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Our History

Alain Krivine and Algeria

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Alain Krivine, one of the best-known leaders of the Fourth International, is about to publish his political memoirs, covering 50 years of political activism. He began his political life as a young Communist militant. It was in that capacity that he was sent to the World Youth Conference in Moscow in 1957, where he met with representatives of the Algerian FLN. This meeting was to be the turning point in his political life.

When I returned to France, if I hadn't totally broken with the Party, I was at least scandalized by its attitude. From that point on I took the decision to aid the FLN and to talk about it with those around me, considering that it was absolutely necessary to "do something." But I didn't know how to make contact.

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/algeriademo2-2.jpg>]

French troops confront rioters, Algiers 1960

And it was here that family relations intervened: I had brothers who had been aiding the FLN for a long time. They weren't Stalinists and they had hidden their activities from me since I was a [little] "Stalinist leader." But seeing how unhappy I was to not be able to do anything for Algeria they intervened, telling me that perhaps we could help the Algerians.

So they put me in contact with the group Jeune Résistance (Young Resistance), through which I began my support activities. Within the framework of the Communist Youth (JC) I had begun to carry on a fight for the Algerians, notably demanding that Mme Audin [1] be invited to a meeting of the JC. They answered me: "You're nuts. We're not going to invite her to a meeting."

Just to finish off these stories, which show pretty clearly the mind set of the party, the JC had distributed a tract that invited people, on the occasion of a student congress, to a dance "For peace in Algeria." The words: "We'll dance and we'll..." were added to it. I was a delegate to the National Congress. Still naïve I went up to the tribune to declare that we didn't seem to be aware of the situation, that there were people who were dying there and that I thought it disgusting that we would allow these kinds of festivities on the subject of Algeria. Everyone started to chant: "Virgin, Virgin..."

So I found myself in a network that was led by Trotskyists. My brothers were Trotskyists and of course they hadn't told me this, since as a good Stalinist I hated the Trotskyists. The first question I asked one of them was: "I agree to join into your Jeune Résistance network, but only on condition that there not be any Trots there!" He asked me why I said this and I answered: "Because they're cops, and I know that in this kind of thing there are Trotskyists." He assured me that there weren't any and asked me what I had against Trotsky. "Nothing! All I know is that he was a cop and a fascist!"

So I worked with Jeune Résistance, which above all worked at stopping the trains of draftees. Then I went into the Union des étudiants communistes (UEC), where I was a member of the leadership, while clandestinely being a member of Jeune Résistance. During demonstrations we tried to start up chants for independence and to wave FLN flags, while the rest shouted "Peace in Algeria!" There was also activity within the army; this is what most interested me. So there was the stoppage of trains of soldiers who were leaving. Signals were sabotaged. In this way we stopped dozens of trains, and this made a lot of noise.

During most of the war the Party had as its slogan "Peace in Algeria," and its instructions were not to have relations with the Algerians, which would have been too dangerous for the Party. When the hierarchy found members

supporting the FLN they were expelled. A comrade from Billancourt who aided the FLN, who we called “Benoit,” was immediately chased out of the Party (in fact, he was a clandestine Trotskyist).

The Party was also equally opposed to desertion and insubordination. It explained that a young Communist should go into the army, but following Lenin's schema, in order to introduce revolutionary ideas there. Nevertheless, the PCF didn't organize the draftees at all, and none of the young Communists who went had any instructions. Unfortunately, many of them became racists, since there was no counterweight to the ideological pressures of military life.

So the PCF opposed all initiatives. It was completely against the stopping of trains, the sabotage against “our comrade railroad workers.” The movement had considerably developed, since we were as many as 900 in Jeune Résistance, which is a lot for a clandestine organization (in a way it was the beginning of the extreme Left). Young Communists refused to be insubordinate for fear of going to prison... There were some sons of members of the Central Committee who carried out courageous actions, but it was too late. The leadership of the PC had its few martyrs in order to later say to the Algerians and public opinion “Our Party, too, had its martyrs.”

So in the last two years of the war about 20 young Communist soldiers refused to be sent to Algeria. But when you look at their names it was often the sons of leaders, like the son of Léandre Letocard, or of members of the Central Committee who did refuse to go to Algeria and were sent to prison. But this was at the end. In 1956 Alban Liechti was the first to refuse to go to Algeria, but the Party didn't support him: he was absolutely alone [2].

