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Natalya Vince, *Our Fighting Sisters: Nation, Memory, and Gender in Algeria, 1954-2012*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015. xxi + 274 pp. Maps, figures, acknowledgements, abbreviations, glossary of commonly used terms, appendix: brief biographies of interviewees, select bibliography, index. U.S. \$30.95 (pb). ISBN 978-1526106575.

Review by Elizabeth Perego, Shepherd University

Algerian women emerged from their nation's War of Independence, like the rest of the country, in a precarious position. Women had fought and played a key role in the conflict. They also survived and witnessed brutality from nationalist, French, and settler sides alike. Under immense international pressure to show that they were "modernizing Algeria" and as part of a wider effort to win over the Muslim majority, French authorities had launched a massive campaign in the midst of the war to "emancipate" Algerian Muslim women.[1]

Furthermore, Algerian Muslim women's activism and engagement in the nationalist cause did not go unnoticed. Female veterans of the war have been some of the most iconic figures of the Third Worldist zeitgeist that reshaped international history in the 1960s and 1970s. Indeed, the *Battle of Algiers* scene of three Algerian Muslim women, Djamilia Bouhired, Zohra Drif, and Hassiba Ben Bouali (played by actors), preparing to place bombs in European-majority spaces has proved one of the most discussed scenes in twentieth-century film history and one that classes across the U.S. decipher.[2] Women's allegiances and images became almost synonymous with the revolt and, by extension, the Algerian nation. While international media attention and nationalist/French propaganda honed in on Algerian Muslim women nationalists, a handful of European settler women likewise contributed to the cause of Algerian independence. Finally, and a reality that both official and scholarly accounts often fail to note, these women constituted the nation's majority at the war's conclusion; seven out of twelve million inhabitants in March 1963 were women, according to later president Ahmed Ben Bella (p. 143). Women were thus critical players as independent Algeria sought to construct itself out of the rubble and fire of war, the terrorism wrought by the radical settler group, *Organisation Armée Secrète*, and the fierce internecine fighting between nationalist factions that lingered long after the official peace process concluded.

Natalya Vince's *Our Fighting Sisters: Nation Memory, and Gender in Algeria, 1954 to 1962* unpacks the figure of Algeria's female veterans from the liberation struggle as it has shifted over time from the very moment of the conflict through the present day. In the process, she historicizes social memories of the Algerian Revolution, especially among women who had been involved with the National Liberation Front, as well as how various communities within Algeria have seen or not seen the *mujahidat* and how the women themselves have responded to attention (or lack thereof). Throughout the manuscript, Vince raises and answers a number of essential questions for researchers of modern Algeria. Can we discuss the "Algerian War" as a completed event if actors on the ground consider the revolution unfinished and if vocabularies of this conflict remain fertile spaces of negotiation, elaborating political stances and stakes for key figures? How can Algerian civilians and state agents unquestioningly revere

the liberation revolt while simultaneously disagreeing about who best represents its legacy? Do common threads exist across contested narratives put forward by what Jay Winter coins “fictive kin of memory,” groups tied together by a sense of shared views and commemoration of the past, related to the war? (Spoiler alert: they do).<sup>[3]</sup> Finally, does it make sense to apply categories of analysis like “gender” that scholars find “useful” in other contexts to understand particular pasts when their agents may reject them?<sup>[4]</sup>

Previous literature on the *mujahidat* has, like Vince’s work, employed oral histories to consider these women’s contributions to the nationalist movement and their lives after independence.<sup>[5]</sup> As Vince rightly notes in her introduction and again in the work’s third chapter, this scholarship has overwhelmingly asserted that the post-independent state established by one camp of the National Liberation Front, the major resistance party against French rule, pushed women out of the public sphere. *Our Fighting Sisters* unravels this myth by illustrating how diverse women’s post-independence experiences were. Vince additionally takes on a different task with this piece. She traces these lives in the context of Algeria’s politically fraught and ever-changing post-independence landscape and how female veterans not only view this history and their place in it but how they have worked to construct, shape, or push back against memories concerning themselves. The historian goes a step further as well to illuminate moments when her narrators felt that political factions or communities had wrested their own stories from their hands or failed to acknowledge their sacrifice. How these feelings shaped women’s relationships to the post-independence governments, each other, and varying Algerian communities are explored as well. Above all, the work aims to uncover how social memories more broadly are controlled, represented, and created in post-independence Algeria.

