Empire and Catastrophe

Spencer D. Segalla

Published by University of Nebraska Press

Segalla, Spencer D.
Empire and Catastrophe: Decolonization and Environmental Disaster in North Africa and Mediterranean France since 1954.
University of Nebraska Press, 2020.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/75384.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/75384
At 1:06 a.m. on September 9, 1954, Algeria’s Chélif Valley was struck with an earthquake measuring 6.7 on the Richter scale. Two hundred kilometers northeast of the epicenter, the news reached a young Muslim doctor, Belgacem Aït Ouyahia, sitting in his new Renault 203 in the town of Haussonnvillers (today Naciria). Aït Ouyahia had just left the Chélif the week before after finishing his surgical internship in Orléansville; he was on his way to take up a position in the colonial health service as a “médecin de colonisation de la région” in his native Kabylia, while he finished his thesis. It was eight in the morning, and he had just stopped for gas, coffee, and a beignet. Aït Ouyahia recounted that moment in his 1999 memoir:

I got back behind the wheel and turned on the radio:

“…[sic] has shaken the region of Orléansville. Numerous buildings have collapsed. Already there are known to be many victims, and the hospital is inundated with the injured. This is the largest earthquake ever known in Algeria…”

—My God! My God!

And I surprised myself; I, who was not too observant—even not observant at all—I surprised myself by reciting the shahada in a loud voice:

“There is no God but God, and Mohammed is his prophet.”

Aït Ouyahia immediately turned the car around and returned to Orléansville to rejoin the medical team at the hospital there. Aït Ouyahia was fortunate to have been far from the center of the earthquake when it struck, but upon his return to Orléansville, a city of thirty thousand people just thirty kilometers from the epicenter, he would soon be confronted with the horrors that this sudden movement of the inanimate had inflicted on human bodies.

In his 1955 memoir, a French official, René Debia, described the experience of the city’s inhabitants:
Those who were not crushed immediately were thrown to the ground “like the fruits of a fig tree bent by a storm,” like sailors in the midst of a storm, of which the same din arose around them; it was a deafening noise, formed of an extraordinary rumbling that rose from the subsoil of the earth, of the crashing of walls, and their cracking, like that of a ship rocked by waves, of the dull thud of buildings that crashed on their neighbors like water on a bridge. And the fathers, the mothers who gathered together their children that night, in the darkness, did so instinctively with the idea of awaiting together a death which seemed to them inevitable; but the shaking of the ground abated, little by little; without realizing it, they tried to grope their way to an exit or a stairwell, they climbed over the piles of rubble and twisted iron; surprised to be still alive, they reached a courtyard, a garden, or a street; and there, breathing, breathed finally an odor of sulfur that came, they didn’t know from where, and this opaque dust cloud that enveloped the city, adding to the thickness of the dark.2

When the sun rose, wrote Debia, Orléansville resembled a bombed out city, a “landscape of death.”3 Debia stated that four thousand homes had been destroyed in the city; in the entire affected region, he counted eighteen thousand ruined “houses,” plus the destruction of thirty-five thousand gourbis—small, windowless structures made of earthen bricks, packed earth (pisé), or sticks or stones cemented with mud, that were home to the vast majority of the rural Muslim population. In Debia’s words, the gourbis were obliterated “as if by an explosion. Often the roof was intact but had collapsed in one piece on top of the rest of the structure; from this debris one pulled out the cadavers and the injured.”4

Scientists would later attribute the disaster’s onset to the slow collision of tectonic plates in the Dahra mountains near the Mediterranean coast.5 An aftershock measuring 6.2 on the Richter scale struck farther north near the coastal city of Ténès the next day, bringing down more buildings. Countless more aftershocks followed, including significant tremors on September 16 and October 19 and 21. The earthquake and its aftershocks killed at least twelve hundred people throughout the region, injured about fourteen thousand, and left as many as two hundred thousand homeless. The vast majority of the dead—over 90 percent—were Muslim Algerians, reflecting the overall population of the affected area as well as the quality of housing.6 As in most earthquakes, it was human construction that did most of the actual killing. The deadly pancaking of gourbis described by René Debia was most likely due to the adoption of tile roofing material weighed down and held in place by large rocks. In urban
areas, the widespread use of masonry in building construction proved similarly lethal. Neither metropolitan nor Algerian France had building codes specifically developed for areas of seismic risk, and the general French building code was only applied to larger buildings constructed after 1946 from steel-reinforced concrete. On the other hand, reinforced concrete was insufficient to save an almost-completed nine-story, low-income apartment building (habitation à loyer modéré or HLM) in Orléansville, which “collapsed like a house of cards, crushing the workers who were living on one its floors.”

Those who died there left no memoirs, of course. If disaster victims are a particular subcategory of subaltern, then only the survivors speak. However, the voices of the most disempowered survivors are also muted: the destitute, the illiterate, those too traumatized by disaster or terrorized by war, or too occupied by the struggle to survive to provide testimony for posterity. René Debia and Belgacem Aït Ouyahia were in many ways typical of those who were able to provide such testimony. As the French subprefect for the region of Orléansville and an educated surgeon and future professor of obstetrics at the Algiers School of Medicine, respectively, these men were sufficiently privileged to get their own representations of the disaster published, even if this event, so enormous in scale and transformative in their own lives, would be pushed to the margins of the dominant historical narratives of the era.

Both Debia and Aït Ouyahia saw the disaster as intimately related to the question of decolonization in Algeria, but the two men held sharply contrasting views of this relationship. For Debia, the earthquake both revealed and augmented the commonality of interests between the French and the Muslim Algerians of the Chélif Valley, demonstrating the necessity of continued French rule; for Aït Ouyahia, the disaster was a turning point that decisively demonstrated the oppressive nature of French colonialism. Their writings demonstrate the fractured experience of these events as well as the inseparability of the environmental catastrophe from the experience of political turmoil.

Like the memoirs of Debia and Aït Ouyahia, sources written in the days and weeks following the 1954 earthquake also reveal divergent understandings of these events as well as the linkages between the earthquake and the possibility of decolonization. Archival sources demonstrate that the catastrophe became a tool for the French colonial state to use disaster response to counter nationalist narratives and to defend a vision of benevolent colonialism. Yet, because the earthquake wreaked enormous destruction on the built environment, especially on the humble edifices housing most of the region’s Muslim population, it dramatically increased the financial cost, technical difficulty, and bureaucratic
complexity of the colonial state’s efforts to make plausible its narratives of civilization, development, and solidarity. Consequently, the disaster provided an opportunity for dissidents to offer counter-narratives decrying the hypocrisy and futility of the colonial project. The earthquake thus became an important part of the struggle for and against Algerian independence, and the political struggle in Algeria shaped human responses to the seismic shocks that rocked the Chélif Valley in 1954.

A Department of France, A Valley in North Africa

French histories of Algeria’s Chélif Valley typically begin with the founding of Orléansville in 1843 as a military camp by General Thomas-Robert Bugeaud. Bugeaud’s occupation of Orléansville, and of the Mediterranean town of Ténès, forty kilometers to the north, was intended to create a bulwark against the return of the forces of Amir Abd al-Qadir, the Algerian resistance leader whom French forces had driven out of the Chélif Valley. The new French outpost was near the site of an ancient Roman colony of Castellum Tingitanum, a fact that proved useful to the narratives of French imperialists seeking to link the French conquest of Algeria to the heritage of Rome. The local name for the site (which may have been the location of a weekly souk) was Lasnab or in classical Arabic, al-Asnam, meaning “idols,” a name possibly derived from the memory of the Roman presence or of their ruins. El Asnam became the official name of the city after independence until it was renamed “Chlef” after another earthquake devastated the city in 1980. In 1848, the northern part of what is today Algeria, including the Chélif Valley, was declared part of France by the Second Republic.

Orléansville’s location, isolated by the Dahra Mountains to the north and the Ouarsenis to the south, was perceived as inhospitable by the French due to its climate and due to the ongoing resistance of the inhabitants of the two mountain ranges. Nevertheless, the European settlement at Orléansville grew into a thriving town and became the seat of a subprefecture administering a district, or arrondissement, extending north to Ténès, within the larger French department of Algiers, département 91 among the departments of France. (The départements are roughly akin to a North American state or province.)

To begin the history of this valley in North Africa with the arrival of Europeans reinforces an obviously Eurocentric historical metanarrative. If the scope of the narrative is narrowly confined to the city of Orléansville, this approach might seem, at first, to be satisfactory. Geographer Valentin Pelosse points out that, unlike Algerian cities such as Algiers, Constantine, and Tlemcen, the
French post at Orléansville was not grafted onto an Algerian Muslim town, and there was only a limited presence of Muslim Algerians in Orléansville during the early years of the settlement's growth. For René Debia, the subprefect and administrative head of the arrondissement in 1954, Orléansville, though inhabited by migrants “from all shores of the Mediterranean,” grew into a typical “small bourgeois city” of the Third Republic.

A transformation was underway, however: the city started to become what Debia called “a great indigenous city, one of the most significant Arab cities in all of Algeria.” By 1900, the city of Orléansville was already home to approximately three thousand Muslim Algerians, half the total population. These Muslims did not materialize out of thin air. Even if Orléansville was a creation of the French, the Chélif Valley was not—there was an earlier history of the region. The Chélif Valley was inhabited, prior to the French arrival, by the Awlad Qasir, among others. By 1863 the French had driven the Awlad Qasir out of twelve thousand hectares of the best agricultural land. For the next several decades, Muslims often sought to escape the rural poverty caused by French conquest of the Chélif by emigrating to Tunisia or other Muslim countries rather than to European-dominated Algerian cities. Around the turn of the century, however, migratory flows shifted toward the city, and the history of the rural Chélif merged with the history of French-built Orléansville.

This growing city, like all of Algeria, was dominated by its European inhabitants, who enjoyed the full rights of French citizenship, while the Muslims were French subjects ruled according to the indigénat, or native-status, laws. Nevertheless, certain leading Muslim families were able to maintain their prominence by switching their allegiance to the colonial state, which needed collaborators who could facilitate control of the Muslim population as French-appointed rural notables, or caïds. The most significant of these families in the Chélif was the Saïah family. The Saïahs became a focus of controversy and criticism after the Orléansville earthquake: as a propertied elite with close ties to the French regime, they represented a symbolic fulcrum in the struggle for post-disaster justice in the region: though members of the Saïah family positioned themselves as advocates for the Muslim population, they were portrayed by critics as oppressors, criminally implicated in an unjust system.

