

**POLITICS OF REMEMBRANCE, COLONIALISM
AND THE ALGERIAN WAR OF INDEPENDENCE
IN FRANCE**



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Since the final wave of decolonisation in the 1950s and 1960s, 'colonialism' and 'imperialism' have been considered part of a European – as well as worldwide – historical heritage.¹ But unlike the two world wars and the Holocaust, they have not yet found their place in the various national or shared European cultures of remembrance. This relates not only to the fact that colonialism ended relatively recently but also to its spatial distance. The 'great events' of colonial history did not take place inside Europe; rather, colonialism left its most significant marks in remote and 'exotic' regions. Despite great efforts to transmit the 'colonial experience' to the metropole via cultural media and its impact on everyday life,² for many Europeans colonialism remained an abstract concept. Its presence in the public space has been dependent on a strong political will, a will which abruptly decreased after decolonisation, when colonialism no longer contributed to national glory. By simply abandoning existing commemorative and propagandistic efforts, it was thus quite easy to deterritorialise colonial history from Europe. A critical remembrance of colonialism was (and still is) even more unlikely, as colonial history after decolonisation was a history of loss and defeat, undermining the generally 'narcissistic' politics of national identity.

Nevertheless, since the 1990s, in countries such as France, Italy and Germany, it is possible to identify a 'rediscovery' of colonial history in academic, public and sometimes even political discourse. Working against the deterritorialisation of the colonial past, researchers are beginning to revisit its residues and reflections within Europe. They rediscover these traces inside European cultures, shaped by cross-cultural influences and

'colonial cultures'; inside urban spaces, replete with manifold abandoned colonial vestiges; and on the level of immigration and migration politics, linked with debates about the non-European 'other' (Aldrich 2005; Andall and Duncan 2005; Blanchard et al. 2005; Hargreaves 2005; Henneberg 2004; Heyden and Zeller 2002).

Even so, most of these debates tend not to consider colonialism as a common European experience and remain encased within a national framework. Moreover, the recent increase in public discourse on colonialism is not a Europe-wide movement. This is demonstrated by the huge gap regarding official and public remembering of colonialism in Great Britain and France, the two main European colonial powers during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. There seems to be no or very little public debate regarding the Empire in Great Britain. French colonialism, however, and especially the history of French Algeria (*Algérie française*), has since the 1990s become the subject of increasingly fervid academic and public debates and has resulted in hurried commemoration activities by state and non-state actors.

Given these differences, the current public remembrance of national colonial pasts in some parts of Europe cannot be explained simply by general mechanisms of 'collective memory', such as a delay of three or four decades that enables a dramatic event to be 'remembered'. For a massive and nearly 'obsessive' wave of remembrance to occur and for colonialism to become a first-rank political issue, as it is in present-day France, these general trends have to coincide with other factors. The evolving treatment of the colonial past in the French public sphere therefore constitutes a prominent case for examining the making of official and public memories of colonialism. This chapter outlines the main stages of this process from the Algerian War of Independence to the present, focusing on the public and political remembrance of French Algeria.

In the first part of the chapter, I argue that the period from Algeria's independence until the 1980s was characterised by an antagonism between the attempt to conceal the colonial past by the French state and the constant pressure to remember that past, which was felt by other historical actors. Focusing on the period since the 1990s, the analysis deals with the subsequent increase in public memories of Algeria and with the first steps of 'officialisation' by the French state. In both periods I argue that, in spite of state efforts to conceal colonialism and, in a later period, to shape the remembrance of it, remembering French Algeria and the colonial past has always been a complicated, embattled and contested process outside the purview of any single actor. Taking the perspective of European politics, the scope of the discussion will not include the important aspect of post-colonial remembrance in Algeria, which has been studied abundantly elsewhere (Branche 2005; Kohser-Spohn and Renken 2006; Manceron and Remaoun 1993; Stora 1991). The conclusion will sum up

the essential lessons from the French case and expose some obstacles to the 'Europeanisation' of these forms of remembrance.

Politics of Concealment and *Lobbies de Mémoire*, 1960s to 1980s

The recent debates and conflicts in France arise from a specific historical context. They are closely related to the political constellations of remembrance that evolved in France after its last war of decolonisation, the Algerian War (1954–62). The decade-long contradiction between official politics of concealment and the historical actors' practices of remembrance has had wide repercussions on current debates.

The Algerian War of Independence constituted a dramatic turning point in twentieth-century French (and Algerian) history. With around two million French soldiers fighting in Algeria between 1954 and 1962, it was the third violent war that France experienced in the twentieth century. Yet its significance went deeper, marking the dramatic agony of the French colonial empire and catalysing a crisis of the political system that led to the fall of the Fourth Republic. It was no accident that the Algerian struggle for independence produced such a deep national crisis. As France's colonial 'masterpiece', French Algeria (1830–1962) had been considered an integral part of French national territory and the homeland of the settler community of *Français d'Algérie*, which by far outnumbered those in other French colonies. Despite worldwide decolonisation trends and the dissolution of the French colonial empire, for a long time a non-French Algeria seemed inconceivable to many French citizens and the French political elite. Thus, the Algerian War, unlike the Indochina War (1945–54), attracted great public attention, producing deep fissures and intense debates about decolonisation, colonial violence and the reassessment of French history and identity (LeSueur 2001; Shepard 2006). Hence, for the French state, the colonial era, which had come to a bloody end as a result of the war, was a sensitive and disagreeable issue that needed to be concealed.

