

# Madman

By Dr. Ṭāhā Ḥusayn

No one has spoken of French shame in the wake of the Second World War as frankly as French writers themselves have in the countless books published during and after the conflict—some written abroad, some in France once the war had ended. There is scarcely a French institution untouched by collaboration with the enemy during the German occupation. Ongoing trials reveal that this disgrace permeated every layer of French society.

Officers of all ranks participated, one of whom was recently tried and condemned for treason, only to be pardoned within the same verdict. Esteemed scholars were implicated; among them, the rector of the University of Paris, overwhelmed by the consequences of his trial, took his own life. Members of the French Academy were expelled, alongside other learned societies; politicians, industrialists, financiers, journalists, writers, and artists were implicated. From the middle classes to the lowest social strata, many paid the price: some executed, some stripped of civil and political rights, others punished more lightly, and yet others punished by the people themselves without trial. Some were killed, some humiliated publicly, and many women had their heads shaved. These events are recorded not only in French sources but also in foreign accounts.

German memoirs from the occupation years detail these events with relentless candor: humiliating collaborations, obsequious flattery toward the victors, and the myriad ways the defeated sought favor from those they had wronged. The accounts are often so shameful that they defy summary.

I cannot forget, for example, the description in one book of a dinner hosted by a wealthy Parisian, attended by leading figures from industry, commerce, science, and finance, all eager to receive a distinguished German commander. The guest arrived late, and the hostess—smiling with pleasure and a hint of anxiety—remarked: “We now wait only for our beautiful conqueror.” When he appeared, the attendees fawned over him, hung on his words, and vied for his attention.

All this, and far more, constitutes an unparalleled humiliation. Some French resisted defeat and dishonor, of course, but the greatest irony is that the very French who experienced, enacted, or witnessed such shame cannot free themselves from its lingering grip. This internalized disgrace has produced the countless follies of the Fourth Republic.

The Indochina War, for instance, was but an attempt to reclaim lost honor, yet it yielded only new humiliation atop the old. Likewise, the atrocities committed in

North Africa are the consequences of this enduring shame. The French sought, through these crimes, to reassure themselves of their own greatness—but gained only added disgrace and infamy. They could not escape the weight of a moral capital already overflowing with dishonor.

Morocco and Tunisia were liberated after the French had suffered humiliation there; Algeria is on the verge of liberation and must inevitably join them, adding further shame to France's ledger. Even the invasion of Egypt, committed alongside Britain, was a symptom of this enduring disgrace. Attempting to assert dominance, they achieved only defeat, fear, and global contempt, earning the judgment of the United Nations and derision from the civilized world.

Against this backdrop, the absurd spectacle of the French Prime Minister appearing at a dinner hosted by the French Regional Press Association seems almost comical. The previous day's reports claimed that Egyptians fled at the mere sight of his forces: officers first, soldiers next, and the people of Port Said finally—yet all ended peacefully.

So why did the Suez Canal, and the country as a whole, refuse obedience? Why does President Gamal Abdel Nasser remain resolute, undeterred by their schemes, ready to confront any overreach? And why does the Egyptian people continue to support him and their republic, in defiance of France and Great Britain alike?

A friend, Sāmī Dāwūd, asked me for a name befitting this fool. I do not know what precisely he seeks, nor in which language to describe him. In Arabic or any tongue, only one word suffices: \*\*madman\*\*.

Tahā Husayn

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