The Saïahs’ relationship with the French was shaped, over the years, by French reform measures intended to justify, mitigate, or occlude the arbitrary and oppressive character of colonial rule. While the most dramatic of these reforms were enacted after the Second World War, historians have argued that this process stretched back into the nineteenth century and included the 1898
establishment of the Délégations Financières, an assembly that included a limited number of seats for privileged Muslim Algerians. Reform accelerated after the First World War, when almost half of adult Algerian men were exempted from the *indigénat* and given voting rights in local elections. After World War II, the French regime affirmed the citizenship of Muslim Algerians and, in 1947, replaced the Délégations Financières with a 120-seat Algerian Assembly, elected by voters who were divided into two “colleges,” one composed of Europeans and a small number of select Muslim Algerians, and one composed solely of Muslim Algerians.24

These postwar reforms maintained a system of governance firmly under the control of the French of European origin and their chosen Muslim allies. Although the *indigénat* was eliminated, and adult male Muslim voters could now elect some representatives to the French National Assembly and the Algerian Assembly, in Algeria the influence of the sixty Algerian Assembly delegates chosen by the Muslim “second college” voters was checked by the power of the sixty chosen by the overwhelmingly European voters of the “first college.” Consequently, as has often been pointed out, delegates representing a European population of less than a million and less than sixty thousand of the most privileged Muslims (those who had been given “first college” voting status) could block the will of the delegates who represented a population of almost eight million. The ability of the settler population to prevent the Muslim majority from expanding their power was reinforced by the requirement of a two-thirds supermajority for certain proposed reforms. When an upswell of Muslim political activity led to nationalist successes in municipal elections in 1947, the authorities further subverted the limited democratic potential of this assembly through intimidation and election-tampering in favor of approved Muslim candidates.25

This “reformed” political system prevented real democratization in Algeria, but it provided opportunities for a well-positioned few. Closely tied to the French colonial system, the Saïah rose to top of the reformed political structure. At the time of the earthquake, members of the family held important positions in French Algeria: Saïah Abdelkader was a member and former president of the Algerian Assembly; Bouali Saïah was a member of the Assembly, and Saïah Menouar was a representative to the French National Assembly in Paris. Locally, several members of the family still held posts of *caïd* in the Chélif region.26 The vast majority of Muslim Algerians were less fortunate, and it was the poor Muslim population that would suffer the most after their homes were destroyed by the earthquake, in the growing shantytowns around Orléansville.
housing migrants from the countryside and in the vast rural areas housing an impoverished and scattered population. The relation of the Saïahs to this population—as oppressors or advocates—would be a matter of controversy when the earthquake struck.

City and Country on the Eve of Destruction

In sharp contrast to Agadir, destroyed by an earthquake less than six years later, controversy and political struggle following the 1954 earthquake in the Chélif would center as much on rural as on urban areas, while the destruction of Orléansville’s architectural legacy, such as it was, would provoke little comment. Orléansville’s twentieth-century landscape still bore the imprint of its military origin. A grid of streets was surrounded by a wall and a belt of military land, with military buildings dominating the western part of the city. Outside of the walls, the metropolitan area (agglomération) of Orléansville included two suburbs (faubourgs), La Ferme in the north and La Bocca Sahnouné in the south. These suburbs became increasingly Muslim as they absorbed migrants from the countryside. Europeans engaged in “white flight” from the faubourgs into city proper, while many Muslim Algerians lived in improvised mudbrick and bidonville (shanty) housing without piped water or sanitation infrastructure.27

As Benjamin Stora explains, many Muslims across Algeria had been driven to cities by French expropriation of land and water, the disruption of pre-colonial social and economic networks, and population growth. In the nineteenth century, communal tribal lands, properties of religious brotherhoods, and lands of the defeated Ottoman governor had been partitioned into private plots, leaving the average Muslim Algerian farmer with only seven acres, barely enough for subsistence. Meanwhile, traditional systems of water management were disrupted, along with communal landholding and charitable religious foundations. By 1919, colons, farmers of European descent with French citizenship, possessed a million acres of land in the département of Algiers alone, although, it should be noted, there was enormous inequality of wealth within the European population, and agricultural consolidation in the twentieth century also led to the urbanization the European population.28 In the Chélif Valley, rural poverty and further economic disruption in the period of the world wars prompted an acceleration of rural-to-urban migration, and by 1948 the official census in Orléansville counted 13,693 Muslim Algerians, out of a population of 17,223.29 The rate of migration was such that, by 1954, the majority of the city’s population had been born in the
By 1960, when the European population of Orléansville reached its apex, the Muslim population had grown to almost thirty-eight thousand, and people classified as “European” constituted only 16 percent of the population. For Sub-Prefect Debia, an advocate of colonialism through economic development, the growth of the city’s Muslim population was, in part, a positive development, insofar as it included Muslim merchants and functionaries and later some doctors and lawyers, of Kabyle and Arab backgrounds, who “adopted our way of life, if not in terms of dress then at least in the realm of habitat,” moving into villas and apartments formerly occupied by Europeans. “Less encouraging,” lamented Debia, “because it was a sign of poverty and because it often resulted in social uprootedness,” was the much more numerous settling of Muslims in the faubourgs “where they often lived as if they were in the douars [rural villages].” Debia described the exponential growth of unregulated housing in these suburbs as a demographic battle that threatened to overwhelm the legacy of the planned French city, protected by the “solid corset” of its ramparts. Debia’s modernist, imperialist fear of unregulated Muslims was echoed by another French official who described the faubourgs as “two popular quartiers constructed in an anarchic fashion, in violation of the most elementary rules of hygiene and urbanism.”

Reinforcing this vision of a city divided between realms of European progress and Muslim disorder, the European sections of Orléansville had by 1954 become home to dazzling monuments to Europeans’ belief in their own modernity. Debia described the architectural innovations: “Here, an ultra-modern building; there, a gigantic school, the largest in France [sic]; an administrative hôtel; a ten-story building under construction; a magnificent subprefecture in the hispano-mauresque style.” It was a city “glittering with light at night,” and a city of motorcars. The city walls were undergoing demolition, and the glittering modernity of the city extended westward beyond the old city limits, exemplified by the construction of a “sumptuous” new building to house the administrative offices of the subprefecture.

All this was far removed from the lives of most inhabitants of the region, however. Beyond the immediate environs of the city, the arrondissement administered by the subprefecture of Orléansville, which included most of the zone affected by the earthquake, was overwhelmingly rural. This area included eight sizable communities, with a total population of about eighty-five thousand, that were classified as communes de plein-exercice, endowed with elected municipal
governments due to their significant European populations. In addition to the city of Orléansville, these included Ténès, on the coast (population ten thousand); and Oued-Fodda (population twelve thousand), east of Orléansville, and five smaller towns. Nevertheless, most of the arrondissement’s three hundred thousand inhabitants lived in rural districts classified as *communes mixtes*, where the almost entirely Muslim residents were administered by appointed officials. In these rural areas, “extreme dispersion characterized the distribution of the rural population,” who survived through a combination of pastoralism and agriculture. This “extreme dispersion,” over an area of four hundred fifty thousand hectares (more than seventeen hundred square miles), would make disaster response slow and difficult.

**Disaster Response**

The effectiveness, earnestness, and equity—or lack thereof—of the French disaster response effort became a central focus of public contestation in Algeria in the autumn of 1954, as competing voices struggled to frame the shortcomings of the disaster response as either the fruit of an intrinsically unjust system, or as the inevitable result of the sheer magnitude of the “natural” disaster amid the putatively primordial backwardness of the Algerian people, or simply as the result of organizational failures that could be corrected for future disasters through technocratic adjustments.

Those involved in the disaster response in its early stages testified to the magnitude of the challenges they faced. On the night of the first earthquake, “total confusion, in darkness” reigned in Orléansville until sunrise; one early report described an “atmosphere of war (presence of numerous soldiers) and of post-bombardment.” The seismic shock had destroyed the city’s means of telecommunication with the outside world and had interrupted its electrical supply. A gendarme was dispatched to the town of Oued Fodda, twenty kilometers away, where he was able to reach Algiers by telephone, forty minutes after the disaster. The radio transmitter of the French military subdivision in Orléansville had been damaged but was repaired within two hours, enabling Subprefect Débia to send three messages requesting tents and food as well as civil engineers, trucks, and bulldozers. As the hours passed, news of destruction in Ténès and in several towns in the Chélif Valley trickled into Orléansville, and Débia requested helicopters.

The city was home to a volunteer crew of thirty or so firefighters (*sapeurs-pompiers*). They were reportedly unable to organize as a team in the early
hours of the disaster, but were instead drawn individually or in small groups into rescue efforts in their immediate vicinities; the fire chief and several pompiers became engaged in efforts to extricate victims buried in the ruins of the Hotel Baudoin. The 200 legionnaires housed at the military garrison, and the 30 or so police d’État were able to respond in more organized fashion within hours. By the afternoon, their numbers were augmented by the arrival of an additional 500 troops, with trucks and bulldozers, and several sapeur-pompier units from Relizane, to the southwest, and Algiers, to the northeast.

The medical staff at the hospital constituted another indispensable group of first responders, reinforced by health professionals arriving from other areas. In a chapter titled “Orléansville 54,” Dr. Aït Ouyahia described the scene in the hospital just after his arrival the next day, when additional tremors struck. Patients sustained additional injuries as they were thrown from their beds by the aftershocks. Beds were moved to the garden as new patients were brought in with fresh injuries. Amid the fear and chaos that ensued, the medical staff, led by Aït Ouyahia’s mentor Dr. Kamoun, kept working.