My two brothers were directly involved in the support networks, in liaison with the Federation de France of the FLN. They handled the transporting of money. From time to time I gave them some help. For the most part I took care of transports in Paris: when cars full of cops closed off certain neighborhoods you had to put people at the intersections to be sure there weren't any checkpoints set up. Our friends sent us signals permitting cars transporting FLN militants to cross Paris without hindrance. I did this many times.

And then we took “initiatives” concerning prisons. Notably, I participated in an attempt to liberate some women. This was at Fresnes. A group of comrades had flown over the prison with a small plane, which was prohibited, and had taken some pictures. By the way, they were sick as dogs in the plane, which had had to perform aerial acrobatics. We kept track of the changing of the guard among the police and the CRS around the prison in order to learn their itinerary, how many they were, and when the guard was changed.

We were right up against the walls. Little hills permitted us to hide. We were a few couples who relieved each other, each couple remaining there four and a half hours.

We transmitted the information to people who had pseudonyms, and whose identity I don't know. They were at “a higher level.” It was pretty well organized. The networks were a good school. Some participated for “humanist” reasons, because they were scandalized by the torture of Algerians. This is both good and normal. But for others these networks were a good political school. They became true internationalists. They acquired a form of political practice, which is always useful.

Afterwards, in political organizations, we realized that a good part of the nucleus of the future extreme Left had its origins in the aid to the Algerian revolution. It was a matter of “practical” internationalism, and not one of discourse. It could concretely be seen how a revolution inspires sympathy, politicizes young people, and makes militants of them. This was truly a school of practical labor.

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/rudidutschkekrivine.jpg>]

Alain Krivine (second right) with Rudi Dutschke (third right) with the JCR contingent, Berlin Vietnam demo,

February 1968

The attitude of the leadership and the Communist students in relation to the war in Algeria was to be one of the reasons for the opposition that was born and exploded among them. Algeria, along with Hungary, are the two elements of the crisis; the betrayal of the Algerian people by the PCF and the support given by the latter during the Soviet invasion of Hungary, which was also considered a betrayal - of the Hungarian people.

The "clandestine" militants in solidarity with Algeria, who were members of the UEC, were to play a very important role in the birth of a "Left Opposition" to Stalinism. This opposition was to be born beginning in 1960-61 and would end with the expulsion of all of them in 1965. The transition was nevertheless to take five years. Before the war in Algeria ended, the [OAS](#) affair was to be a supplementary element in nourishing, feeding and radicalizing a portion of the Young Communists, including in "practical labour."

All of these elements were to contribute to our radicalization, but in contradictory ways. So when it came to the army, in principle I was attached to the Leninist tradition, i.e., that it was necessary to go into the army and fight there by denouncing colonialism. I admired those few soldiers who went over to the other side, lock, stock and barrel. For me, as I was beginning to de-Stalinize myself, the hero was officer cadet Maillot. What he did was like the "mutineers of the Black Sea" with André Marty [\[3\]](#): "We are in solidarity with the revolution on the other side. We join them with our arms, we're joining the other side." The enemy was French colonialism. Maillot and Iveton [\[4\]](#) were truly heroes: the act of solidarity was capital.

Knowing that the PCF was doing nothing, in the army we completely supported insubordination and desertion. This allowed the carrying out of political provocation, a political gesture to shake up the French. It was better than doing nothing. Since those who left for Algeria couldn't be educated, many became racists.

You know what a colonial war is: "our buddies are being killed", the young soldiers are completely caught up in the machine. It was better that they not leave at all. Though Leninists on the army question, we were thus in support of insubordination: it was the most effective way to lead people to obtain consciousness and to participate, in however slight a way, in a small sabotage of the French military apparatus.

Torture, too, was an important element in our choice. There were newspapers that specialized in the distribution of forbidden works (like *La Question* by Henri Alleg). This was the case with *Temoignages et documents*, which denounced all the dirty work of the French in Algeria. I worked a lot for this last publication.

The denunciation of torture played a large role. For example, when the general secretary of the Algiers Prefecture in 1957, Paul Teitgen, said: "Torture is our way of governing," he didn't go much further, but this was already more than mere "humanism." We managed thus to be "forced to respond," as we say today, on the very nature of the combat that the French carried out in Algeria. This had an important political meaning.

