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Rémi Dalisson, *Guerre d'Algérie. L'impossible commémoration*. Paris, Armand Colin, 2018. 318 pp. Tables, notes, bibliography, and index. €24.90 (pb). ISBN 978-2-200-61713-4.

Review by Jo McCormack, Nottingham Trent University, UK.

Rémi Dalisson's book about Franco-Algerian memories in contemporary France is a very timely publication. In September 2018, President Macron officially acknowledged the systematic nature of torture by the French state during the Franco-Algerian War (1954-1962) and apologised for the role of the French army in the death of mathematician Maurice Audin. That month also saw the now annual *Journée nationale d'hommage aux Harkis* take place, yet also new financial measures proposed to (belatedly) help *harkis* (Algerian soldiers who fought for the French army) and their families. As I write, public memories are to the fore in Europe with the centenary of the end of the First World War. In the UK, in the midst of Brexit, a variety of accounts of the past are fiercely competing as politicians try to promote various versions of British identity—past, present and future—all of which reminds us of the importance and salience of historical memories to (national) identity/ies.

Dalisson is not entirely new to this topic. His many previous publications include work on other “*passés qui ne passent pas*” (to borrow Henry Rousso's phrase), such as the Vichy period. His earlier work also focused on political symbolism and memories of the Great War. That previous work and expertise has, in my view, greatly helped shape this book on the question of commemorating the Algerian War. As such, it focuses a good deal on politics and “official” memories of that conflict, with a particular focus on soldiers. As Dalisson states “*La logique des commémorations est de s'appuyer sur des lieux, monuments, et symboles*” (p. 146). Places might include Paris, or more specifically the Mémorial national de la guerre d'Algérie et des combats du Maroc et de la Tunisie, or various towns and regions—not least the south of France. Monuments include the memorial, but also steles and street names—with a particular focus on actual wording (“*rue du 19 mars*”? “*rue du 19 mars, fin de la guerre d'Algérie*”? “*Rue du 19 mars, cessez-le-feu en Algérie*”? [p. 148]). And the symbolic nature of commemoration can relate to the *mise-en-scène* and the ritualistic nature of the events—highlighting the usual “*fonction fédératrice*” of “*la tradition commémorative française*” (p. 137), but also underlining the difficulties of achieving that on a subject such as the Franco-Algerian War. The study includes the key period since 1999 (when the French Parliament finally acknowledged that a *war* had taken place) in order to address the issue of it having been “the war without a name” for over thirty-five years. But in terms of commemorating the event, why has it also been the “war without a date”? And, as the title suggests, is its commemoration still impossible? The book elucidates how 19 March became “*Journée nationale du souvenir et du recueillement à la mémoire des victimes civiles et militaires de la guerre d'Algérie et des combats en Tunisie et au Maroc*” during François Hollande's presidency, although there are actually three dates which compete in terms of commemorating the Algerian War; a situation which is not sustainable according to Dalisson.

The first part of the book examines the roots of commemorative difficulties (1945-1999) and part two studies commemorative developments since 1999. The book covers the period up until 2016, so is a very

useful *mise à jour* of scholarship in this area. The work is very readable and provides a comprehensive account of the difficulties of commemorating the Algerian War in France. It is made amply clear that the nature of the war—as such a divisive conflict—hindered remembrance of the war. Furthermore, the approach to working through memories of the war in the decades immediately after the conflict did not facilitate coming to terms with this past. Lastly, the period since the turn of the millennium has involved more memory work, but this is a difficult process, which is ongoing. As Dalisson puts it, “si la question algérienne s’est replacée au cœur des débats, elle reste conflictuelle et surchargée d’émotions contradictoires” (p. 137). The first two decades of this century saw memories of the Algerian war become particularly politicised in France.

That leads me to my first concern about the work: to what extent is this an “Algerian memory” (p. 154) rather than “French memories of Algeria”? And to what extent is that therefore only a part of the current memory mosaic that we find in contemporary France—and indeed which is influenced by a more global culture of remembrance? Secondly, given the topic—memorials, commemoration, iconography—it is a shame that there are no photographs or visual sources to illustrate the narrative. Graphs could be more nicely presented too, for ease of reading. The work could draw on a wider variety of references—for example, this work fits well with studies such as the one by Robert Aldrich—and endnotes very often refer to primary rather than secondary sources.[1] That said, the reference list does include an appropriate range of secondary sources. Lastly, I’d like to hear a little more about the current context in French society—what is at stake at present in remembering the Algerian War? Have these stakes increased or decreased? How are they evolving? Why?

That said, there are several points to commend in this work. A strength of the book is the use of information from associations, which helps us understand what has been going on at the local level. A variety of organizations have worked for decades to support “memory carriers” in France, and their archives and publications are indeed a very rich source of information for the historian. Another strength is the discussion of “Ces médailles, diplômes, timbres, plaques et lieux symboliques [qui] permettent d’esquisser des célébrations [et qui] préparent les commémorations officielles, y compris celles du 19 mars” (p. 111). That local, detailed focus also allows Dalisson to show that if the Algerian War was officially neglected, it was never really forgotten in society. It also enables him to provide a convincing critique of the mistakes made by politicians recently in their handling of, and approach to, commemoration. He also argues for the primacy of history over memory. This is certainly a very detailed and thorough historical work.

Dalisson’s focus on public opinion, and intellectuals, is also helpful here. I was particularly interested, given my own work, in the discussion of the teaching of the war and how that has evolved over the last ten years—in both *collèges* (reforms of 2016) and *lycées* (reforms of 2010). In all of these areas, as one would expect, collective memories continue to evolve and change over time in a variety of complex ways—which Dalisson helps us understand better. As he states “la question de l’impossible commémoration, sa constitution, ses débats et impensés, mais aussi ses récupérations et ‘guerres de mémoires’, autant que les regards croisés entre les deux rives de la Méditerranée, résument tous le enjeux identitaires de la France du XXIe siècle” (p. 268). I think that encapsulates very well the interest of this book—and takes us back full circle to my starting point above—by marking it as a work which will be of interest to scholars of France, but also to anyone interested in memory debates more widely.

NOTES

[1] Robert Aldrich, *Monuments et mémoires: Les traces coloniales dans le paysage français*. (Paris: Société française d’Histoire d’Outre-Mer, 2011).

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