As crucial to the disaster response as the functioning of the hospital was the fact that the city possessed not only a railway depot but an airport; both were damaged but still usable. The morning after the first earthquake, the first relief shipment, containing medical supplies, arrived by air. The Cold War presence of the US Air Force in Europe and in neighboring Morocco proved valuable, as six American C-119s joined ten French army planes in the airlift of goods from France to Algiers and Algiers to Orléansville. By afternoon, flights were arriving in Orléansville every twenty minutes, bringing supplies and evacuating the seriously injured: 117 were evacuated the first day. Hunger and thirst were rampant, but in the afternoon, the arriving army trucks brought bread and two cisterns of water. Shipments of tents also began to arrive immediately, but the supply was grossly inadequate. People had no choice but sleep in the open, although some found refuge in train cars still on the tracks of the train station, slowing the arrival of shipments by rail.

On September 11, a national disaster relief committee, the Comité National de Secours aux Victimes du Séisme de la région d’Orléansville, was created by the Ministry of the Interior in Paris, and the Government-General of Algeria established a parallel committee. A large role in the post-disaster relief effort was played by the metropolitan Service National de Protection Civile (SNPC), which dispatched a team to Orléansville, including seventeen members of the Paris Sapeurs-Pompiers to supplement the firefighters from Orléansville and from Algiers. The SNPC team leader, Lieutenant Colonel Curie, arrived in
Algiers on September 11 at what is today the Houari Boumediène airport, along with a shipment of 16 large tents and 245 beds. That night, Curie flew to Orléansville, where he met with Subprefect Debia and Mr. Freychet, director of the departmental relief service (Service de Secours). The rest of the metropolitan SNPC team arrived within the next forty-eight hours, accompanied by an engineer named Marius Hautberg, who had been appointed to serve as an assistant (adjoint) to Colonel Curie, with a mission to conduct a study of structural damage, methods of clearing debris, and the organization of the disaster response.50

Those engaged in disaster response were not immune to the stress created by the carnage and destruction that surrounded them. Once assembled in Orléansville, the sapeurs-pompiers slept in tents at the military garrison, where food supplies were inadequate, while Curie and Hautberg joined Subprefect Debia, his staff, and his family in tents near the slightly damaged subprefecture building. 51 Hautberg recounted that, within the SNPC team, “overwork, fatigue, and a kind of necro-psychosis caused an ambiance of nervousness,” and tempers flared.52 Aït Ouyahia, too, referred to his own shock and emotional distress upon viewing the carnage.53 As the days passed, response workers undertook the grisly task of excavating the ruins to recover bodies. Soon, “in the stifling heat of September, the atmosphere was permeated with the odor of decay.”54 In the blazing heat, workers began to use the stench to help them locate the bodies, which had to be painstakingly extricated from the rubble and then coated with quicklime in an attempt to prevent outbreaks of disease.55 DDT was sprayed liberally over the city by helicopter and from trucks.56 A school was converted into a makeshift morgue, where the bodies were placed in coffins, which were being shipped in from throughout the region.57 After another major aftershock on September 16 brought still more damage to the city, eighty four more firefighters arrived from Paris, bringing the total size of the SNPC team to about one hundred.58 However, the dispatch of these reinforcements from the metropole was rushed after the new tremor struck. Consequently, they arrived without adequate advance planning or materials—they lacked sufficient food supplies for themselves and were not accompanied by the fifty tons of tents they had been expected to bring. As a result, the SNPC team was, according to Curie, ill-equipped to respond to the new wave of disaster.59

Beni Rached

In the weeks and months following the earthquake, much controversy surrounded the dire conditions and scarcity of relief aid in rural areas, where the
population was overwhelmingly Muslim. For the first few days, however, officials had initially assumed that the epicenter of the earthquake was in Orléansville where initial counts of the dead ranged from 153 (including 23 “Europeans” and 130 “français musulmans”) to 168. There were also reports from other towns describing death and damage throughout an area extending from the Chélif Valley towns of Oued Fodda (163 dead) and Pontéba (“total destruction – numerous dead”), to Ténès on the coast. However, officials were slow to recognize the extent of the disaster in rural areas, and no effort was made in the first 48 hours to extend disaster aid into the smaller villages, or douars, in hard-to-reach areas not served by roads, where most of the thousands of casualties had in fact occurred.

It was not until September 11 that aid workers in Orléansville became aware of the enormity of the devastation of the village of Beni Rached, 40 kilometers to the east at the true epicenter of the earthquake, where 300 residents had been killed. Sources provide conflicting accounts of the discovery of the tragedy there. Official reports neglected the role of Algerian Muslim agency in uncovering and treating the suffering in Beni Rached, emphasizing instead the vigorous state response that followed. Colonel Curie’s report from September 27, 1954, stated that the discovery of Beni Rached on September 11 was made “by chance” by a gendarme. According to Colonel Curie’s concise report, the morning after the discovery of Beni Rached, a US Air Force helicopter then flew reconnaissance missions in the area, returning with one of the injured. More helicopter evacuations followed, and a systematic effort was undertaken to identify affected rural communities, with ten medical teams sent out to canvass the region. Colonel Curie’s report on the SNPC mission to Orléansville was followed, in December 1954, by a report on the organization of the disaster response written by Philippe Kessler, a recent graduate of the elite École nationale d’administration who had been conducting an administrative traineeship near the Chélif Valley in September, and by Marius Hautberg’s report addressing both disaster response and the structural effects of the earthquake on buildings.

Kessler’s report credited the medical service’s staff as being the first to address the full extent of the rural disaster. Like Curie and Hautberg, Kessler emphasized the importance of helicopters. Kessler was impressed by the heroic drama of the aerovac: “It is thus that in certain places where, in the memory of man, no ‘European’ had ever passed, families affected by the disaster could see one of these providential machines descend from heaven, land at their door, from which would disembark ‘toubib’ [doctor] or nurse. This medical penetration, provoked by the event, brought a royal and marvelous path to the unhappy people who
benefitted from it.” This story of miraculous, technological “penetration” (a term of colonial conquest) by European saviors is redolent of the mythology of colonialism—the “providential” machines a modern version of Columbus’s ships, appearing as gods, as Europeans liked to claim, to the inhabitants of a New World. Frantz Fanon informs us that Algerian Muslims often saw the colonial doctor as threatening and humiliating rather than “marvelous.” While there is no doubt that the helicopter evacuations saved lives, Kessler’s version of the narrative emphasizes the importance of the colonizer’s military technology, and erases the agency of Muslims—both outsiders and residents of Beni Rached—who responded to the disaster.

Dr. Aït Ouyahia tells a very different story. According to Aït Ouyahia, the medical staff at the Orléansville hospital, finally taking a dinner break on the evening of September 10, were joined by local notable Saïah Menouar, a deputy (representative) from Orléansville to the National Assembly in Paris. According to Aït Ouyahia, the young doctor turned to his supervisor, Dr. Kamoun, and said, “I have noticed, sir, that all the injured who have come to us come from the farms and villages that are along the roads. I wonder, in what condition are the isolated douars and mechtas [villages and hamlets]?” Saïah Menouar offered the use of his jeep, and, after a few hours of sleep, Menouar and Aït Ouyahia left, still in the dark of night.

Aït Ouyahia may have downplayed Menouar’s role in initiating the expedition. French records indicate that Saïah Menouar was born in Beni Rached and that six members of the Saïah family died there during the earthquake. This suggests that Saïah Menouar played a more active role in initiating the expedition and determining its destination than Aït Ouyahia indicated: Saïah Menouar was very likely the driving force of the expedition, if not the actual driver, as in the doctor’s memoir. Aït Ouyahia’s account, published in 1999, reflects some ambivalence about Saïah Menouar, mentioning that Menouar had been “elected” by the Muslim population only after being handpicked “by the administration and colons of the Chélif,” in consultation with the head of the Saïah family, Saïah Abdelkader. Aït Ouyahia’s depiction of Saïah Menouar’s role in this story may have been influenced by nationalist condemnations of those who, like the Saïah, collaborated with French rule. Nevertheless, the doctor’s memoirs granted Saïah Menouar a role, unlike the reports of Curie and Kessler.

According to Aït Ouyahia’s memoir, he and Menouar drove about thirty kilometers on the road, through the town of Oued Fodda. (There, the ten-year-old Ali Bouzar, who would later write his own memoir of the earthquakes of 1954
and 1980, had just survived the disaster and was fearing for the life of his father, a medical worker in Orléansville—likely one of Aït Ouyahia’s colleagues.73) Past Oued Fodda, they left the road and turned north, following a trail along a dry riverbed. At dawn, they reached a pair of collapsed dwellings. Under a fig tree lay, still alive, a woman, seven months pregnant, the skin on her bloody abdomen torn back as if “scalped,” along with a man and a small child. Around them lay corpses: their three sons, and the man’s parents. Aït Ouyahia applied sulfa and bandages to the woman’s wounds and promised the man they would soon return to take the woman and child with them to the hospital. They then pressed on for another dozen kilometers to the village of Beni Rached. There, they found that “not a single house had resisted the earthquake; Beni Rached was nothing more than a gigantic cluster of earth and stone, planted here and there with torn up walls.”74 The survivors recognized “Si Menouar” and kissed his hand. They reported that there were several dead in every household; the mosque had been converted into a morgue; survivors were still trying to dig out the dead from the ruins. Dr. Aït Ouyahia worked for several hours treating the injured, until he ran out of supplies. Aït Ouyahia and Saïah Menouar were forced to return to Orléansville, to summon more assistance. On the way, they came to the first family they had encountered by the fig tree. The woman and child were still there. The man was on his way to bury the dead. His donkey and mule were laden with corpses; his parents and two of his sons were stuffed into the saddle bags, his third son lay across the back of the mule.75

The contrast between Aït Ouyahia’s account and those of the French reports raises certain questions about sources. Aït-Ouyahia’s book’s 1999 publication date makes it different from Debia’s 1955 memoir and from other sources used in this chapter such as contemporaneous press reports and archival documents such as cablegrams and official government reports: it is inflected by a greater passage of time and by the knowledge that the turmoil of the Algerian rebellion would lead to independence in 1962 (and then to an imperfect polity in independent Algeria). Can Aït Ouyahia’s memoir of his life and family history published many decades later, in 1999, be useful in understanding events following the disaster in 1954? Or can it only be used as evidence of the long-term, retrospective intermingling of understandings of decolonization and the 1954 disaster in imagination and memory (a purpose to which it will be put in Chapter 7)? Certainly, Aït Ouyahia’s memoir cannot be considered entirely reliable. Yet the early genesis of the reports available in French archives does not necessarily make them more reliable than the memories of Aït Ouyahia or those of writers such
as Mohammed Khâir-Eddine, Habib Tengour, and Ali Bouzar, whose work will be discussed in Chapter 7. Historians of colonialism are accustomed to reading primary archival sources “against the grain” and with an awareness that authors’ depictions of events may be shaped by the cultures of colonialism; we are equally aware, in dealing with post-independence memoirs, that depictions of events may be shaped by cultures of anti-colonial nationalism, by the preoccupations of later decades, and by the desire to tailor memorialization to the needs of a specific audience.