After this, the OAS was also an important cause of political turmoil, because there it was a matter of fascism. For a whole period Algeria was very far away for people, so people didn't really give a damn, and anyway it had to do with the "Arabs." The mass of the population began to get interested in Algeria when tens of thousands of their sons had been there and then told about their war when they got back. Besides this, there were thousands who didn't come back, or were wounded; the French population then began to ask questions.

At the beginning of the war, aside from intellectuals, the Left slept. But with the OAS, that is, with fascism, the people of the Left began to wake up, there were anti-fascist reactions. It became a "French phenomenon," with the skinheads, the strong-arm men of the right...people began to be afraid. Then there were the attacks, Delphine Renard... As for me, my flat was firebombed by the fascists.

The third “interesting” experience: at the time when the OAS was carrying out these attacks, we felt that among young people there was something bigger than just the war in Algeria itself that was happening, and the Front universitaire antifasciste (University Anti-fascist Front- FUA) was created. We managed to create a true mass combat organization that brought together thousands of students in Paris and the provinces. The PCF was against us and we, Communists, were at the head of the FUA.

In opposition to the Stalinists, we managed to demonstrate that it was possible to have a unitary, non-sectarian combative reaction, since it was the organization that had decided to chase the fascists from the Latin Quarter. Every day there were hundreds of students who, at the call of the FUA, gathered in the Latin Quarter with flying squads. As soon as there was a distribution of fascist leaflets we went out and broke it up. We know that people like Duprat, [\[5\]](#) who was pro OAS and has since died, were never able to penetrate the Institut de Geographie... Recently there was still an inscription on the walls of that Institute: “Duprat will not enter.” We really cleaned up the Latin Quarter, not in an ultra-Left way, but with the mass of students who'd been mobilized. There were Christians, PSU (United Socialist Party, a left centrist group - ed) members, the unorganized and us, the Communist “opposition.”

The Party leadership called me in, along with some others, to tell us to stop, that we were behaving like “ultra-Leftists.” This was to be a good experience, for we were quickly given a kind of “democratic cushion” to protect us: 150 intellectuals, with Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir at the head of the group, signed a text that was more or less the same as that of the FUA. This was the creation of the FACUIRA [Front d'action et de coordination des universitaires et intellectuels pour un rassemblement antiraciste]. So we now had this anti-OAS structure guided by intellectuals, and the organization of high school and college students, the FUA.

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/KBB.jpg>]

With Daniel Bensaid (left) and Oliver Besancenot in 2002.

This was a very rich experience. We had our own spy service: it was in this way that we acquired credibility. We were able to arrest those who bombed Le Figaro, a kind of operation that the cops never handled. We nabbed them and interrogated them (without beating them) for a whole night in an apartment until they confessed.

We found on them a list of 50 officers and dozens of keys. Afterwards we didn't know what to do with these people. We turned them over to the cops, with the maps of the Figaro that they had. The cops were furious that it was “Leftists” who gave them these bombers. Three of these OAS members were placed in an internment camp.

The next day the Figaro, very much put out, had to talk about this. This was really an event. But the newspaper still said that it was “perhaps” a question of the bombers of the Figaro. The OAS people did about two or three years in an internment camp (there were very few of these camps for fascists, but many for Algerians.)

The OAS alienated a good part of public opinion, especially after the attack aimed at the apartment of André Malraux, which cost little Delphine Renard her eye. This was a turning point in the war in Algeria. People said: “It's a total mess here. If there's a danger of attacks on the streets, well, let's put an end to this...”

And then there was the [Paris demonstration of October 17, 1961](#), when hundreds of Algerians were killed their bodies thrown into the Seine. Public reaction was miserable; what happened had never before been seen. But there was so much racism among the public that everyone contented themselves with finding the repression shameful. Information about it came out little by little.

Today we know what happened, but at the time not much was known; we were constantly lied to. For many people it was only a that “there was an enormous demo of filthy Arabs that the cops attacked.” The public reacted to this benign version of the facts, and racism had free rein here. It wasn't French people who were attacked and, by

definition, the Algerians were frightening. We like the neighborhood Arab grocer, the one who's open all night, but when they're together on the street they're scary. So there was, on the one hand, fear of that mass of Algerians and a little regret because there was talk that there had been a lot of deaths. This explains the paralysis of opinion.