The politics of concealment started immediately after the conclusion of the Evian agreement (18 March 1962), which put an end to the fighting in Algeria. Two main tools were supposed to prevent a remembrance of the conflict: control of the official language and a broad amnesty (Renken 2006; Stora 1991). Since Algeria was considered part of France, events had to be represented as a conflict inside French territory rather than a war. Thus, until the end of the 1990s, expressions such as *événements*, *opérations* and *mesures pour le maintien de l'ordre* were substituted for the term 'war'. Even more than language, the backbone of the state's politics of concealment was unarguably the general amnesty on crimes committed during the war. This began with the first decrees on 22 March 1962 and was consolidated

with further measures during the 1960s. This politics of broad amnesty closed the door on any potential judicial aftermath.

No public 'update' or revision of French colonial history was carried out. In general, street names and memorials, which remained unchanged, were slowly abandoned and neglected. In some cases, attempts were made to cover the tracks of the colonial past. The previous *Ecole coloniale*, in former times a virtual 'temple to French Expansion' (Aldrich 2005: 34), was used as a school for Third World students. The building's facades, bearing the names of French colonial heroes, were sandblasted, busts of colonials and colonialist wall panels were removed, and in the foyer a false ceiling was installed to hide the colonial ceiling paintings from the new occupants.

Today, these decades of official concealment are often referred to as a period of collective 'repression', keeping up a tradition of collective psychoanalysis dating from the 1960s. The Algerian War and the loss of the cherished object empire thereby appear as a historical 'trauma', which produces a collective 'neurosis' or 'syndrome' (see Raybaud 1997; Schalk 1999; Stora 1991). In this view, the painful process of remembrance – and especially the creation of a reconciliatory official memory – corresponds to a type of collective therapy. Yet although it may be of heuristical value, this essentialist Freudian interpretation raises serious problems. In particular, the personification of the French nation as a single 'psyche' seems inappropriate. National remembrance, in contrast, emerges from communication and interactions between different social actors.

Hence, French Algeria and the Algerian War – although not officialised – were continuously commemorated within families and by several groups. During the period of official repression, approximately 2,000 titles about French Algeria and the Algerian War were published (Branche 2005: 18–23). The discrepancy between the official version and the public debate also became obvious in the fact that everyday language never adopted the artificial wording *opérations* to describe the war; instead, the term *guerre d'Algérie* remained in use. Despite the general public interest, it was, first of all, the historical actors of the colonial period and the war who, in quite different ways, kept alive and diffused the memories. The two largest lobbies *de mémoire* were 'repatriated' *Français d'Algérie* (the *rapatriés*) and veterans of the Algerian War.

The end of French Algeria led to a mass exodus of almost one million French and other European citizens from the colony. Despite their mostly successful economic integration in mainland France, many of the repatriates were left with a feeling of discontent and bitterness. This feeling found expression in their self-designation as *pieds-noirs*, marking a specific group identity based on shared experiences of the year 1962 (Leconte 1980).³ The creation of a *piéd-noir* identity was accompanied by specific forms of nostalgic remembrance, cultivated within families and a dense network of associations and *Amicales* that emerged after 1962. Yet looking

at southern French urban landscapes with a high percentage of *pieds-noirs* strongly suggests that, on a local level, memories related to French Algeria quickly entered the public space via street names or objects and ceremonies dating back to the times of *Algérie française*.

The second set of decisive non-state actors on the scene after 1962 were veterans of the Algerian War. Numbering around two million, they challenged the official doctrine of oblivion, which had far-reaching consequences for them. They were denied the status of veterans and thus the corresponding symbolic honours and material benefits. In response, the largest veterans' organisation of the Algerian War, the *Fédération Nationale des Anciens Combattants en Algérie, Maroc et Tunisie* (FNACA), claimed the right to equal treatment with the veterans of the world wars (Renken 2006: 270–325). The FNACA thus entered the politics of remembrance. As early as 1963, it started to lobby for the creation of a commemorative day for soldiers killed in Algeria, choosing 19 March, the date of the ceasefire in 1962. During the following decades, their annual ceremony at the Arc de Triomphe gained public recognition, although it was rejected by rival organisations and repatriates' associations and was not officially recognised by the French state. The FNACA has also been successfully campaigning to name public spaces after 19 March and to erect memorials to the Algerian War. By September 2002, over 3,000 *communes* (and in 2004, also Paris) named a square, a street, a park or a bridge after the date (FNACA 1999; Renken 2006: 317–18).

These two examples of the *pieds-noirs* and the veterans demonstrate that French Algeria and its bloody decolonisation had not been forgotten in post-1962 France. While they were kept out of official memory, they found their way into the public space of many *communes*. Far removed from the state, certain forms of remembrance, front lines and conflicts emerged that have had decisive impacts on current debates.

Processes of Remembrance since the 1990s

Since the 1990s, the issue of the colonial past, and particularly the Algerian War, has found a wider public audience in France. Efforts to create an official memory have produced new monuments, commemorations and restructured museums. Hence, the colonial past and the 'extra-European' legacy of French history have become part of a wider and more in-depth process of redefining France's national identity and history since the 1980s. Furthermore, this process has been affected by growing international conviction about the necessity of coming to terms with negative aspects of the national past.⁴

The politics of concealment have fundamentally affected these recent processes of remembrance. Once the state and the wider public entered the

debate, they encountered a multi-structured, occupied and embattled territory. The non-state purveyors of memory have also increased their activities in recent years, trying to pass on their historical experience and to influence the official culture of remembrance in the process. New actors, such as migrant groups or the *harkis*, the Algerians who had fought for France during the Algerian War, have also entered the historico-political stage.