However, exclusively privileging early archival documents when examining the events of 1954 would privilege the French who were in a position to write official accounts, skewing our historical understanding in ways that would reflect the distribution of power in 1950s Algeria. Though Aït Ouyahia’s account of “Orléansville, 1954” is separated from events by the passage of more time than are Curie’s, Hautberg’s, and Kessler’s, it must be recognized that the French accounts, even those written just days after the events, are also works of memory and representation for a specific audience. The historian must also approach those accounts skeptically, in recognition of their neglect (both ideologically conditioned and individually self-serving) of Muslim agency, and in recognition of their echoes of imperialist narratives. Hitherto unexploited archives in Algeria may eventually reveal additional perspectives on these events, but in any case, our understanding of history will remain an ongoing work of construction out of the “disparate and multiple” memories (both long-and short-term) and representations by those involved.76

The Second Phase

French archival documents provide much detail about the disaster response as the French state’s efforts shifted from the initial phase of rescuing victims, treating the injured, and retrieving the dead, to “interventions of secondary urgency”: housing the displaced and beginning the process of reconstruction. However, contemporaneous descriptions of events by leftist and nationalist journalists called into question official representations of this second phase of disaster response. Central to the public debate and political struggle in the Chélif Valley in late 1954 were divisions over not only whether the French state was acting with equity to assist both the Muslim and the European survivors but also whether the remoteness and inaccessibility of rural villages such as Beni Rached was part of a status quo ante that French colonialism had to confront and overcome or if the
vulnerability of rural Algerians was a product of colonial neglect or exploitative harm—in other words, whether the French colonial state, as it then existed, was the solution to the disaster that afflicted Muslim Algerians, or its deepest cause.

The second phase of relief efforts included both direct state intervention through the work of the SNPC and services such as Ponts et chaussées (Bridges and Roads), and donations from private individuals and from organizations such as the Red Cross and Sécours Catholique (Catholic Relief). The Interior Ministry’s Comité National de Secours organized a “solidarity campaign” to solicit donations, beginning with a “National Day of Solidarity” on September 26. These funds were to be applied toward the purchase and transport of tents, blankets, and other goods to meet the immediate needs of survivors. Throughout metropolitan and overseas France, as well as Morocco and Tunisia, tens of thousands of fundraising posters and hundreds of thousands of solidarity badges were distributed. The total amount collected throughout France and its empire eventually rose to more than 1.5 billion francs (over four million dollars). However, raising the money was one thing; getting aid to the people in need was another.

Monetary donations from throughout France and the overseas French departments were turned over to the treasury office (Trésorier Payeur Général) of each department and then consolidated in Paris by the Trésorier Payeur Général de la Seine. Donations in kind, however, were sent directly to the Governor-General of Algeria by each department, resulting in a diverse plethora of goods that had to be counted and sorted prior to distribution in the affected areas. Cultural and religious differences produced some glitches in the trans-Mediterranean solidarity effort, most notably an excess of food donations containing pork, and a shortage of clothing for Muslim women, although fifty million francs from the September fundraising were earmarked for the purchase of cloth for such clothing.

It was housing, however, that presented the greatest problem, a fact agreed upon by all sources. If a major rationale for French rule in Algeria in the twentieth century was the ability of the French to improve the material well-being of Muslim Algerians, the earthquake had just made this vastly more difficult. Sources within the National Service of Civil Protection (SNCP) presented the difficulties as largely logistical. By September 13, the Ministry of the Interior in Paris had arranged shipments, with the help of the SNPC, the French Army of the Air, and the US Air Force, of 316 large tents capable of housing over six thousand people. Radio broadcasts in France urged citizens to donate their old camping tents, declaring that “the tent that you have been keeping in the attic and that the grandchildren never use would constitute an undreamed-of
solution for an affected family.”²⁴ As more tents arrived, the SNPC team led by Curie and Hautberg took charge of sorting and distribution. However, the tents were of a variety of sizes and types, and most were ill-suited to housing families. It became a nightmare to sort and count the component parts to assure that each recipient obtained a complete kit. Hautberg’s log also indicated that there were some enormous American military tents, “worthy of a circus,” that neither the SNPC nor the legionnaires could figure out how to assemble.⁸⁵ Meanwhile, displaced residents resisted the efforts of aid workers to move them into large tent cities, preferring to camp in front of their damaged homes and keep watch over their goods.⁸⁶

By September 22, Hautberg reported that 2,371 tents had been received and 2,066 of them distributed, leaving 305 still in reserve, with the arrival of another 930 anxiously anticipated.⁸⁷ The leaders of the disaster response were well aware that this was insufficient and requested more. A daily report of the Algerian emergency committee estimated that only approximately half of the need had been met.⁸⁸ Given the enormity of the disaster, with over forty thousand homes destroyed,⁸⁹ this was a gross underestimation of need, reflecting the assumption that the rural gourbi dwellers would not receive tents.

In the long term, more than tents would be needed to rebuild Orléansville and to save French Algeria from the political and environmental disasters that threatened. In late September, Hautberg, seeing tents as an unsatisfactory remedy to the housing crisis, traveled to Paris, and communicated “to diverse individuals interested in the events in Orléansville” the urgent need to construct temporary housing, referred to as “barracks.” Hautberg pointed out that “the more quickly these are installed, the less need there is for tents.” Hautberg also warned, ominously and accurately, that “the rains in the Chélif Valley are said to be torrential.”⁹⁰ The first step beyond tents was the requisitioning of fourteen thousand square meters of asbestos-reinforced, fiber-cement sheets—roofing material for temporary housing.⁹¹

With the winter rains coming, temporary housing was an urgent need. However, barracks, like tents, were mainly destined for the cities and towns. Those who lived in gourbis were expected to quickly rebuild their homes themselves, supported by grants of materials and cash payments of ten thousand francs (about thirty US dollars in 1954) to each household, to be followed by an additional ten thousand later.⁹² The proponents of this response argued that an illiterate population in desperate need, many living in areas not served by roads, required a process that would be simple and, it was hoped, quick—quick enough to obviate the need for tents or barracks. In practice, however, rebuilding gourbis was not as
simple as officials had initially hoped. On September 22, Saïah Abdelkader and the mayor of Orléansville, Ange Bisgambiglia, met with the Governor-General of Algeria, Roger Léonard, during Léonard’s visit to Orléansville, and both local officials complained of inadequate efforts to help the inhabitants of gourbis. They denounced the slow pace of distribution of building supplies (specifically, poles to provide a lattice for the roofs) and complained of delays in the distribution of the promised first installment of ten thousand francs for these families without shelter.93 When the Algerian Assembly convened several days later to address the crisis, one representative (M. Francis) pointed out that the “gourbi” policy ignored the many rural poor who lived in houses made of stone that could not be rebuilt with some wooden poles and twenty thousand francs. Similarly, representative Bentaieb objected to the use of the term “traditional” in the budget line for “improvements for traditional rural habitats,” essentially agreeing with Francis that aid should not be based on an arbitrary distinction between what was modern and what was traditional in the dwellings of the rural poor. The term “traditional” was duly deleted from the legislation, but the Assembly maintained the policy that rural populations would be expected to rebuild their own homes with the assistance of some materials and the fixed payment of twenty thousand francs. Future long-term improvements were promised, but the advocates of the plan claimed that the inhabitants of gourbis preferred to rebuild their own homes.94

Solidarity and Division

For the French state, Algeria was France, and the message was one of national solidarity; flags were flown at half-mast on public buildings throughout France.95 Hautberg believed that this sentiment was sincere and widely shared, referring to “this Algeria, so dear to all the French.”96 Governor-General Léonard proclaimed, “I say above all that the French government considers the Orléansville catastrophe a national catastrophe, which France takes charge of because it affects a French department, French citizens.” This statement was meant to be inclusive of Muslim Algerians, who were technically French citizens, albeit unequal ones. Léonard declared, “There has never been, and never will be, discrimination of any kind regarding the victims.”97 Given the obvious divisions in colonial Algerian society amid intermittent nationalist insurgency since 1945, such assurances were aspirational, and had to be made explicit, if only in hopes of minimizing political discord. Léonard’s declaration prefigured a more deliberate policy promoting the idea of Muslim equality after 1958.98

As Valentin Pelosse has pointed out, official public declarations from the state—in Paris, Algiers, and Orléansville—presented an image of unity across
ethnic divisions, but this “phraséologie officielle” was undermined both by the preexisting inequities of colonialism and by the official disaster response, which treated poor rural Muslims very differently from the rest of the population. Nevertheless, it was frequently claimed that the earthquake had the effect of unifying the population across class and ethnic lines. Raymond LaQuière, president of the Algerian Assembly, declared that “All distinctions, all hierarchies, were leveled in single blow: there remained only brothers, animated by a single and identical desire to help their neighbor with sublime devotion.”

Orléansville mayor Bisgambiglia echoed this sentiment, declaring to the Assembly that “The Chélif contains two ethnic elements: the Muslims, who are the more unfortunate, and the Europeans. One should not oppose one to other, because they have shown, after the earthquake, that they consider each other as brothers.” Several months later, René Debia explained the process by which he believed the earthquake had furthered this inter-ethnic solidarity. From the limited vantage point of the subprefecture, Débia described the first night after the disaster: “An empty lot, across from the subprefecture, was transformed into a city of canvas where, indistinctly, and taking into account only the situation of the family, were settled Europeans and Muslims . . . it never ceased to bring together the ethnic strata of the population so that everyone, rich and poor, and whatever their origins, knew the same hardship and started again together from zero.” In Débia’s account, it was as if the earthquake had resolved the fundamental contradiction of France’s “Impossible Republic,” reconciling in one cataclysmic moment the aspirations of French universalism with imperial rule in Algeria. But Débia’s optimistic vision, like the broader hope of reconciling imperialism with democracy, was a fantasy. The winds were shifting. By late September, diverse voices, both within the state disaster response effort and in the press, were pointing out the imminent arrival of the rainy season that portended fresh misery for the many thousands sleeping outdoors or in tents.