I saw the horrible scene on the Grands Boulevards. I was warned of it, and it was absolutely horrible: it's a memory I'll never forget. What's more, it was raining, which gave it an even more gloomy aspect. There were no cars on the Grands Boulevards, traffic was blocked. It was 11:00 at night and the massacre had already taken place.

The Boulevard was flooded, gloomy, black; no cars, not a sound: total silence. And the mounds of Algerians - and there's no other words for it - every 50 meters before the doorways. You didn't know who was dead. There was blood. They didn't move, they didn't cry out, they didn't say anything. Mounds of Algerians in the darkness, and companies of CRS, clubs in hand, who weren't hitting anyone anymore, who walked back and forth.

The worst was in front of the offices of L'Humanité, on the boulevard Poissonnière, its iron shutter down and in front of it a mass of Algerians, wounded or dead, who were bleeding and were there, in front of the closed shutter: an image like this one is unforgettable.

There's finally today a rehabilitation of the truth, but we had to wait for it almost till the end of the century. All kinds of committees have tried to do something. In many interviews it was asked of Communists if it's true that the curtain of L'Humanité had remained closed before of the demonstrators. They answered that this was the case, but that they couldn't do otherwise, that they had to ensure the security of the newspaper, etc. Always the same arguments, it's terrible.

All of this represents the beginning of the break between the world of labour and the PCF, the beginning of the latter's decline. From a certain point of view, the formation of the "cadres" of 1968 and the "new extreme Left" with the Trotskyists, the Maoists and some of the ecologists - everything that goes beyond the traditional parties, in short, a good part of the militants today in their fifties, were politicized, radicalized, revolutionized and de-Stalinized by their support for the Algerian Revolution.

In 1962 the independence of Algeria was a great joy; we had worked for years to this end. There were no manifestations of joy in France. It was difficult...But it was extraordinary for all the solidarity militants. You could look yourself in the mirror after having contributed if not a stone, at least a grain to that Algerian independence. The combat was victorious and we were absolutely happy.

Afterwards there were debates: what is this going to lead to? Some were more confident than others, more optimistic. But we said to ourselves: "At least this is it. The country is independent, the cause for which people were massacred. Torture has stopped. Whatever the regime, the primary objective has been achieved, the Algerians have their own home."

In conclusion, I'd like to say that you have to try to understand that an entire generation maintains particularly close ties with the Algerian people since that time. If I go to Tunisia, to Morocco or Albania it's not the same as when I go to Algeria. There's something there that remains. This is why we're very demanding if something's not right in Algeria. "They don't deserve this," we think.

*Source: Jacques Charby, Les Porteurs d'Espoir. La Découverte, Paris, 2004; Translated: for marxists.org by Mitch Abidor. Alain Krivine's new book **Ca te passera avec l'Âge** (You'll Grow Out of It) is published at the beginning of October by Flammarion.*

[1] Josette Audin, widow of Maurice Audin, an Algerian Communist professor who was arrested by French paratroopers, tortured and executed in secret.

[2] He was sentenced to two years in prison for insubordination.

[3] André Marty led a mutiny in an attempt to stop the French Navy intervening against the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917. Tried and imprisoned, Marty was eventually released in 1923. Marty immediately joined the Communist Party and eventually became a member of its Central Committee. He was also appointed to the executive of the Comintern and was involved in establishing the International Brigades that took part in the Spanish Civil War. Marty was in the Soviet Union on the outbreak of the Second World War. He later moved to Algiers where he attempted to direct the activities of the Front National and the Francs-Tireurs Partisans, the military wing of the Communist Party. After the D-day landings took place Marty wanted the Communists to take power. However, under instructions from Joseph Stalin in the Soviet Union, Maurice Thorez and other leaders refused to cooperate. In 1952 Marty and Charles Tillon were both expelled from the Communist Party. André Marty died in 1956.

[4] Maillot was an Algerian Communist who was killed while transporting arms stolen from the French army. Iveton, too, was a Communist, guillotined after a failed act of sabotage.

[5] Extreme Right-wing militant, later co-founder of the Front National. He was killed under mysterious circumstances in 1978.