Given this complexity, the following portrayal can elucidate this debate only by focusing on its most important factors and stages. The first of the next five sections examines the central steps in the state's commemoration and recognition of the Algerian War, followed by two sections focusing on two important public debates, the so-called torture controversy and the debates about colonialism in the context of immigration. The fourth section deals with the law of 23 February 2005, which tried to establish the 'positive role' of colonialism in the school curriculum. The fifth section deals with the most important events and changes that have taken place during Nicolas Sarkozy's presidency, starting in May 2007 to the present.

From Vichy to the Algerian War: The Official Politics of Remembrance during the Chirac Era (1995–2007)

Until the 1990s, the Vichy past and collaboration during the Second World War had preoccupied the French public, research, courts and politics. The steady decrease in these debates enabled a revisionism of French colonial history and the Algerian War (Cohen 2002). In general, the coming to terms with Vichy is often cited as a model for dealing with French colonial history. Thus, demands to apply the central juridical tool against Vichy – the category of 'crimes against humanity' – to French colonialism are a common feature of the debate.

Since the late 1980s, historical research and public interest have increasingly focused on the Algerian War.⁵ A generational change at the helm of French politics further enabled a greater focus on the French Algerian past. After the death of François Mitterrand in 1996, two members of what one may call a *génération algérienne* stepped into the limelight: Jacques Chirac, who had participated in the war, and Lionel Jospin, who had opposed it. In the initial years of Chirac's presidency, starting in 1995, the first cautious attempts were made to incorporate the legacy of the Algerian War into the French culture of commemoration. On 11 November 1996, Chirac unveiled the first Parisian monument to the conflict at the Square de la Butte du Chapeau-Rouge. However, the precise function of this monument – commemorating all 'victims and combatants killed in North Africa, 1952–62' (*Le Monde*, 12 November 1996) – was somewhat vague (see also Cohen 2002; Schalk 1999). The remote location of the memorial also reflects the slow, hesitant and difficult nature of these first steps. Before and during the inau-

gural ceremony, special attention had to be paid to the strict representative balance of all affected groups – veterans, *rapatriés* and *harkis*. Not surprisingly, the monument failed to establish itself as a public site of memory. A few months after its unveiling, it had been partially covered by graffiti and seemed to be neglected. Apparently, as a result of its vague 'oecumenism' (*Le Monde*, 12 November 1996), the monument had not met the expectations that had been placed on it by very different groups of actors.

Nevertheless, one finds in this first step an attempt to remember the Algerian War and the colonial past within the categories of national honour, dignity and duty, a pattern characteristic of the official policy in the following years. A crucial first effort was thus made to recognise on a national level the people who had fought and worked for the French colonial empire – a recognition that had been withheld from them for a long time. This was primarily a political response to the various historical actors, in particular the veterans, and to the increased pressure to be remembered that they had built up in the previous decades. Chirac purposely addressed his speech to the 'troisième génération du feu' and opposed the disuniting dimensions of the war with a unifying act of recognition: 'I do not want to return to either the causes of these often fratricidal confrontations or to the tragedies these battles produced.... That is the reason why we are here, to collect our thoughts, to honour those combatants who gave their lives for France, along with those men and women who died on French soil, soil enriched, for 130 years, by their parents' work.'⁶ Concluding his speech, Chirac acknowledged the 'incontestable achievements' accomplished by French citizens overseas, citing 'pacification', economic development and the spread of instruction, medical knowledge and administrative institutions.

Another crucial step was taken in 1999. On 10 June, the French National Assembly unanimously replaced the term *opérations* with the expression *guerre d'Algérie*.⁷ Thus, almost 40 years after the war, official language was adjusted to the public discourse. From the year 2000 onwards, Chirac's commemoration in accordance with national *grandeur* moved on to the *harkis*. Since 1962, the French state had denied any responsibility towards them. Most were not allowed to flee to France, exposing them to bloody acts of vengeance and massacres after the ceasefire. Those who had managed to relocate to France were housed for decades in camps under miserable conditions. A revolt of *harki* children in 1991 and actions such as hunger strikes drew and augmented public attention to their situation.

In 2001, Chirac intervened in these debates by organising a Journée Nationale d'Hommage aux Harkis on 25 September (Branche 2005: 37–8, 54). On this occasion the eternal flame was ignited at the Arc de Triomphe, a commemorative plaque was unveiled at the Hôtel des Invalides and 150 Muslim veterans were decorated by Chirac. Furthermore, a presidential message was read in all French *départements*, acknowledging the

honourable effort of the *harkis*. Chirac's address at the Hôtel des Invalides was couched in careful words of recognition and sympathy for the *harkis'* destiny. However, Chirac did not offer any apology for the French state's responsibility in failing to prevent the massacres following the ceasefire, a step required by many *harki* associations.

On 5 December 2002, the French president unveiled a Mémorial National de la Guerre d'Algérie et des Combats du Maroc et de la Tunisie, 1952–1962 (Aldrich 2005: 150–5; Schalk 2002). The monument was built at the Quai Branly, located prominently next to the Eiffel Tower and the newly opened Musée des Arts Premiers, a much more accessible and central location than the 1996 memorial. The monument's deliberate simplicity contrasted with its solemn inauguration on 5 December. In his speech, Chirac emphasised that the soldiers of the Algerian War were firmly established 'in the glorious line of France's sons distinguishing themselves on all continents and serving our country during the most tragic moments of its history'. Chirac largely avoided the term 'war' and talked about Algerian 'separation' instead of 'independence'. The 'French overseas achievements' were also mentioned.