Organized Protest

Sources contemporaneous with the earthquake response reveal that depictions of the disaster quickly became a field of struggle over the future of Algeria. Even as official French sources promoted a narrative of solidarity and promises of improvements, alternative narratives were being offered within the framework of Algerian nationalism, on the one hand, and leftist calls for class struggle, on the other. Within weeks of the first earthquake, organized opposition groups began to openly denounce the French colonial authorities in Orléansville, and
the provision of humanitarian aid became a field of political and ideological struggle in the Chélif Valley. Active post-disaster public relations campaigns and relief aid operations were carried out by various groups in Algeria: the Algerian Communist Party, the Communist-linked Confédération Général du Travail (CGT) labor union—and also by Ferhat Abbas’s moderate nationalist Union Démocratique du Manifeste Algérien (UDMA) and the less moderate Mouvement Pour le Triomphe des Libertés Démocratiques (MTLD), the nationalist party originally founded by Messali Hadj. The earthquake created an opportunity for these groups to challenge the state’s narrative of the disaster response and to present their own alternatives.

The UDMA’s newspaper, *La République algérienne*, denounced the authorities’ efforts at disaster response and the propaganda of “solidarity” that accompanied it. The authorities were accused of “criminal negligence and scandalous discrimination” based on race. The paper also took note of the manner in which official sources and the mainstream press emphasized the destruction of the urban centers where most Europeans lived, and how they invariably reported the number of European dead separately from casualties among *français musulmans*. *La République algérienne* portrayed the paucity and tardiness of disaster aid in rural areas as a product of racial discrimination. The paper rejected official claims that the lack of roads was to blame for these shortcomings, and argued that transportation infrastructure never seemed to be a problem when the army wanted to send “trucks full of troops” to crush rural disturbances, as they had in the village of Sidi Ali Bounab three years before. Moreover, the paper argued, the flimsy construction of gourbis and the absence of roads and medical facilities only demonstrated the emptiness of the imperialist promises associated with the “civilizing mission.”

The authorities were denounced in slightly different terms by dissident political groups of the far Left that included both Muslims and Europeans, most notably the CGT trade union (associated with the French Communist Party) and the Algerian Communist Party (PCA). Like the nationalist UDMA, these groups offered material and political support to the victims of the disaster while portraying the French state as callously indifferent to the needs of the people. Some of their criticisms seemed to echo the UDMA almost verbatim. However, as historian Yaël Fletcher has demonstrated, these non-nationalist groups promoted a class-based vision of colonial oppression that deemphasized ethnic divisions. A major vehicle for this vision was the daily newspaper *Alger républicain*, whose Muslim Algerian and European editors and writers, though predominantly affiliated with the PCA, sought to provide a platform for diverse
opposition groups and, as they put it, to “unite, as broadly as possible, all those who—regardless of their political orientations and their origins—want to end colonial oppression.” In their criticisms of the state response and their appeals for donations from their members, these groups offered their own vision of “solidarity” between the European French and Muslim and non-Muslim Algerians, based on class identity. This alternative vision criticized the inequities of French colonialism and castigated the French authorities but also hoped to mitigate the “feudal” elements of Algerian nationalism by persuading nationalists to see the French working class as their comrades in the struggle against colonial tyranny.

In early October, articles in *Alger républicain* denounced the empty promises and slow pace of the state’s response to the disaster, contrasting the generosity and goodwill of the people who had donated to the solidarity fund with the anemic official efforts to deliver help to the people. Particularly contemptible, in this view, was the state’s expectation that the rural population should rebuild their own dwellings, with no help from the state except the paltry payments of twenty thousand francs (less than sixty US dollars)—not even tents for temporary shelter. The earthquake had exposed the falseness of officials’ claims about the material benefits the French state had brought to Algeria. The suffering of rural people—rarely identified as Muslim or Arab—was the direct consequence of the failures of the state; villages like Beni Rached had been “abandoned” and left without access roads or medical facilities.

Meanwhile, rural and urban people began to register their discontent, sometimes organized by the dissident political groups. On October 2, *Alger républicain* reported that a hundred “paysans” (peasants or country folk) from the douar Bouarouys had marched in protest of a local official or *caïd* who had demanded bribes from families wishing their names to appear on a list of those to receive the aid allowance for rebuilding—a recurring complaint that the leftist press used to demonstrate the complicity of Muslim elites with the oppressive French state. A day or two later, women from the douar of Oued Larbi, who had organized a “Committee of Disaster Victims,” presented themselves at the subprefecture in Orléansville, accompanied by Baya Allaouchiche, secretary of the “Union of the Women of Algeria,” and demanded the distribution of tents. The CGT’s disaster relief committee organized a delegation of 300 rural “fellahs” who marched to the town hall in Orléansville, where some of them were able to gain an audience with Saïah Abdelkader’s personal secretary, to whom they complained of the lack of tents and the practice of providing only one reconstruction allowance in cases of multiple families living in a single dwelling.
On October 9, the rain began to fall, and the need for shelter became urgent. The CGT responded with its own relief efforts and organized a march of 500 “fellahs and rural workers” to the town of Oued Fodda, led by syndicate leaders Gessoum Dahmane, Mohammed Marouf, and Zaidi. On October 14, Dahmane led another march—of 700 people, according to Alger républicain—to the sub-prefecture in Orléansville, where Debia’s reassurances that all would soon be housed were found unconvincing. Yet another march of over 700 women took place in Orléansville on October 28. In Alger républicain, André Ruiz appealed to international class solidarity: “Brothers and sisters, workers and peasants, of the regions of Orléansville, Ténès, Duperré, you can count on the support of the working class of Algeria and of France, and the support of the international working class. . . . It is incontestable that this catastrophe highlights the misery of our lands, due in the first place to the regime of colonial exploitation.”

Critiques of the state response also emerged in the metropole. On October 8, the Catholic Resistance newspaper Témoinage chrétien (Christian Witness), which would later voice important critiques of French tactics in the Algerian War, published an article titled “Orléansville: Racism is not dead! Does the Mayor only want to feed the Europeans?” The paper quoted a September 15 message, allegedly sent by Bisgambiglia, mayor of Orléansville, to the Red Cross: “Please do not feed Pontéba, the villages Menassis, Maizia, El-Douabed, Gulaf- tia, Kafafsa, Cheklil and Chouiat, where the men and children did not come to work this morning.” This piece of damning evidence was later reprinted in Algeria in the CGT’s La Vie ouvrière (The Worker’s Life) and in its local monthly newsletter, La voix des sinistrés du Chéliff (The Voice of the Disaster Survivors of the Chélif).

Whereas Témoinage chrétien had focused on Bisgambiglia, Alger républicain and the CGT paired Bisgambiglia’s villainy with that of privileged Muslims. Alger républicain pointed out that the first cement building to be constructed, in October 1954, was a shed to house Bisgambiglia’s horses, but it also addressed continuing demands for bribes from rural Muslim caïds. The CGT’s La voix des sinistrés du Chéliff paired Bisgambiglia with Saïah Abdelkader, describing the two as “The Profiteers of Misery.” Both Saïah and Bigambiglia, it was implied, were guilty of skimming from donations intended for disaster victims; Saïah would later be accused of profiting from the disaster through his family’s stake in a cement company which was contracted as a supplier in the construction of HLM housing.

The archival record suggests that this demonization of Bisgambiglia and Saïah Abdelkader was not fully justified; in September 1954 the pair had pressed the
Algerian government to speed the distribution of materials for the reconstruction of gourbis, and in 1955 Saïah would lobby the government in Paris to expand construction of permanent HLM apartment housing in Orléansville for homeless Muslims who had migrated to the city after the earthquake. However, in the Algerian Assembly, it would be the PCA representative René Justrabo who would speak out for the needs of the rural poor. Bisgambiglia and Saïah Abdelkader, in contrast, would focus on maximizing indemnifications for property owners. For the CGT, this dastardly duo constituted a perfect foil to demonstrate that ethnicity and religion were irrelevant to the class struggle against capitalist oppression. The oppressors, it was made clear, had no ethnic identity.

This message was reinforced by a complementary message of worker solidarity across ethnic lines. Parisian syndicalists visited Beni Rached in October 1954, and *Alger républicain* contrasted the empty words of Saïah Abdelkader and the inaction of the Algerian Assembly with the successful effort of councilman Rachid Dali Bey, a communist, to persuade the Algiers Conseil Général to allocate one hundred million francs for disaster relief. Meanwhile, Ruiz was organizing local Muslim Algerian elected officials, who formed a “Comité National algérien d’aide aux sinistrés,” which addressed complaints to the Minister of the Interior about the lack of tents and barracks, and about the extortion of bribes from disaster survivors by rural caïds.

The situation seemed to be explosive. Faced with signs of popular agitation, the authorities assigned gendarmes to Beni Rached and other villages. As the rains intensified, so did the protests. In late October, *Alger républicain* reported crowds as large as two thousand.

**Shortcomings and Deep Causes**

The force of seismic waves had produced a dramatic intervention in human history, transforming another environmental factor, the seasonal rains, from a routine and predictable event into a catastrophe: a humanitarian catastrophe for the people of the Chélif Valley and a political disaster for the French state. These catastrophes were also products of late colonialism: a century of impoverishment and neglect left the rural Algerian population exposed to the elements in the autumn of 1954, while the growing vitality of the anti-colonial opposition made the suffering of poor Muslim Algerians an urgent political concern for the colonial regime.

