

**Histoire iconoclaste de la guerre d'Algérie et de sa mémoire**, by Guy Pervillé, Paris, Editions Vendémiaire, 2018, 661 pp., 26 € (softcover), ISBN 978-2-36358-314-7

This book is a history not only of the Algerian war (1954-1962) but of its memory, associated with official memorials and decrees and deserving of an "iconoclastic" treatment in the author's opinion. It is divided into four parts, 1) a summary history of Algerian-French relations from the sixteenth century until the end of 1962, 2) a historiography of principal events, beginning with the "genocide or failed uprising" of 8 May 1945 and concluding with the ceasefire of March 19, 1962, and its aftermath until the end of the year, 3) an analysis of the different constituencies giving rise to contending memories of the war, and 4) the writer's recollections of his "overly delayed realization that the Algerian war is a subject of memories and not only history" (10).

The "war of memoirs" (8) surfaced in the 1990s in both France and Algeria.<sup>1</sup> In France new generations of former French settlers and Algerian Muslim immigrants sought recognition. In Algeria the military regime, having canceled elections in 1992, sought international legitimacy in the face of an insurrection lasting until 1998. In Part 3 Pervillé categorizes the audiences for their "antagonistic memoirs" as follows: 1) the French metropolitan majority since 1962, which largely favored DeGaulle's ending of French Algeria, 2) the losers, consisting of some veterans associations, repatriated French settlers, and many French Muslims, including *harkis* and other Algerians who had served in French security forces, 3) French anti-colonialist activists, 4) the Algerian Communists, the Christian Left, "so-called liberals," and former FLN-ALN cadres, all of whom supposedly lost their illusions about an "Algerian Algeria,"<sup>2</sup> and 5) official postcolonial Algeria.

As for the French metropolitan majority, the author points out that most citizens just wanted to forget the war and move on. Only in 1999 did the French Parliament even recognize the events of 1954-1962 to be a real war. President Chirac then implied by the decree of September 23, 2003 that it ended on December 5, 1962, a date revised back to March 19, the date of the official cease-fire accord, by President Hollande in 2012 (law of 6 December). Chirac's center Right coalition had tried to please some of the veterans associations that preferred the later date, on the ground that many soldiers and civilians lost their lives after the official cease-fire.

Pervillé considers these dates and many other memorials in France and Algeria to be based on very selective versions of the history of the Algerian war, a short period of recent history about which he has devoted his entire, highly prolific career to studying.<sup>3</sup> In his view it is the duty of the historian to uncover the entire spectrum of remembered experiences and to critique

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<sup>1</sup> Pervillé ascribes the term "guerre des mémoires" to Stora (2007).

<sup>2</sup> One quote of Ait Ahmed deserves mention (523): "With the settlers (*Pieds-Noirs*) and their dynamism, I say the settlers and not the French, Algeria today [2005] would be a great African power. There were inadmissible offenses committed against the settlers, war crimes against innocent civilians to which Algeria should respond just as Turkey should concerning the Armenians," Revue *Ensemble* No. 248, June 2005, available online: <http://cerclealgerianiste2607.fr/Chapitres/CULTURE/ILS%20ONT%20DIT/Algeriens/Hocine%20Ait%20Ahmed.html> and <http://www.nicoletouati.com/2017/02/21/chasser-les-pieds-noirs-a-ete-plus-quun-crime-une-faute/> (accessed on 10 August 2019).

<sup>3</sup> See his extensive website, [guy.perville.free.fr](http://guy.perville.free.fr), which documents many debates with other French historians as well as numerous publications.

official remembrances based on the selections of interested parties. He explicitly contrasts his view of history with that of Benjamin Stora, a historian whom he respects but who in his eyes incarnates the "domination of the ideology of the anti-colonial Left in French higher education [and in whose words] 'history can never be separated from political stakes'" (591). Pervillé argues instead against any political engagement, whether Right or Left, and insists on being above it all, in a center "permitting the largest vision following the laws of perspective" (592). He insists that his history is fair and impartial, helping to substantiate (as well as understand the shortcomings of) memorials for some of the political losers as well as winners of the Algerian war. To his credit, he analyzes the complex of interests underlying various French memorials and also hints (190-193) at the interests in the mid-1990s driving Algerian leaders to call on France to "repent" for all the wrongs inflicted on Algeria during the colonial period.

But historians are always bound to be selective. Pervillé discusses the massacre of Algerians in Paris on 17 October 1961 but misses the explanation presented in 2007 by the head of FLN's Federation of France for ordering a peaceful mass demonstration to break a curfew imposed by a notoriously vicious French police chief (Boudaoud 2007, 183-192). Pervillé also fails in his copious bibliography to mention the work of one of Algeria's leading political sociologists (Djabi 2005) in his discussion of the Algerian Communist Party. And as for the Battle of Algiers in 1957, he omits memoirs of key protagonists and their perception that operations against French civilians were provoked by settler terrorists.<sup>4</sup> In his efforts to be "impartial," he also observes that at no point during the war did the armed insurgents of the Army of National Liberation in Algeria outnumber the roughly 200,000 Muslim Algerians who served as *harkis* or in other French security forces (420). He points to ongoing efforts "on the basis of a critical history of the Algerian revolution" to persuade "Algeria to renounce its demonization [*diabolisation*] of the 'harkis'" (371).

As for his own selection of the facts, Pervillé presents his personal odyssey. After growing up in a small industrial town north of Paris reading mainstream news he was surprised at university in the late sixties to discover that others who shared his revulsion of the war had utterly different understandings of the facts. His first effort to gain a more complete view of its history was to compare notes with Algerian students having backgrounds similar to his French university study (Pervillé 1984). He believed that the liberalization of Algeria in 1989, coupled with the opening of French archives in 1992, would further facilitate the sharing of a common history of the war—only to discover after 1993 that "the war of memoirs was about to disturb relations between historians" (575).

Pervillé has diligently dissected the interests underlying various histories of the war and their associated memorials. An index to the 615 pages of text and footnotes would have helped the reader to digest his rich materials. His bibliography and historiography will nevertheless serve a future generation of scholars interested in the tangled postcolonial relationships between France and Algeria. The "war of memoirs" will probably continue under ever greater social and political pressures in both countries. Concerning Algeria, it seems fair to conclude with one of its

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<sup>4</sup> Notably Zohra Drif 2013, also interviewed in Henry 2012, 380-388. She argues from her perspective on the ground in 1956-1957 that French ultras' indiscriminant terrorism ignited the Battle of Algiers in the summer of 1956. Pervillé only cites her radio broadcast of 2012 accusing colonial France of genocide as an illustration, along with "crime against humanity," of "language abuse" by Algerian officials (507).

rising novelists cited in this book (526-527) that Algeria still needs truth as well as reconciliation.<sup>5</sup>

## References

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<sup>5</sup> Pervillé cites Kamel Daoud: "And if we had had Mandela rather than Ben Bella in 1962? And Truth with Reconciliation rather than Reconciliation without Truth, as with Bouteflika? An Algerian Mandela would have taught us that violence suffered need not be paid back, precisely so as to break the cycle. An Algerian Mandela would have spared us the country as it is today, with its bad convictions, our bad days, and its mushy dictatorships and messes...To decolonize, it is necessary to vanquish not the settler but one's own demon," *Le Quotidien d'Oran*, 7 December 2013.