By extension, Vince adds to an exciting new scholarship in Algerian historical studies embracing social, cultural, or micro-historical methodologies to elucidate views on Algerian history from oftentimes “messy” perspectives (for example, p. 245) “from below.”<sup>[6]</sup> In think-tank and journalistic accounts of contemporary Algerian politics, commentators on Algerian politics or views of Algerians and Franco-Algerians concerning international affairs/incidents try to collect opinions of these communities through haphazard and anecdotal manners. The results can prove essentializing, as Vince herself has brilliantly noted elsewhere. This pattern renders *Our Fighting Sisters*, with its deliberate, careful scaling of the remembered past’s weight upon the present, all the more timely.

The book’s arch follows Vince’s twenty-seven demobilized female Revolution participants from their initial engagement in the nationalist camp through the present day. As the historian explains in the introduction, she does not seek to provide a representative snapshot of the *mujahidat* (p. 19) or their views on the past and their postwar legacies and experiences. Vince also embraces an inclusive definition of “*mujahidat*,” interviewing women both recognized as veterans and those women who assisted the revolution but are not counted among the state’s official veteran roster (p. 18). She also spoke to women who were categorized as “European” or “Muslim” during the colonial period.

Vince reconstructs these women’s stories and present-day comments on their memories in a chronological manner. The first chapter looks at the experiences of women during the liberation struggle, the diverse paths that these women took to rebellion, and what insurgency meant for each woman. As with all good oral history, the piece considers the influence of official rhetoric regarding the war as well as women’s own previous practices of recounting their stories of engagement with the nationalist cause on their narratives. Vince breaks her twenty-seven narrators into two categories: women hailing from rural areas and those who tended to be well-educated urban dwellers. As the scholar analyzes them, the women’s testimonies highlight the reality that chronology for local female participations does not match the war’s official start and end dates.

The second section, “Heroines and Victims, Brothers and Sisters,” considers how female veterans responded to propaganda employing their images and French officials’ attempts to win women over to the cause of “French Algeria” in the midst of the conflict. With interviewees then situated in rural areas,

Vince concludes that these women generally ignored or manipulated the projects of *Sections Administratives Spécialisées*, mobile administration units that French administrators established to reach broader swaths of the Muslim population. Some women also appear more comfortable speaking of themselves as “sisters” in revolution to their male counterpart “brothers” when discussing their war experience.

Chapter three, “1962: Continuities and Discontinuities,” follows in the vein of recovering women’s perspectives on time and breaking down the boundaries that historians and official accounts have traditionally imposed between periods of Algeria’s history. In this piece, Vince turns her attention to the socioeconomic conditions of female Liberation War participants on the nationalist side after the struggle. This chapter thoroughly undercuts the myth of women only being forced back into domestic space, showing that the circumstances of the postwar period required some women, namely educated, city-dwelling ones, to take up key positions in postwar society. The unevenness of experience and opportunity for women after armistice is also elucidated; rural women tended not to benefit from growing opportunities across the country.