The French state’s response was seen as inadequate not only by the regime’s opponents but also by those responsible for the disaster response. By early 1955,
the solidarity campaign had collected over 1.5 billion francs, with donations arriving from across Europe, the Middle East, the United States, and the Soviet Union. This did not, however, translate into robust action in the Chélif Valley. Within the SNPC, the shortcomings of the immediate disaster response were acknowledged, and the event became a case study in unpreparedness and suboptimal organization. Although the immediate response of the military units, sapeurs-pompiers, and especially the medical staff seem to have been universally applauded, the response from the local government and from Algiers and Paris was inefficient. As Colonel Curie’s report on the disaster response effort would explain, the local staff of the Service de Santé had performed admirably, but the local authorities, including Debia, Bisgambiglia, and the mayors of the other affected towns lacked the “means of communication” to organize an effective local governmental disaster response operation. Only the military troops in the area had been able to respond immediately. The subprefecture building had itself been damaged, as had the gendarmerie, and the local officials had themselves been traumatized by the disaster. The Service de Protection Civile d’Algerie had been slow to respond to the disaster; the “designated director of disaster relief” arrived in Orléansville on Friday September 11, only to return to Algiers that day, and when he returned on the 12th, he possessed no more means of communication or response than did the subprefect or the mayor.

As Kessler noted in his report on the disaster response, the SNPC team that set up operations on September 20 in the subprefecture fell short of the organization and infrastructure called for in the Plan ORSEC (Organisation de la réponse de sécurité civile), the guidelines for disaster response promulgated by the French state in 1952. The Plan ORSEC specified that a team of “specialized functionaries and technicians” needed to be sent to the disaster site with the authority to respond to the variety of urgent problems that might arise. This team would have both the skills and the “psychological distance” necessary to confront the disaster, but it was to work closely with the local authorities in order to benefit from local knowledge. The Orléansville response, however, suffered from poor coordination. Although the Civil Protection workers from outside of Orléansville shared space in available buildings with the local authorities, this resulted in the “dispersion of services” of the SNPC staff while producing confusion, rather than coordination, between the hierarchy of the SNPC and that of the subprefecture. Marius Hautberg complained that the municipal government issued vouchers to Orléansville residents for tents and blankets without regard for the ability of the SNPC to fulfill such commitments, and
uncoordinated requests were made to the engineering corps by various authori-
ties, including Debia, at the subprefecture; Freychet, representing the prefecture; and even the medical service, resulting in wasted time and resources. Meanwhile, although buildings containing corpses were excavated, no official possessed the legal authority to order the demolition of the countless other buildings that stood unusable, damaged by the earthquake. These critiques were analogous to concerns emanating from within the Algerian government. In an October 7 encrypted telegram marked “secret,” Governor-General Roger Léonard expressed alarm that “latent conflicts” between the municipal authorities and the prefecture prevented effective action, as did the lack of a legal structure permitting the Algerian administration to address the need for repairs to existing buildings and for permits for new construction. These problems rendered the administration “paralyzed,” according to Leonard, “on the eve of winter.”

Kessler argued that the impact of the earthquake was much like that of an aerial bombing campaign, and therefore planners of national defense had much to learn from Orléansville. Kessler noted that there was one important difference between the earthquake in Orléansville and the experience of cities destroyed in war: the Orléansville disaster had occurred when France was otherwise at peace and had affected only a single region. Given the peacetime abundance of means in September, the inefficiency of the response was worrisome. For Kessler, the “appalling mediocrity” of the service’s own resources and the grossly “insufficient training” of the local French population would be a wake-up call, he hoped, for French disaster response. A similar view was made public in the pages of the newspaper L’est républican, where an editorial titled “Warning” pointed out the growing danger of nuclear destruction of French cities and cited the inadequacy of the response to the earthquake. Hautberg, too, hoped that improvements in the organization of disaster response would better prepare the administration to respond in times of war. Finishing their reports in December 1954, it was not yet evident to Kessler and Hautberg that history would record the period of relative peace in North Africa as ending within weeks of the disaster.

Neither Hautberg, the engineer, Kessler, the administrator-in-training, nor Debia, the subprefect, made any mention of the political agitation of the survivors. Hautberg and Debia, however, addressed the question of deeper causes of the suffering occasioned by the disaster, and recognized that the problems revealed by the earthquake went beyond organizational inefficiency. They recognized that the disaster produced disproportionate suffering among Muslim
Algerians living in rural poverty even if they did not accept that this poverty was rooted in the injustices of colonialism, insisting instead that French rule was a force for positive change.

In subprefect Debia’s view, the earthquake provoked a “revelation” for outsiders, including “visitors, metropolitan or Algerian [i.e. colons], journalists, functionaries—and even very high functionaries.” This revelation, for Debia, was not of the iniquities of colonialism but of the harshness of the land, invoking the discourse described by Aït-Saada. For the first time, these outsiders saw beyond the façade of beautiful beaches, impressive dams, and public works usually shown to important visitors and tourists. The disaster brought to the fore “the Algerian reality” of an “ungrateful land” where people toiled in an inhospitable climate, as they had for millennia, but where population growth now exacerbated their poverty. Debia was confident in the French colonizing mission, however: the solution lay in the “mise en valeur” (improvement) of Algeria through economic development.142 Prior to the earthquake, Debia had dreamed of the Chélif Valley becoming “a new California,” and he remained optimistic, although he had recognized, even before the outbreak of war, that the poverty of rural Algerians was “the gravest problem, which risks endangering France’s work of civilization.”143

For Hautberg, too, the alterity of “this land of Africa . . . brutal and savage” was the root cause of Algerian underdevelopment.144 Like Debia, Hautberg believed that the future of French Algeria depended on economic development. Unlike Debia, however, Hautberg acknowledged the fragility of the ties between Muslim Algerians and France, pointing out that French “penetration” in North Africa was a relatively recent phenomenon. Hautberg argued that poverty was the root cause of unrest in Algeria, inclining Muslim Algerians “to react violently in order to loosen the grip of their misery.”145 For Hautberg, this poverty exacerbated the suffering brought by the disaster, and was the primary cause of social disorder. Ignoring the role that the French had played in destroying the rural livelihoods of Muslim Algerians since the nineteenth century, Hautberg assumed that the current underdevelopment reflected the historical status quo ante, perpetuated by a lack of modern agricultural methods and by insufficient French schooling. Echoing a frequent postwar theme in French colonial theory, Hautberg argued that the solution lay in a Keynesian program of state investment in Algerian economic development.146

The suffering that followed the earthquake had drawn attention to the inequalities of life in Algeria and the need for improvements in the standard of living of the Muslim population. For Debia, French rule was the cure for Algeria’s
underdevelopment, not its cause, but “two thousand years of backwardness cannot be regained in a century.” Algeria’s situation, he argued, was not unlike that of America’s rural South, where state-led economic initiatives—the Tennessee Valley Authority—had been initiated in response. In contrast, Alger républican asserted that the root cause of Algerian poverty was the state itself, which imposed on poor Algerians “a burdened life, with taxes, caïds, informants, and gendarmes.” Nevertheless, there was significant point of agreement between the views of dissidents like the editors of Alger républican and imperialist analysts like Debia, Kessler, and Hautberg. They recognized that disaster response was not enough: reconstruction would be insufficient if it merely returned the Chélif Valley to its pre-earthquake condition. As Alger républican put it,

The problem posed goes beyond reconstruction, or aid, or even solidarity with the victims of the catastrophe. Because these fundamental problems will not be resolved when everything is put back “in order.” When we resume “as before” the neck irons of misery and hunger. A “normal” misery and hunger. A life without school, without doctors, without warmth and without liberty.

Yet even restoring the Chélif to its pre-earthquake condition seemed initially to be beyond the competence of the French authorities; the seismic event had dramatically exacerbated the contradiction between imperialism’s promises and the reality of life in Algeria.

**Revolution and Reconstruction**

On the night of October 31, 1954, a series of attacks were carried out by the FLN (Front de Libération Nationale), across Algeria, mainly in Algiers, Kabyla, and the Aures mountains. On November 1, the FLN issued a proclamation that the “final phase” of the struggle for an independent Algerian state was beginning, a “true revolutionary struggle” that would use “every means” to force the French to negotiate. This was not, however, the sudden start of a conflagration. The insurrection of 1954 started small, with fewer than a thousand armed militants and was part of a history of postwar resistance that included the mass uprisings of 1945 followed by the militant activities of the FLN’s predecessor, the MTLD’s Organisation Spéciale. In 1954, the new insurrection brought no immediate transformation of the situation in the Chélif.

Soon, however, the “events” of the incipient revolution started to compete with the disaster response for headlines in the Algerian press, and voices in the
Chélif Valley began to ask how the earthquake was related to the insurrection. The earthquake, it was assumed, was simply too momentous an event to be irrelevant to the political question. Descriptions of the calm in the Chélif and planning for the reconstruction of Orléansville became elements of the discursive contest to imagine the future of Algeria.

For seventeen months after the FLN declaration, Orléansville remained untouched, as the FLN struggled to gain traction beyond its strongholds in the Aurès and Kabylia, in eastern Algeria. The calm in the Chélif, however, was only relative: peace for the colonizer went hand in hand with oppression and violence for the colonized. The nationalists’ declaration of war had made all forms of dissidence more dangerous. Survivors’ organizations, by operating in the open, gave the administration prime targets for repression: the activist, the disgruntled, the engaged. In November 1954, fourteen people were arrested in Beni Rached, as well as five CGT members organizing in the village of Chouchoua. In January 1955, the CGT’s *La voix des sinistrés* reported that homes of its disaster committee organizers were raided by French troops or gendarmes, claiming to search for arms. One local organizer, Ahmed Sameti, was imprisoned on charges that he had stolen the caïd’s cow. Two others were imprisoned on charges related to demonstrations. The villages of Yaabouch and Ouled Bendou were also raided. No arms were found, but nineteen people were arrested. The following year, there were more arrests in Beni Rached, and twelve in the village of Taighaout. In August 1955, Kaddhar, the secretary of the Fédération des Comités de Défense des sinistrés was arrested, as was, a few months later, the secretary for the Comité Intersyndical de solidarité, Dahmane Guessous. In May 1956, the remaining leadership of these committees were rounded up and sent to detention camps.

