

From Empire to Exile: History and Memory Within the Pied-Noir and Harki Communities

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Author: Claire Eldridge

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Reviewer: Sung-Eun Choi

In 2012 a host of commemorative events took place in France to mark the 50th anniversary of Algeria's independence, an indication for some that decades of imposed silence and reticence on the part of those who experienced the pangs of decolonization were finally drawing to an end. Particularly lively throughout 2012 were media debates about the Algerian War and the plight of the French inhabitants who left in its wake, namely the settlers known as *pieds noirs* and the Muslim soldiers or *harkis* who fought on the French side during the conflict. Had France finally moved into the ultimate 'hyper-memory' phase of the memory syndrome as delineated by Henry Rousso? Is France now cured of its amnesia with regard to its Algerian past? Experts would certainly have us believe so.

In this meticulous and much welcome study, University of Leeds historian Claire Eldridge challenges the prevailing claims about a resurgent memory of Algeria to uncover a much more complex story behind the perceived silence of France's colonial past. Tracing the two entwined trajectories of popular memories that emerged out of the *pied noir* and *harki* communities between 1962 and 2012, Eldridge argues that the apparent surge in the outflow of first-hand narratives from the two communities alongside growing public interest in the Algerian past follows on the heels of a long and active engagement with memory making that took off in earnest after 1999 when France finally recognized the Algerian War. Without belittling their meaningfulness to the members of each community, Eldridge decolonizes *pied noir* and *harki* popular memories by identifying the processes through which activist members of each group tailored particular accounts about their respective pasts in order to maintain the integrity and survival of their communities and their unique identities. As Eldridge explains, memory making was strategic, a 'conscious commemorative strategy based upon the reiteration of key propositions relating to a mythologized past' (p. 128).

Before elaborating further, it is worth noting the key contributions that Eldridge makes to the field of French decolonization and memory studies. As the reviewer herself can attest, any attempt to give a global analysis of the post-empire voices of the *pieds noirs* and *harkis* is bound to face overwhelming methodological challenges: how does one begin to frame the history and memories of 1 million people in the scope of a single monograph and still hope to remain loyal to the diversity of memories among them? Is it possible to give equal place to so many *pieds noirs* and *harkis* considering the vastly different experiences that separate

their fate in France? *From Empire to Exile* tackles these challenges by delineating the boundaries of what we mean by memory and keeping the discussion centered on the key agents of memory making, the associations and their representatives. Effectively drawing on recent theoretical works on social and collective memory, Eldridge begins with the premise that memories are always embodied and situated, so that what is remembered must always be understood in relation to who articulates these memories and for what purpose. As Eldridge would argue, memories are products of a complex social process whereby individuals who have lived through trauma constantly search for meaning by looking to communally configured narratives relevant to their own individual memories.

Here Eldridge frames the 50-year history of memory making around the activism of associations and the goals they were hoping to achieve with particular storylines about a shared past. Since 1962, associations have offered a sense of community and self-importance for each community by affirming the shared trauma of displacement and adjustment to life in France. As noted in the book, associations were important mediators between the community they claimed to represent on the one side and the government from which they sought to gain aid and recognition on the other. Associations could also mobilize votes during elections by cultivating the same kind of patron client relations historically characteristic of politics in French Algeria, making them powerful gainsayers with candidates who would feel compelled to advocate their cause once elected. The book is a rich and thick description of the network of associations and probes the rivalries and tensions between prominent associations, whose leaders vied to speak with authority for their respective communities – the most extreme case ending in the death of one association leader accused of cowing to official claims about the successes of pied noir integration.

Another engaging feature of the book lies with its use of sources. To get at the making of popular memories by associations, Eldridge has compiled a rich repository of print journals and bulletins, interviews, commemorative events, exhibitions, media debates, public letters, television programming, and a list of scholarly studies. Together, these more than make up for any gaps one might suspect from a study conducted largely outside the archives. The particular kind of history explored here benefits from Eldridge's thoughtful and exhaustive reading of sources that have perhaps too long remained secondary to researchers obstinately immersed in budgets, legislative debates, and state policies. As Eldridge indicates, her goal is to uncover that which has remained in the shadows of official commemorations and to read between the nation-state-centric narratives that have dominated memory studies since Pierre Nora.