In 2003, the government declared 5 December, the day of the memorial's unveiling, the annual Journée Nationale d'Homage aux Morts des Combattants d'Afrique du Nord. The government thus tried once again to end the still smouldering conflict over the date on which to commemorate the Algerian War (Branche 2005: 106–8). In January 2002, the socialist government under Jospin had sought to declare 19 March the national day of commemoration. After heated debates, the law was passed with a small majority on 22 January; however, the government had previously declared that it would act only if a large majority supported the law. In 2003, the FNACA immediately rejected the date of 5 December, arguing that it had no relation to the historical events it was supposed to commemorate. Hence, the search for a fitting day of commemoration continues, revealing the limitations of any attempt to find a consensus on official memory.

The final step in the politics of national recognition during the Chirac era came about as a consequence of Rachid Bouchareb's 2006 film *Indigènes* and the response it produced among the French public. The film deals with the history of French colonial troops during the Second World War. It both celebrates the 'indigenous' veterans' 'patriotic' contribution to the liberation of France and deplores the overt discrimination they experienced in comparison to their French counterparts. On 27 September 2006, the day the film was released, Chirac announced a law, aligning 'indigenous' pensions with those of 'normal' French veterans (*Le Monde*, 26 and 27 September 2006). However, these raises referred only to basic retirement and disability pensions and did not concern the more significant military retirement pension for those serving at least 15 years.

The Torture Controversy, 2000–2002

On 20 June 2000, *Le Monde* published an article on its front page, which, in the words of a French journalist, provoked a virtual 'earthquake' (*Le Monde des Livres*, 15 June 2001). In the article, the journalist Florence Beaugé described the suffering of Louissette Ighilariz, who had been tortured for three months by French soldiers during the Algerian War.

By this point, the issue of torture during the war had been a generally known fact.⁸ The article about Ighilariz nevertheless ignited an unprecedented debate in the French public sphere.⁹ The daily newspaper *L'Humanité* published 47 articles concerning torture in the course of less than seven months (June–December 2000). On the one hand, the intensification of the debate, in comparison with earlier discussions, pointed to a greater willingness on the part of the French public to deal with an issue as sensitive as torture and with the suffering of its victims. At the same time, several new factors became involved in 2000, adding to the intensity of the debate. Ighilariz's attitude, for example, was quite unusual. Her remarks implied less of a desire for vengeance and focused more on her gratitude towards her saviour, a French military doctor (*Le Monde*, 20 June 2000). Moreover, Ighilariz named and accused high-ranking officers of having attended the torture sessions. The reactions of those officers, who had previously unanimously denied or justified any wrongdoing, now became more diverse. Upon the enquiry of *Le Monde*, one of the accused, General Massu, acknowledged the use of torture and even questioned the necessity of interrogations under torture (*Le Monde*, 22 June 2000). Numerous interviews with high-ranking officers and soldiers followed. In November 2000, the remarks of the hitherto relatively unknown General Aussaresses shocked the public. In an interview with *Le Monde*, he confirmed torture practices and admitted, without emotion or regret, to summary executions. Aussaresses emphasised that 'there was no need to repent' and that he would do it again, if necessary (*Le Monde*, 23 November 2000).

The French government and the head of state witnessed the growing debate as neutral spectators. On 31 October 2000, 12 prominent anti-war activists went public with a manifesto in *L'Humanité*, asking for official recognition and condemnation of the torture practices. Shortly afterwards, the Parti Communiste called for a parliamentary commission of enquiry into torture (*Le Monde*, 24 November 2000). A poll from March 2002 revealed that 50 per cent of the public approved an official condemnation of the use of torture (*L'Humanité*, 19 March 2002). Prime Minister Jospin and President Chirac reacted evasively and cautiously to the public pressure and media enquiries. Chirac's commemorative acts during these years showed that he was not willing to integrate the issue of torture into the official remembrance of the war. He even asserted that he would 'never do anything damaging the image of French soldiers who fought

in the Algerian War or besmirch their honour' (quoted in Aldrich 2005: 145). Jospin endorsed the *Appel des Douze* in principle, but he understood that the reassessment of the Algerian War should fall within the purview of historians rather than political actors (*Le Monde*, 28 and 29 November 2000). It was only when Aussaresses presented his version of events – in all their brutal detail – in his book *Services Spéciaux* in May 2001 that politicians were forced to take a clear moral stand and condemn Aussaresses' cynicism (*Le Monde*, 5 and 6–7 May 2001). Aussaresses was fully retired and stripped of his Cross of the Legion of Honour. However, throughout the debate, the French government and president avoided assuming any official responsibility for 'individual' acts of torture.

In the meantime, the debate had already reached large parts of the French public. Leading military officials aggressively questioned the credibility of Massu and Aussaresses. At the same time, many of the participants in the war felt the need to speak out. Editors of leading newspapers and historians were swamped by a flood of individual confessions and testimonies admitting to (or denying) acts of torture and violence. Newspapers such as *Libération* and *Nouvel Observateur* now jumped on the bandwagon.