“Embodying the Nation,” the book’s fourth chapter, demonstrates commonalities between the socialist and conservative “Islamic” views on women and their ideal role in the construction of “Algeria.” Both discourses, which historians have typically considered at odds with one another, accepted that the state had to regulate gender relations, as occurred in other contemporary North African contexts. The chapter investigates the “woman’s question” after the war, seeing when and where women accepted or rejected political debates or parameters concerning their status as emblems of the Algerian nation or their inclusion in the latter. By brandishing their labor, activism, and experiences of sheer pain, these women appear to have accepted that their belonging as full-fledged civilians to the nation depended on their active sacrifice, past or present, a dangerous bind that countered a possible alternative view of women as having innate, inalienable rights. Above all, the *mujahidat* overwhelmingly refused to see themselves as women or advocate for rights as such, a direct rebuttal of state efforts to consider them separate from men and symbols of the “nation.”

In the 1960s and 1970s, the educated former female partisans of the war-time FLN participated in state-building to varying degrees. This participation or resistance to it form the subject of chapter five. Vince examines how engagement with the government through state feminism or employment did not translate to these women’s full-fledged endorsement of state; instead, Vince then effectively shows that some former female FLN partisans only accepted to be considered gendered citizens at the moment when Chadli’s government threatened to curtail women’s freedoms with the 1984 Family Code law. It was at this moment that these women took on the label, “*mujahidat*.” An historicization of this term is essential due to its importance in Algeria today.

The sixth and final chapter of the book, arguably the most important one for making sense of the revolution’s ongoing afterlives, tackles the *mujahidat*’s views on how they have been commemorated or forgotten in the wake of an explosion of writing and reckoning about the Algerian War from the 1990s until today, especially in the shadow of the country’s “time of terrorism.” Indeed, the 1990s violence influences women’s perceptions of the Revolution and then the first two decades of independence: the 1960s and 1970s. The *mujahidat* have moved at moments to participate in state commemorations of their sacrifice and have, at times, drawn upon their trials dating to the revolution to make claims upon the state. Finally, Vince identifies persisting taboos from the revolution such as rape.

By viewing major historical events through these women’s memories as they explain them in 2005, Vince smudges the too-neat lines separating dichotomizing categories of identity in Algeria (European, Algerian, pro-state, opposition), official periodization of the country’s past, and notions that criticism of/dissenting opinions about the revolution equate to negation of its importance. She additionally succeeds at casting doubt upon the narrative that most works of Algerian women’s lives have woven, namely that after the conflict, the one-party regime shuffled women back into the home and it was only

in the 1980s that women surfaced once again in a vain attempt to thwart the ultimately successful Family Code legislation.

Along with compelling anecdotes and contextualization, Vince's wit keeps her readers engaged, resulting in a work that is not only highly informative for a number of fields but also engrossing. After a section discussing post-independence birth policies, Vince discusses attempting to "impregnate" young minds with the nationalist take on "Algerian" history since 1830 (p. 183). National fecundity on multiple levels. Vince's writing is clear and accessible to a general public. *Our Fighting Sisters* will appeal to both scholars and students at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels interested in discovering more about the legacy and lives of Algerian women and the *mujahidat* as well as social memory formation in post-conflict, postcolonial, and highly politicized contexts. Vince also masters the delicate task of providing enough of a contextual framework for deciphering her narrators' testimonies and the conditions in which the women produce while also permitting space for the *mujahidat* to speak for themselves. The result is a work that highlights the difficult and different circumstances before, during, and after the conflict for the *mujahidat* while also helping to map out for readers the jagged terrain that is social memory formation and circulation in many Algerian communities.