The book is divided in two parts. Part one covers the era from the exodus in 1962 to 1991, the year France officially recognized the Algerian War of Independence, and part two covers the period between 1991 and 2012. Part one deals with the 'emergence' and 'consolidation' of pied noir and harki memories while part two discusses the outflow of memories as France officially recognized the Algerian War. To begin, in the immediate years following 1962, material needs and reparations were easily a rallying point for pieds noirs who had only just arrived in France. But as the 1970 indemnity laws allowed relief and diminished the need to rely on associations, pied noir activists began to emphasize the need to 'save a culture in peril,' as the main purpose of joining associations, and staged commemorative reminders of a shared past, an effective tool to maintain interest in the associations. While most historians have seen this shift toward a cultural agenda as a depoliticizing turn, Eldridge explains that it was less a change in direction than an alternate route to retaining a pied noir collective identity and avert the risk of slipping into obscurity. For the harkis, the 1960s were marked by the tough struggle to survive the isolation, discrimination, and poverty especially in the camps. Against the backdrop of the harkis' reluctance to speak out, it was the pied noir activists and non-harki Muslim elites who spoke in their name, foregrounding the fate of the harkis as evidence of the state's neglect of all those who left French Algeria. In this way the pieds noirs placed themselves alongside the harkis as victims of decolonization.

The 1970s brought on a period of consolidation with regard to both pied noir and harki identities. Eldridge argues that it was the very absence of official interest in the pieds noirs and harkis at this time that allowed for the proliferation of associations and their activism. But as she notes, the dissemination of popular voices did not mean that each and all had equal measure. Diverse accounts of life in French Algeria were churned

into an increasingly monotone narrative about loss, longing, and *nostalgérie* for an idealized, harmonious colonial past. Such selective remembering gave no place to historical recollections of colonial oppression, fascism, and racism that were endemic to French Algeria. Eldridge's account of these selective memories is not entirely new. What is significant is her contextualized analysis, which explains how a highly idealized story of the Algerian past could gain traction in the 1970s as a response to the government's aloofness regarding reparations and indifference to the everyday plight of the *pieds noirs* and *harkis*.

The 1970s meanwhile marked a momentous decade for the *harkis*, as the children of *harki* veterans reached adulthood inside those camps most notorious for their poor conditions, and emerged as a voice of protest for recognition and rights. Their fervent demands to dismantle the camps finally succeeded in forcing officials to take a more conciliatory and expiatory tone towards the *harkis*, though substantive efforts to integrate the families into French society would be delayed. When the 1980s heralded the age of anti-racist and immigrant activism, however, the younger generation of *harki* families identified a common goal of achieving equality and acceptance alongside these immigrant associations. Those speaking for the *harkis* soon promoted a distinct *harki* identity, however, insisting that unlike other Muslims in France, the *harkis* could only be understood in relation to the suffering endured as a result of their sacrifice during the Algerian War. Here, associations would stake their claim in the very label *harkis* by emphasizing the memory of sacrifice thereby limiting the ways the community could be coopted for causes beyond those they promoted. In time, the hard life and misery in the camps became the salient themes of *harki* memory even though, as Eldridge points out, not all *harki* families shared the same experience.

Part two distinguishes between the 'acceleration' of memory production in the 1990s and the consequent 'memory wars' of the 2000s for both communities. As international events such as the Palestinian Intifada and the first Gulf War increased general awareness of events in the Arab world and the presence of Muslims in France, moderate *piéd noir* voices entered the debate with an anti-racist agenda and sought common ground with other marginalized groups in France. Such voices faced a backlash from the radical wing of associations standing ardently in defense of a positive view of *Algérie française*, revealing the fractious relations between *piéd noir* associations. At this time, public debates also engaged the Vichy past in ways that enabled further discussion about the Algerian War as a dark chapter in the nation's past. Increasingly critical views of France's intervention in Algeria in the media and academia only intensified efforts among *piéd noir* associations to speak positively of French Algerian society, but such efforts failed to increase momentum for associations as was hoped. Rather, competition between moderate and radical voices was intensified while the lack of state support only added to the strains in their efforts to identify a unified community and memory. State support was however amplified for the *harkis* who were now being propped up as true and loyal subjects of France.

'Memory wars' builds on the acceleration of memory production about Algeria, and is very much about the current state of affairs where extended debates about France's Algerian past have inevitably given way to more and more conflicting perspectives and memories. Such sensitive and taboo topics as torture and the violence inflicted on Algerian nationalists during the war further aggravated *piéd noir* associations eager to erect a more redeeming story about their life in Algeria and the trauma they suffered during decolonization. For the *pieds noirs* and also conservative veteran associations, the preferred strategy has been to tie their stories to the plight of the *harkis* to insist upon 'shared experiences of terror at the hands of the FLN, a traumatic exile in 1962, and an ignominious welcome in France followed by years of marginalization and silence...' (p. 243). Here Eldridge deliberates the end result of decades of selective memory making as the failure to confront history. Radical associations remain vocal and intractable, demanding recognition of a biased version of a past while the multitude of popular *piéd noir* voices resonate in ways that belie claims to a unified repatriate identity or memory. All in all, Eldridge has provided us with a fuller understanding of the evolution in the postcolonial terrain of memories and by extension, the terrain of identities constitutive of French society, which emerged in reaction to the Algerian War. *From Empire to Exile* will no doubt remain indispensable reading for those interested in the role played by memory in decolonization.

Links

[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/257473>