Yet by mid-2002, the torture debate had receded and almost disappeared from newspapers and television screens. The two-year-long public focus on violence and the suffering of its (mainly Algerian) victims has failed to elicit any official commemoration or recognition from the state. Significantly, the most important public act remembering torture since then was made by the Paris city council – and it referred to a prominent French victim. On 26 May 2004, a square in Paris's fifth *arrondissement* was named after Maurice Audin, an anti-colonialist mathematician at the University of Algiers who was tortured and killed by the French army on 21 June 1957 (Aldrich 2005: 20). The torture controversy has nevertheless left behind lasting effects. Its pressure led to 'a quiet revolution ... in archival access and research' (MacMaster 2002: 455) and to greater public awareness of torture as a commonplace during the Algerian War. Furthermore, it awoke passions and intensified certain divisions that influenced subsequent processes of remembrance. The law of 23 February 2005, discussed below, and increased initiatives aimed at the construction of pro-French Algeria monuments (e.g. in Toulon, Nice and Perpignan) can be seen as a backlash against a primarily negative discourse about the French opposition to Algerian independence (Liauzu 2005).

To date, the torture controversy is the most intense encounter of the French public with its colonial past. The most prominent feature of this debate is its focus on a particularly bloody aspect, a pattern of remembrance that is present in other metropolises. Similar instances of public debate include, in Germany, the wars against the Herero and Nama peoples of south-west Africa of 1904 and, in Italy, the use of poison gas during the Second Italo-Ethiopian War of 1935–6. Whether the torture debate represented a

hidden discussion about the whole of French colonialism – and whether it will revise the picture of the colonial 'civilising mission' in general – remains to be seen. Some views voiced during the debate did purposely make a connection between torture in Algeria and the colonial context as a whole (Cohen 2003: 235–7). Yet both official and public memory tends to dissociate the Algerian War and torture as *le mal absolu* from the history of colonialism in general (Manceron 2003: 286; Stora 2005). In a 1990 poll, at a time when a majority of the French people believed that torture had taken place during the Algerian War, three out of five respondents stated that the French presence in Algeria was a 'pretty good' or a 'very good' thing and thus exhibited a clean colonial conscience (Rioux 1993: 16–17).

Racism and 'Repressed' Colonialism

The contemporary debates about migration, integration, racism and ethnic segregation in French cities have created fertile ground for yet another remembrance of colonialism. Immigration presents a potential site of colonial memory in France in so far as the majority of the immigrants originate from former colonies in the Maghreb, sub-Saharan Africa and Asia. Furthermore, racism in France is very strongly influenced by an anti-Algerian sentiment (MacMaster 1997; Renken 2006: 389–408).

Since the 1990s, younger immigrant societies and anti-racism organisations have entered the historico-political stage against this backdrop. In novels and plays, public events and music, one finds an increasing focus on the colonial problematic (Derderian 2002; J. Gross 2005; Ireland 2005; Oscherwitz 2005). An often-mentioned theory in this context concerns the connection between the repression of the colonial experience, which has not yet 'found closure', and the racism towards immigrants in present-day France.¹⁰ According to this theory, the official silence, which perpetuated the existence of colonial racism and the desire for revenge after the loss of Algeria, is now projected on those migrants living in France: 'Collective amnesia and the *non-dit* covering this painful period foster anti-Maghreb racism.'¹¹ Thus, an Internet manifesto, published in January 2005, proclaimed: 'Nous sommes les indigènes de la République' (*Le Monde*, 22 February 2005; *Le Monde*, 17 March 2005). Written against the background of the public controversy surrounding the 2004 law banning conspicuous religious signs from public schools (mainly targeting Muslim headscarves), the manifesto referred to these political issues in historical terms. The deliberate use of the colonial term *indigènes* equates the treatment of the immigrants in France with the colonial situation. Following its manifesto, the Mouvement des Indigènes de la République has continued to link its political activities with historical references by commemorating, for example the anniversary of the massacres by French troops in Sétif and

Guelma (Algeria) on 8 May 1945 (*Le Monde*, 10 May 2005).¹² The discourse surrounding the French 'post-colonial situation' also shaped the public perception of riots by youths of foreign origin that broke out in French suburbs in October–November 2005 and that have regularly resurfaced since then (Bertrand 2006: 123–46).

The official processes of remembrance are most clearly affected by the successful struggles concerning the memory of 17 October 1961, the day on which the Parisian police bloodily repressed a demonstration of about 25,000 Algerians, organised by the FLN (National Liberation Front), against a curfew. More than 11,000 people were arrested and between 50 and 200 dead bodies were thrown into the Seine. While the authorities kept silent about the event, since the 1980s, and even more so since the 1990s, it has become an occasion of systematic remembrance (House 2001; House and MacMaster 2006: 265–334). In 1990, an organisation titled *Au Nom de la Mémoire* was established. Together with other associations, it holds annual commemorations on 17 October and fights for access to the relevant archives. A great deal of media attention surrounded a symbolic march held along the path of the demonstration on the thirtieth anniversary of the event. As a first official act of remembrance, the socialist mayor of Paris put up a commemorative plaque at the Quai du Marché for the victims of the massacre on 17 October 2001 – the fortieth anniversary of the demonstration.

The current conflicts and debates concerning racism and xenophobia have thereby perpetuated and further complicated the processes of remembering the colonial past. However, they might also cause certain confusions and reductions. Thus, with regard to the commemoration of 17 October, the conflict appears less as a demonstration within the framework of the Algerian struggle for independence and more as an example of a deeply rooted tradition of racism in France (Branche 2005: 43–9). Even if one can find certain personal and ideological continuities from *Algérie française* and the colonial empire to the New Right in France, the xenophobia in the metropole is hardly a result of the 'repatriation' of racism after decolonisation. France has experienced waves of xenophobia since the late nineteenth century, and one can trace anti-Maghreb racism back to the 1920s (MacMaster 1997). These simplifications put aside, it is clear that the issues of immigration and racism in France cannot be entirely detached from the colonial past.