Yàel Fletcher has argued that the earthquakes of September and the rains of October had given the leftist dissidents writing for *Alger républicain* and organizing the CGT’s disaster victims’ committees a grand opportunity to promote their narrative of a class-based divide between the workers and the wealthy. The FLN insurrection did not trigger a sudden conversion of these activists to the nationalist cause—at least not overtly. In 1954, however, voices from the Left denounced the repressive measures taken in response to the outbreak of hostilities, and argued that the root causes of the insurrection lay in the oppressive nature of French rule in Algeria. *Alger républicain* declared “the necessity of seeking and finding, QUICKLY, democratic solutions to the Algerian problem.” The Fédération des Comités de defense des Sinistrés (Federation of Committees for the Defense of the Victims) declared that “the deep causes of these events [the
FLN insurrection] reside in the accumulation of the methods of exploitation and oppression, in all domains, of misery and arbitrariness, by a colonial regime which is largely condemned by all humanity.”¹⁵⁷ Al ger républicain also pointed out the contradiction between the French state’s inability to supply twenty-five thousand tents in the aftermath of the earthquake and its ability to use aircraft to deploy paratroopers across Algeria in response to the FLN.¹⁵⁸ The Chélif earthquake was once again portrayed as revelatory of the follies and hypocrisy of the colonial regime.

Meanwhile, supporters of French colonialism depicted Orléansville and the French response to the earthquake as a model for Algeria. In September 1955, an article in the Journal d’Alger asked, “Do we owe to the [seismic] cataclysm the total absence of political troubles in the region of Orléansville?”¹⁵⁹ Subprefect Debia began his book-length history and memoir of Orléansville, published that year, with a foreword titled “Warning.” In the months between his completion of the manuscript’s chapters and the publication of the book, Debia acknowledged that “the situation” in Algeria had become more perilous. But Debia remained hopeful, as his book’s title indicated: Orléansville: Naissance et destruction d’une ville: Sa résurrection (Birth and Destruction of a City: Its Resurrection).¹⁶⁰ Debia portrayed the region as a harbor of political tranquility amidst an Algeria in crisis, and he attributed this to the leveling effect of the earthquake. His memoir is notably silent about the discord of October 1954, when, as the rains intensified, people slept in the open and marched in the streets. Debia elided the entire period of the survivors’ protests and their repression in three words: “the months passed.”¹⁶¹ Ignoring these events, Debia focused on the urban housing of Europeans and Muslims of all social classes, first in an improvised “city of wood” and then in barracks constructed, for temporary housing, beginning in December and largely completed by March. There, Europeans and Muslims experienced together the hardships of life after the earthquake.¹⁶² The result was a new solidarity. The final page of Debia’s book was blank, except for a photograph of a smiling Muslim Algerian boy.

Given the anger and misery expressed in the Chélif Valley in the fall and winter of 1954, Debia’s optimism was Panglossian. In the Chélif the rains continued, as did the survivors’ demonstrations, culminating in a demonstration of as many as five thousand people on November 25.¹⁶³ Their complaints, as conveyed by Algèr républicain and La voix des sinistrés du Chéllif, continued to focus on the difficulty of obtaining the twenty thousand francs allotted to rural families rendered homeless, and above all, the lack of housing. The weather had made
the need for housing urgent, and, weeks after the disaster, neither the administration nor the survivors saw tents as an adequate solution. On October 11, the administration had promised temporary housing in barracks constructed of prefabricated materials. However, the volume of material ordered was grossly insufficient, having been intended only for the residents of towns and cities. Meanwhile, there was no sign of progress on plans for permanent reconstruction of Orléansville.164

Nevertheless, the pace of disaster relief did improve in November 1954. This was partly in response to the political agitation in the Chélif, and to negative press coverage about the disaster response in Algeria and metropolitan France. In part it was simply because initiatives begun in late September and October were finally bearing fruit. In October, a meeting of the Algerian Assembly had established a legal basis for funding reconstruction; meanwhile, the mess of heterogeneous tents and poles and canvas piling up in the Orléansville train station was sorted out. By late November, according to official figures, over 6,000 tents had been distributed, including 500 from the Italian Red Cross, 1,474 from the SNPC, and 1,030 from the army. Thirty thousand blankets were handed out: the Red Cross had provided twenty thousand and Sécours Catholique, ten thousand.165 (No mention was made in official counts of the efforts made by the CGT, UDMA, or MTLD.) From Kessler’s point of view, the distribution of tents “represented the vastest French housing effort ever achieved in a time of peace.”166 Meanwhile, “Operation Gourbi” was declared, to speed the distribution of funds and supplies to permit rural families to rebuild their homes. Debia claimed that the reconstruction of thirty-eight thousand gourbis was completed by winter (Interior Minister Mitterrand claimed that it was thirty-five thousand), enabled by the aid payments of twenty thousand francs each.167 Official claims of successes in the distribution of tents and aid for the construction of gourbis are corroborated by a shift in the nature of the critiques leveled by the colonial regime’s critics, including not only the CGT and Alger républican but also the metropolitan Comité Chrétien d’entente France-Islam, who now increasingly called for the construction of barracks or more permanent “modern” housing for the rural population.168

The question of housing in the Chélif was not just a matter of overcoming logistical, financial, or bureaucratic obstacles, however. In the context of the FLN rebellion, reconstruction took on new urgency. It is important to note that this urgency predated the 1958 Constantine Plan, which is often portrayed as a turning point in the French response to anti-colonial revolt. A massive program of state investment in Algeria intended to undercut the appeal of the FLN by
fulfilling some of the promises of colonialism, the Constantine Plan aimed to improve standards of living through investment in infrastructure, industry, education, and particularly the construction of decent housing for swelling urban populations. However, this 1958 initiative was part of an ongoing shift in post-war colonial thinking emphasizing social reconfiguration and economic development through Keynesian investment. French intentions for reconstruction in the Chélif Valley prefigured the Constantine Plan as a response to the threat of nationalism.169

Scholars have demonstrated that violent coercion played a central role in this attempt to remake Algeria through an imposed economic transformation.170 For Debia, the earthquake's violent disruption of traditional patterns of Muslims' lives already represented a helpful “forced step toward assimilation, of which we today see the happy effects.”171 Debia argued that these “happy effects” meant that there was hope that France might “remake the moral, social, economic and administrative conquest of the country.”172 Debia argued that the regime’s critics were wrong to focus merely on housing the rural poor without envisioning a wholesale transformation of Algerian life. He saw the inadequacy of the gourbis as a mere symptom of the underdevelopment of rural Algeria; replacing collapsed gourbis with modern housing would not treat the cause of the problem. Roads, he argued, were the key: “It is by road that civilization penetrates and implants itself.”173 Debia’s view that the inaccessibility and isolation of remote villages was a major obstacle to the success of the French project was widely shared; and in the context of the war this problem would eventually be addressed through the mass relocation of rural Algerians into dismal centers of régroupe ment.174 In the Chélif, however, mass relocation had already begun. The population had swelled on the outskirts of Orléansville, as desperate earthquake survivors in rural areas moved closer to the center of aid distribution, many resorting to picking through garbage dumps to survive.175 The Muslim Algerian population of the city grew to over twenty thousand by 1955.176

Reconstruction was slow to manifest, however, and its political purpose was undermined by the inequities of colonial power. In 1955, the Commissariat of Reconstruction rebuilt low-income (HLM) apartment housing in Orléansville destroyed by the earthquake and constructed additional HLM housing, but in some cases European families moved into these buildings. Muslims in the suburbs of Le Ferme and Bocca Sahnoune, including many who had migrated from the countryside after the disaster, continued to live in tents.177

Owners of European-style buildings in cities and towns were better provided for. Not only were they provided with temporary “barrack” housing, but they
had the opportunity to receive substantial compensation for their losses from the state. In October 1954, the Algerian Assembly had authorized assistance from state funds for private property owners (excluding the gourbi dwellers) equal to the value of any property damage valued at more than five thousand francs. This aid included grants of up to one hundred thousand francs per property owner for repairs, and up to the depreciated value of the building for buildings deemed irreparable. Government-backed low-interest loans were offered to cover the remainder of repair or reconstruction costs. This assistance, however, was issued in the form of vouchers, redeemable only when reconstruction was underway, which required obtaining demolition and building permits from the newly created Commissaire de la Reconstruction. The process was slow, and consequently little permanent reconstruction occurred before 1956. When buildings were reconstructed, provisions intended to ensure that renters would be able to return to reconstructed buildings proved ineffective, and many tenants remained displaced.178

As one might expect, the well-to-do and the well-connected fared best of all. As the months passed, critics on the Left pointed out that Bisgambiglia and Saïah Abdelkader received state funds to reconstruct their own villas, reportedly costing ten million and sixteen million francs, respectively, while their business enterprises and those of their family members benefitted from state reconstruction contracts.179 The wealthy also benefitted from the real estate market created by the process of reconstruction. The rich bought the property and the vouchers of owners left destitute by the earthquake, who could not afford to wait for the Commissariat of Reconstruction to approve reconstruction plans and issue payment for their vouchers. This created a profitable market for those with the means to speculate in a real-estate market propped up by government funds. Meanwhile, in 1955, the municipal council blocked the urban planners’ efforts to “construct affordable housing in well-situated locations” such as on the central thoroughfare, the rue d’Isly, and near the train station. In a move paralleling segregationist strategy in the United States, plans for a public swimming pool were thwarted in favor of a privately owned swim club exclusively for Europeans.180

In March 1956, 1.3 of the 1.5 billion francs from the national solidarity fund remained unspent. The CGT’s Committee for the Defense of Disaster Victims (Comité pour la defense des Sinistrés) argued that these funds should go directly to the survivors of the earthquake.181 However, a member of the Saïah family had organized a survivors’ group to act as an alternative voice to the CGT, and this group supported the transfer of money from the solidarity fund to the reconstruction budget.182 The CGT’s approach would have ensured that
equal benefits would go, not only to urban property owners, but to urban renters and the rural population in the gourbis, who constituted the majority of those affected by the disaster. Instead, the funds were transferred to the Algerian Government-General for use by the Commissariat of Reconstruction, in keeping with the regime’s desire to impose centrally directed transformation.183

Plans laid out in October of 1954 that had languished for many months were now put into motion. These included provisions to address the needs of the Muslim poor. Two hundred fifty thousand francs were allocated for “social improvements in the douars.” One hundred nine million francs were allocated for roads, water supply, and sanitation in Orléansville’s Muslim suburbs of La Ferme and Bocca Sahoune. In Ténès, apartment housing was to be constructed for 328 families, along with a school, mosque, and bathhouse (a hammam or “Moorish bath”). Trade schools for construction were to be built in Orléansville and Ténès, at a cost of thirty-two million francs; eighty million was allocated for a cultural center in Orléansville; while only forty million was set aside for a rural vocational training center in El Attaf.184 A small portion of these funds were used to respond to complaints of discrimination against Muslim Algerians. For example, a supplemental distribution for war veterans of ten thousand francs from the solidarity fund, originally only distributed in the city of Orléansville, was extended to veterans in the outlying areas when Muslim veterans outside of the city complained that geography was being used as a proxy for race in granting preferential treatment to European veterans.185 Such measures, however, did little to counteract the rural catastrophe inflicted, first by more than a century of settler colonialism and then by the new violence of the earthquake and the war.