The manuscript could have been strengthened, though, had Vince provided more detail regarding how she conducted the interviews that make up approximately half of her primary source material along with state and media archives in Algeria, France, and the U.K. Oral historians, especially in the fields of African and modern U.S. gender histories, have debated and demonstrated the importance of disclosing the parameters of oral history interviews in their scholarship, including the author's positionality vis-à-vis his or her subjects, settings, etc.[7] For instance, Vince mentions several times in passing that she conducted group interviews. At one point, a family member of a female veteran pipes up during their conversation (for example, p. 33). Did having several veterans in the discussion at once change the type of detail that they may have given had they been interviewed separately? Might interviewees have censored or, conversely, revealed more if speaking in front of relatives? Engaging with oral history literature from fields beyond the Middle East and North Africa may have helped Vince to put into relief her work's contribution to these fields as well while filling this slight, but noticeable gap in the work. Given Arthur Asseraf's work on oral paths of news circulation in Algeria, albeit during an earlier period, Vince could have explained in further detail the extent to which rural interviews were cut off from official narratives of the War of Liberation due to their geographic position in the country.[8] Finally, a few minor errors creep into the monograph (the "Madonna of Bentalha" was not the mother of the massacre's victims and *Taxi al-Makhfi* appeared in 1989; pp. 7 and 221, respectively). On the whole, though, Vince evinces the deep understanding of Algerian history and present-day circumstances in the country necessary to consider the influence and import of social memories about this past.

As it stands, this monograph proves an essential contribution not only to the history of decolonization and the post-independence era in Algeria, but also to broader regional and global histories pertaining to these topics. The strongest moments of the manuscript probe the *mujahidat's* changing relationships to the concept of the Algerian "nation" and the political factions/governments that have sought to appropriate their legacies or ignore their ongoing needs. In many ways, the work complements Claire Eldridge's recent book on the memory activism of *harkis* and *pieds noirs* communities in France.[9] It certainly fills out the rich dialogue that historians of both France and Algeria have had concerning French policies towards Muslim women during the war by looking at how these policies reached or did not reach these women.

*Our Fighting Sisters* represents a major step in Algerian historiography by considering the intersectional lives of Algerian women and the heterogeneity of the state before the October 1988 revolution. Given that historians have only recently begun the seemingly Herculean task the post-independence history of Algerian and the wider Maghrib, Vince demonstrates that students of this past can effectively manage the daunting hurdles between them and the goal of reconstructing this past and social memories of it. They need only be prepared to sit with, acknowledge, and wade through "messy" narratives and the

sometimes compatible, sometimes incongruous textures of time expressed in their sources.

## NOTES

[1] Neil MacMaster, *Burning the Veil: the Algerian War and the "Emancipation" of Muslim Women, 1954-62* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012) and Diane Sambron, *Femmes musulmanes: Guerre d'Algérie 1954-1962* (Paris: Editions Autrement, 2007).

[2] Gillo Pontecorvo, *The Battle of Algiers* (Irvington: Criterion Collection, 2004, special edition) and Madeleine Dobie, "'The Battle of Algiers' at 50: From 1960s Radicalism to the Classrooms of West Point," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, Sept. 25, 2016, accessed Sept. 30, 2018, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/battle-algiers-50-1960s-radicalism-classrooms-west-point/#>.

[3] Jay Winter, "Forms of Kinship and Remembrance in the Aftermath of the Great War," in Jay Winter and Emmanuelle Sivan eds., *War and Remembrance in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 40-60.

[4] Joan W. Scott, "Gender: a Useful Category of Historical Analysis," *American Historical Review* 91.5 (Dec. 1986): pp. 1053-1075.

[5] See, for instance, Djamilia Amrane, *Des femmes dans la guerre d'Algérie: entretiens* (Paris: Karthala, 1994).

[6] See, for instance, Edward McAllister, "Yesterday's Tomorrow Is Not Today: Memory and Place in an Algiers Neighbourhood" (dissertation, Oxford University, 2015).

[7] See, for example, the debate in the *International Journal of African Historical Studies* sparked by Kirk Hoppe, "Whose Life Is It, Anyway?: Issues of Representation in Life Narrative Texts of African Women," *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 26.3(1993): pp. 623-36.

[8] Arthur Asseraf, "Foreign News in Colonial Algeria, 1881-1940" (dissertation, Oxford University, 2016).

[9] Claire Eldridge, *From Empire to Exile: History and Memory within the Pied-Noir and Harki Communities* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016).

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