The 'Positive Role' of Colonialism

The arguments around the *loi portant reconnaissance de la Nation et contribution nationale en faveur des Français rapatriés* (Law on Recognition by the Nation and National Contribution in Favour of the French Repatriates) of

23 February 2005 show how hotly contested, chaotic and often contradictory the state's attempts to establish an official memory really are. Initially in 2003, the official *Année de l'Algérie*, France offered Algeria a series of conciliatory gestures. The highlight was Chirac's visit to Algeria on 2–4 March, which included some 'risky' symbolic acts; for instance, Chirac returned the ceremonial seal of the Dey of Algiers, which the French Army had taken to Paris after the conquest. The most crucial moment was Chirac's public handshake with two historic leaders of the FLN, Yacef Saadi and Zobra Drif (Renken 2006: 146–52).

The trip came only shortly after the torture debates had subsided, and pictures of such events caused a political backlash in France. As a reaction to Chirac's journey, the interfactional parliamentary *Groupe d'Etudes sur les Rapatriés* managed to gain the support of several younger deputies for a new law.¹³ The latter would focus on the question of material reparations for the *rapatriés* and the *harkis*. Yet the *exposé des motifs* to the law clearly showed that the law was also intended to influence current processes of remembrance in favour of the repatriates and their 'civilising mission': 'Recognising the positive achievements of our compatriots on these territories is an obligation for the French state.'¹⁴

When the law was first read in the National Assembly on 11 June 2004, the historico-political dimension was expanded through modifications that would later lead to public scandal.¹⁵ During the debate, amendments of a firmly politico-educational nature were introduced. The representative Christian Vanneste, of the Union for a Popular Movement (UMP), introduced the decisive amendment, stating that school programmes should 'introduce all young French to the positive role France played overseas'. Without any resistance from the socialist and communist opposition, the amendments were accepted and became Article 4 of the law: 'The university research programmes accord the history of French overseas presence, in particular in North Africa, the place it deserves. The school programmes particularly recognise the positive role of the French overseas presence, especially in North Africa, and accord French Army combatants originating from these territories the prominent place to which they have the right to claim.'¹⁶ Neither in the Senate nor in a second reading in the National Assembly did the wording of a 'positive role' and the demand for political influence on historical research encounter any opposition.

Only when Chirac signed the law on 23 February 2005 did an intensive public debate take place about Article 4 of the law. In a petition in *Le Monde* on 25 March, Claude Liauzu and five other prominent historians demanded the removal of the article and the refusal of an apologetic *histoire officielle* (*Le Monde*, 25 March 2005). Other daily newspapers quickly addressed the issue (*Libération*, 26 March 2005). Anti-racism activists linked the discussions about the law to the November 2005 riots. The scientific community demonstratively organised a colloquium in Lyon from 20 to

22 June 2006, attracting an impressive number of participants (Abécassis and Meynier 2008).

Public pressure eventually stimulated political change and conflict. A motion for removing Article 4 was rejected by the UMP faction in Parliament. The issue even became part of the inner UMP power struggle, between Minister of the Interior Nicolas Sarkozy and Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin, to succeed Chirac. While the former claimed in an interview with *France 3* that one had to stop 'the permanent repentance' (7 December 2005), the latter was to declare a day later on *France Inter* that it was 'not up to the Parliament to write history'. On 4 January 2006, Chirac demanded a reconsideration (*Le Monde*, 6 January 2006). Since this could not be done by parliamentary means, it took a request before the Conseil Constitutionnel on 25 January 2006 to find a way out of the blockade. The Conseil Constitutionnel declared that the expression *rôle positif* had only a *caractère réglementaire* and could thus be eliminated by governmental decree.¹⁷

The conflicts surrounding the law of 23 February 2005 demonstrate that different antagonistic forces continue to influence the construction of an official memory of colonialism in France. Only an intervention 'from above' brought an end to the struggle over Article 4. Such conflicts also indicate that the strategy of remembrance within the category of national honour can be used by various actors with various intentions. The debate around the law, moreover, has given rise to further broad discussions within the public and the academic sphere about the role of the colonial past in French school programmes, the relationship between history and legislation, and the difference between 'repentance' and official recognition of responsibility (e.g. Jahan and Ruscio 2007; Lefevre 2006).

The Post-Chirac Era

Many other areas of French public life, such as museums, with their representations of historical events, have been affected by the current encounter with the colonial legacy (Aldrich 2005; Stora 2007). Given its connections with problems of present-day France, this complex and chaotic encounter will continue over the next years. It was during the Chirac era that the French state started to deal actively with its colonial heritage, but many conflicts surrounding the colonial legacy have remained unsettled. Thus, Chirac chose not to yield to the various demands for an official recognition of the French state's responsibility for acts of violence perpetrated during colonial rule (such as torture or the 8 May 1945 massacres) and during the massacres of the *harkis*. Moreover, several official measures did not settle the existing conflicts, but instead gave rise to new struggles. This has, for example, been the case with the partial alignment of military pensions

and Article 3 of the law of 23 February 2005, which provides for an official memorial foundation for the Algerian War. Moreover, the situation of immigrants in France and the social unrest in French *banlieues*, another important factor in the remembrance of colonialism, continue to occupy the French public and the state, reinforced by the focus of the current president, Sarkozy, on the topic of 'national identity' in this age of immigration.

