible. The time is fast approaching when the people of this country will be judged not by their intentions but by their actions, and by the actions to which their words have committed them. That alone is just.

And the French Resistance is telling us clearly that for the past five years the words and actions of Pétain and Laval have done nothing but divide and humiliate France and kill Frenchmen. Pétain and Laval have been disgraced by the war. They will be judged for it.

The Resistance is telling you that we are now at a stage where every word counts, where every word is a commitment, especially when those words ratify the execution of our brothers, insult our courage, and deliver the flesh of France herself to the most implacable of enemies. When they call patriots terrorists and murderers, when they bestow the name "honor" on what is simply resignation, "order" on what is simply torture, and "loyalism" on what is simply murder, compromise is impossible.

government in Vichy. Adopting the new motto "Work, Family, Fatherland," he adopted a policy of active collaboration with Germany, although he had to share power with Laval and was further weakened when the Germans occupied the former Free Zone in November of 1942. After being evacuated to Sigmaringen at the end of the war, he returned to France in April 1945, where he was put on trial (July 23 to August 15, 1945). Sentenced to death, his penalty was immediately commuted to life imprisonment. He died on the Ile d'Yeu in June 1951.

¹⁶ Laval, Pierre (1883–1945). Elected deputy first as a socialist and later an "independent socialist," Laval served several terms as a minister of the Third Republic and twice as President of the Council of Ministers. Forced to resign in 1936, he returned to power after the defeat of 1940. As minister of state under Pétain, he persuaded the Parliament to approve a revision of the constitution putting an end to the Republic and played a leading role in establishing the government of Vichy, in which he served as Vice-President. A passionate advocate of collaboration, he arranged the meeting between Pétain and Hitler at Montoire in October 1940. Arrested on orders from Pétain, who replaced him with Darlan from January 1941 until April 1942, he was freed by the Germans, who made him the strong man of the Vichy regime, in which he served simultaneously as Minister of the Interior, Information, and Foreign Affairs. He is known to have declared his preference for a German victory in the war. Toward the end of the war he left for Sigmaringen with Pétain, then went to Austria. Eventually he was arrested and sentenced to death and after a suicide attempt died before a firing squad on October 15, 1945.

The Resistance is telling you that you have no government on French soil and you don't need one. We are quite grown up enough to clench our teeth and bear what is surrounding and oppressing us; quite grown up enough to bear the thought of our imprisoned and tortured comrades, of whom we never speak, whom we leave enveloped in the silence of fraternity; quite grown up enough to endure hunger and murder. We don't need Vichy to settle our score with shame. We don't need hypocritical blessings. We need men and courage. We don't need to serve the cult of suffering; we need only to overcome it. Not alone, but with an entire people against a predatory nation and a few dishonorable traitors. We don't need a holiday from morality, we need soul, and we can't get it from those apostles who preached abdication of all our responsibilities.

Frenchmen, the French Resistance is issuing the only appeal you need to hear. The war has become total. But a single struggle remains. The flower of the nation is preparing to sacrifice itself, and now is not the time to be tempted by forgiveness. Anyone who isn't with us is against us. From this moment on there are only two parties in France: the France that has always been and those who shall soon be annihilated for having attempted to annihilate it.

Combat, Clandestine No. 58, July 1944

*The Profession of Journalist*¹⁷

“For the first time in history, the profession of journalist has become an honorable profession,” M. Marcel Déat declared.¹⁸

M. Marcel Déat is right.

Clandestine journalism is honorable because it is a proof of independence, because it involves a risk. It is good, it is healthy, that everything to do with current political events has become dangerous. If there is anything we don't want to see again, it is the shield of impunity behind which so much cowardly behavior and so many underhanded machinations once took refuge.

Having become honorable activities, politics and journalism will be obliged one day to judge those who dishonored them. . . . For example, M. Marcel Déat.

¹⁷ The liveliness, irony, and conception of journalism underlying this little sidebar leave little doubt as to its author's identity.

¹⁸ Déat, Marcel (1894–1955). Socialist deputy, minister of the Third Republic, Déat became editor of the newspaper *L'Oeuvre* in 1940 and founded the Rassemblement National Populaire, which favored collaboration. Appointed Secretary of State for Labor and Social Affairs in 1944, he proved to be a very active propagandist. After he sought refuge in Italy, he was sentenced to death in absentia.