The FLN’s major operations were largely limited to eastern Algeria in the first phase of the war, and therefore no clear conclusion can be reached about the effectiveness of the reconstruction effort as an imperialist countermeasure to nationalist recruitment. Keynesian effects may have made a contribution to the relative calm in Orléansville. Certainly, Keynesian stimulus is a more plausible explanation than Debia’s imagined social leveling and post-disaster assimilation in the tent cities of Orléansville. Alger républicain had criticized the state for earmarking funds for reconstruction and compensation of damages that could have been directed toward the most urgent material needs of the survivors.186 However, after 1954, both the reconstruction of the city and the presence of the army stimulated the local economy, creating jobs and a demand for goods from local businesses.187 Before the earthquake, in an economy long dependent on day laborers, underemployment had been a major problem. Hundreds of the underemployed and unemployed had demonstrated in Orléansville in October 1953,
and the administration in 1954 counted 1,026 unemployed workers. The direct, short-term effect of the earthquake was striking: even critics of the colonial state recognized that, in November 1954, more than two and a half times that number were employed in the task of clearing the debris; seven months later, 800 were still working in this capacity. However, this was not a sufficient remedy in the long term for Algerian economic suffering or political discontent.

In 1956, the war came to the Chélif. The Army of National Liberation (ALN) gained a foothold in the mountains north and south of the valley (the Dahra and the Ouarsenis); the Government-General considered the villages in these areas 20 to 50 percent “contaminated.” Although the French maintained control of Orléansville, the city experienced attacks and assassinations; meanwhile, the ALN expanded their control of the mountains. In 1957, the Chélif Valley itself was the site of significant fighting, not only between the nationalists and the French and their Muslim allies, but between rival nationalist groups. In some areas affected by the earthquake, disaster reconstruction came to a halt. The army began implementing the massive forced “regrouping” of populations, along with whatever portion of their herds and belongings they could manage to bring with them, out of the mountains and into regroupement village centers. By October 1958, in the newly created département of Orléansville, which extended north to the coast at Ténès and south beyond the Ouarsenis, over 100 thousand people had been forcibly displaced; two years later, over 260 thousand were housed in 311 regroupement centers, approximately 40 percent of the region’s Muslim Algerian population. Many thousands more fled to cities to escape this “regrouping.” Although the French organizations Secours Catholique and the Protestant CIMADE (Comité Inter-Mouvements Auprès Des évacués) provided aid in these camps and distributed donations of food and clothing shipped from the United States, press reports of unhygienic living conditions and malnutrition in the camps scandalized the metropolitan public. Across Algeria, the French state’s belated attempts to provide these refugees with food and housing, first in tents and then in barracks, paralleled the belated scramble to provide shelter to earthquake survivors in 1954.

In the Chélif, funds originating in the 1954 fundraising campaign and earmarked for “social improvements in the douars” were now directed toward these “regroupement” centers. As the Commissariat of Reconstruction put it, disaster relief in the countryside was now “tightly associated with the work of pacification.” Disaster response in Algeria, in other words, had become a tool used by the colonial state in its efforts to counter the effects of nationalism. Reconstruction efforts were then augmented, beginning in 1958, by the Constantine Plan.
Valentin Pelosse points out that the total sum paid in salaries to Muslim Algerians by the Commissariat of Reconstruction (750 million old francs between 1955 and 1961) amounted to as much as 40 percent of the annual agricultural payroll for Algerian workers in the Chélif area. In addition to providing employment directly, reconstruction had a broader effect on the economy. The Muslim middle class in Orléansville, including business owners, teachers, professionals, and functionaries, grew to perhaps 10 percent of the Muslim population by 1962. However, the fact that Muslims in Orléansville benefitted from post-earthquake reconstruction and the Constantine Plan does not mean that the position of Muslims improved relative to Europeans or that economic power was redistributed. Europeans, already economically and politically better off, tended to benefit the most from the economic stimulus. The Constantine Plan aimed to counteract this by stipulating that contracts for goods and services engage not only the largest firms but also “diverse small and medium-sized local entrepreneurs.” However, these small businesses, to a greater degree in Orléansville than in some cities, were often owned by Europeans. Moreover, as Pelosse points out, the combined effects of regroupement and public spending on earthquake reconstruction exacerbated the long-standing tendency of the French colonizers to privilege urban areas while carrying out the “devastation” of the rural economy. Construction and reconstruction could do little to address the gross and pervasive inequities of colonialism. Yet it is clear that the response to the earthquake was part and parcel of the French state’s response to the political insurrection.

Conclusion

The inseparability of the natural disaster and the war was captured in the interpretation of events presented by the playwright Henri Kréa and in the memoir of Dr. Aït Ouyahia, who each portrayed the earthquake as a harbinger of a nationalist awakening. In Dr. Aït Ouyahia’s recollections of his own personal experience, the façade of solidarity in Algeria crumbled within days of the first earthquake. Aït Ouyahia recalled press reports describing how, “during those days, the entire world manifested its compassion and generosity.” Yet this talk of universal solidarity did not ring true for him. As a Kabyle-speaking Muslim from a small rural village, Aït Ouyahia had a deep-rooted sympathy for the predicament of the rural Algerians he found suffering in Beni Rached. However, as a French-educated doctor and the son of a French-educated “indigenous schoolteacher,” Aït Ouyahia was part of a tiny elite of Muslim professionals who
had benefitted from French power and from colonial education. Frantz Fanon wrote that, before the war of liberation, “the doctor always appears as a link in the colonialisit network, as a spokesman for the occupying power.” Yet, in his memoirs, Aït Ouyahia dated his passage from the realm of the colonizer to the realm of the colonized not to the outbreak of war but rather to the aftermath of the earthquake.

Soon after the disaster, the young doctor observed as crowds of mostly Muslim Algerians gathered to receive aid, and a commotion occurred outside one of the tents where humanitarian aid was being distributed. Soldiers dragged a young Algerian man away from the tent, and a French officer ordered the crowd to disperse, declaring: “All thieves, these Arabs!” This event is not implausible: Hautberg also described incidents of friction between earthquake survivors and French aid workers leading to the intervention of gendarmes during the distribution of aid. For Aït Ouyahia, the angry words of the French officer were an outrage, and a transformative moment for the newly minted, French-trained obstetric surgeon. According to his account, he confronted the French officer and, in front of the crowd, denounced the man’s racism. Aït Ouyahia remembered the moment as an epiphany:

It was as if this insult was addressed to me alone. I decided then to take on, alone, the burden for all the Arabs, and in their name, to respond, alone, to he who had just injured us. I had to do it, me who spoke French. . . . Forgotten was the Muslim intern, all proud of being called “Monsieur,” just like his European colleagues in the medical service! Forgotten the young indigene who had been told, more than once, that he was not “an ordinary Arab” . . . . To the Devil the privileged Muslim! I was no longer me; I was those, those poor wretches in rags and dirty feet. I felt suddenly strong, all grown up.

At this moment, Aït Ouyahia appears to have experienced a conversion. For this Kabyle-speaking, French-educated doctor, a new ideology of solidarity, that of Arab-Algerian nationalism, had replaced the claims of Franco-Algerian unity and universal brotherhood. Aït Ouyahia would later go on to provide active support to the Algerian revolution against France.

Although Henri Kréa in 1957 and Aït Ouyahia in 1999 portrayed the earthquake as a definitive trigger event in Algerians’ embrace of the FLN cause, this cannot be taken as evidence of a widespread phenomenon. Even regarding his own, personal experience, Aït Ouyahia’s story about the French officer seems to fit uneasily with other chapters in his disjointed memoir that treat his wartime
support for the FLN without any reference to the earthquake as a formative experience. Clearly, however, Aït Ouyahia’s memory of the earthquake itself was strongly tied to his commitment to the nationalist struggle for independence.

The archival record produced in the weeks and months following the earthquake supports the view that disaster and decolonization were linked, as colonizer and colonized interpreted and responded to the seismic disaster in light of the problems of inequity in Algeria and of Algeria’s relation to France. By the time the earthquake struck, Algerian nationalism had already been growing for decades, and North Africa already being rent by nationalist violence from Morocco to Tunisia, but the Chélif disaster revealed and exacerbated the very injustices and miseries of colonialism that fueled the nationalist revolution. The bankruptcy of the social contract implied by French promises of “civilization” and economic development was already apparent in Algeria, but by destroying vast amounts of housing, the seismic shocks of 1954 exposed the poorest Algerians to the winter rains and exponentially increased what it would cost the French state to follow through on its promises—at precisely the moment when anti-colonial opposition was gathering strength. Indisputably, when the earthquake struck, questions of decolonization were far from the minds of some—the child Ali Bouzar waking from his bed in Oued Fodda, or those suffocating workers, crushed in the ruins of a high rise in Orléansville. However, the earthquake and the war of independence are not separable objects of inquiry, at least not when the scope of inquiry includes the Chélif Valley. Every action of the French state and of its agents, critics, and rivals in the Chélif was conditioned by the question of whether Algeria was France, and whether and how it would remain so. In the Chélif, disaster relief became a field of struggle over decolonization, as it would in Fréjus and in Morocco in the coming years.