President Sarkozy therefore continues to address the colonial legacy. While he still commemorates the Algerian War within the categories of national honour, he has adopted a line which is different from that of his predecessor. During his presidential campaign, Sarkozy took a stand against what he saw as an overly self-critical approach to French national history, equating demands for official recognition with 'repentance' and 'expiation' (e.g. *Le Monde*, 21 April 2007). During his first trip to Algiers on 10 July 2007, Sarkozy rejected Chirac's project of a Franco-Algerian friendship treaty and clearly refused to make any official 'apology' for Algerian suffering during colonialism (*Le Monde*, 12 July 2007). Only some weeks later, a speech Sarkozy made in Dakar on 26 July 2007, on his first official trip to sub-Saharan Africa, led to public scandal in France and several African countries.¹⁸ The speech did not omit the colonial legacy and its violent aspects. Yet Sarkozy made it clear that 'nobody could ask today's generations to expiate this crime', and he refused to consider the significance of the colonial legacy in Africa today. The most conspicuous feature of the Dakar speech was that it largely drew upon nineteenth-century colonial stereotypes of the ahistorical state and the 'mysterious' nature of the African continent and its inhabitants.

While the Dakar speech perfectly fits into Sarkozy's 'anti-repentance' discourse, the fear of a general revisionist and pro-colonialist backlash in the treatment of the colonial past seems to be exaggerated. Even if Sarkozy more aggressively rejects a self-critical discourse on national history than his predecessor, who tended simply to ignore it, he will hardly be able to turn back the current state of the debates. Even the purveyors of nostalgic memories increasingly feel the effects of the rising public awareness and, paradoxically, their own fight for national recognition. Whereas dozens of monuments erected in commemoration of French Algeria were given relatively little attention during the first four decades after Algerian independence, new pro-French Algeria projects such as the Mur des disparus (inaugurated on 25 November 2007) and the subsequent *pieds-noirs* museum in Perpignan have met nationwide, sometimes even international, protests, not least from critical *pieds-noirs* and *harki* organisations.¹⁹ Also, in view of Sarkozy's first long trip to Algeria on 3–5 December 2007, a group of French and Algerian historians initiated a petition, 'France-Algérie: Dépasser le contentieux historique', which called upon the French state to publicly recognize its responsibility for the 'traumatisation' experienced by the Algerian society under colonialism.²⁰ In a speech at Mentouri

University in Constantine on 5 December 2007, Sarkozy tried to downplay the importance of the colonial legacy in favour of a common future within his vision of a 'Mediterranean Union' (*Le Monde*, 4–6 December 2007). However, he clearly condemned the violence and injustice of the colonial system. In doing so, he nevertheless avoided any 'excuse' or official recognition, pointed to the 'sincerity' of many colonisers and vaguely mixed Algerian and French suffering.

In its uneasiness and ambiguity, the speech shows how contradictory and embattled the French public remembrance of colonialism continues to be. Similar to Chirac, Sarkozy has to manage different conflicting visions of how to deal with the colonial past. While in late 2007 the government confirmed the creation of the controversial and supposedly biased memorial foundation of the Algerian War, the French ambassador in Algeria, Bernard Bajolet, on 27 April 2008, publicly recognised the 'huge amount of responsibility' of the French authorities for the massacres of 8 May 1945 (*Le Monde*, 5 October 2007, 28–29 April 2008). French Algeria and particularly the Algerian War remain crucial to these ongoing processes of recognition and national discourse. Whether the memory of Algeria serves as a driving force for the remembrance of colonialism as a whole is, however, unclear.

Conclusions

The colonial past is among the neglected or even 'forgotten' aspects of Europe's history. In some countries, however, and especially in France, an atmosphere has emerged since the 1990s in which the issue of colonialism – and of French Algeria in particular – is intensely discussed and remembered. Yet this 'boom' in remembrance followed a period of official silence. As in many other European countries since the 1960s, the colonial past had been excluded from official memory. However, in the aftermath of the Algerian War, the official process of forgetting came to contrast dramatically with the emergence of informal and popular memory. Several non-state actors – especially the repatriates and the veterans – created an enormous pressure to remember. The remembrance of Algeria and the Algerian War had thus already begun to enter the local public space despite being kept out of national memory and the Parisian cityscape.

Beginning in the mid-1990s, the state's first attempts to create an official memory seem, after the long period of inactivity, cautious and disorganised. They are obviously meant to meet, negotiate and balance the demand of the various *lobbies de mémoire* by recognising those who made their contribution to French Algeria and the Algerian War. Despite clear, conciliatory gestures to independent Algeria, the violent aspects of colonialism and the numerous Algerian victims are still largely excluded from this official remembrance. In contrast, beginning in June 2000, fervid public debates about

torture during the Algerian War focused on one of the darkest chapters of French colonial history. The law of 23 February 2005 exemplifies the political backlash that occurred due to a primarily negative public discourse on colonialism. Finally, a younger generation of immigrants and anti-racism organisations have appeared as new actors on the historico-political scene, making a connection between 'repressed' colonialism and racism today.

All these events make clear that the current boom in the remembrance of colonialism in France is not simply an automatic mechanism in collective memory, starting after a delay of a few decades. More likely, the process is driven by heated conflicts, struggles and negotiations about the past, and by various factors that are not at work in other countries, for instance, Great Britain. France's two colonial wars rendered its process of decolonisation particularly bloody and dramatic. In contrast, the dissolution of the British Empire is often referred to as a rather smooth process. The Algerian War made the fall of France's colonial empire an agonising mass experience, producing the crucial pressure group of around two million *anciens combattants*. Issues of commemoration were thus closely related to issues concerning financial compensation by the state. Furthermore, the number of repatriates returning to Britain was considerably smaller and more prosperous than the dispossessed mass of *Français d'Algérie* who returned to France. In addition, the integration of immigrants from former colonies has been more explosive in France than in the UK.²¹ These factors may explain the waves and conflicts of remembrance in France, but they should not be misunderstood as a type of *Sonderweg*. Their absence does not necessarily imply the lack of any remembrance of colonialism. Germany and Italy have recently engaged in public debates on the colonial past with some similarities to the French, despite the fact that in these cases there was no bloody war of decolonisation, no great number of repatriates and no considerable immigration from former colonies.

Presently, a cross-national memory of Europe's colonial past would appear to be unattainable, and not only because of the differences mentioned above. Remembering the Algerian War is of a high national importance for several actors in France, and heated controversy is often the result. Thus, the war almost appears in the current debates as a domestic French (and not a colonial) issue. Even the related but more general issue of French colonialism as a whole tends to fade into the background by comparison. The national and international challenges which affect the remembrance of colonialism are partly grounded in the subject itself. Despite its huge importance in European history, imperial expansion cannot be considered as a specifically European fact. In addition, European expansion itself is a multi-dimensional phenomenon: the colonial empire of a single nation could include various forms of colonial possession. There is a reason French Algeria still evokes constant waves of remembrance in France, while French Indochina is located more at the 'outskirts' of French memory.

In principle, the international trend during the last several decades to come to terms actively with negative aspects of national histories might be favourable for a common European and international remembrance of colonialism. Nevertheless, a common remembrance would have to start with the quest for a common denominator. The increasingly critical survey into deeply rooted colonial patterns of thinking, the concept of a European 'civilising mission' or the condemnation of slavery might serve as points of departure. The challenge for a lasting remembrance of colonialism is to include all parties involved – not only Europe, but former colonies as well (Thénault 2005a).

Notes

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1. If not otherwise mentioned, the words 'colonialism' and 'imperialism' used in this chapter refer to the last period of European expansion in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The Algerian War of Independence (1954–62) will be referred to as the 'Algerian War'.
2. For colonial propaganda and colonial (popular) cultures, see, for instance, August (1985), Bancel et al. (1993), Chafer and Sackur (2002) and MacKenzie (1986).
3. See Baussant (2002: 396–411) for different theories about the origin of the term *pieds-noirs*.
4. The increasing number of truth and reconciliation commissions and of international trials worldwide is the most important indicator of this process.
5. For the changes in this historiography, see Branche (2005: 255–314).
6. All quotations from Chirac's and Sarkozy's speeches are taken from the archives on the web site of the French presidency: <http://www.elysee.fr>.
7. See Journal Officiel de la République Française, Assemblée, débats, 11 June 1999, 5710–33).
8. Shocking reports had already been published during the war itself: Henri Alleg's memoir of 1958, *La question*, influenced a whole generation of anti-war activists. Even after the Algerian War, the issue was addressed in books and films and regularly debated in public. A poll, conducted by the University of Paris VII in 1991, revealed that 94 per cent of the French population aged 17–30 assumed that torture had occurred during the Algerian War (Branche 2005; Thénault 2005b).
9. For the main features of the controversy, see Cohen (2002), MacMaster (2002) and Quemeneur (2001).
10. This thesis has also been raised in academic debates, for example, by Bancel and Blanchard (1999) and Stora (1999). Similar theories have been proposed for other former colonial powers, for example, by Paul Gilroy (2004) for the British case.
11. The source is a flyer produced by an anti-racism organisation, dated March 1993 (quoted in House 2001: 364).
12. The organisation has recently tried to become an 'anti-imperialist' and 'anti-Zionist' political party. Within the French Left it is regularly accused of propagating 'anti-white racism' and 'communitarist' (non-integrationist) ideas and is criticised for its proximity to the controversial Muslim intellectual Tariq Ramadan.

13. For the law's genesis and debate, see Bertrand (2006), Liauzu (2005), Liauzu and Manceron (2006) and Renken (2006: 449–57).
14. Projet de loi no. 1499. Exposé des motifs, 10 March 2004. See also Christian Kert, Rapport no. 1660 sur le projet de loi (no. 1499), 8 June 2004.
15. See Journal Officiel de la République Française, Assemblée, débats, 12 June 2004, 4819–71. See also *Libération*, 26 March 2005.
16. See Journal Officiel de la République Française, Lois et décrets, 24 February 2005, 3128–30.
17. See Journal Officiel de la République Française, Lois et décrets, 16 February 2006, 2369–70.
18. The speech was written by Sarkozy's special advisor, Henri Guaino. For the speech, its content, and public reactions and criticism, see *Libération*, 27 and 28 July 2007, McDougall (2007), Gassama (2008) and Chrétien (2008).
19. Among the *pieds-noirs* and *harki* associations that fight against revisionist and nostalgic visions of the colonial past, one can cite the Association des Pieds-Noirs Progressistes et Leurs Amis and the Association Harkis et Droits de l'Homme. For the Perpignan monument, see *Libération*, 26 November 2007.
20. The petition was published on 1 December 2007 in *Le Monde*, *L'Humanité*, *El Watan* and *Al Khabar*. Rejecting the polemical terms of 'repentance' or 'official excuse', the text asks for a public recognition of acts of violence as the basis for a future trans-Mediterranean writing of Franco-Algerian history.
21. This does not mean that imperialism and its dissolution did not have any significant impact on Great Britain. For a survey of its various and often subtle repercussions, see Thompson (2005).