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Natalya Vince, *The Algerian War, The Algerian Revolution*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020. xv + 227 pp. Illustrations. €25.99 (pb). ISBN 978-3-030-54263-4; €21.39 (eb). ISBN 978-3-030-54264-1.

Review by David Stenner, Christopher Newport University.

The last two decades have seen a dramatic increase in the scholarship dealing with the Algerian struggle for independence (1954-1962). As one of the most significant popular uprisings against European domination in the modern era, the revolution has obtained an almost mythical aura among scholars as decolonization has become a topic of significant academic attention in recent years. As a result, we have gained a much more nuanced understanding of this pivotal episode of twentieth-century history from the countless books and articles now available in English, French, and Arabic. This multitude of new approaches and voices certainly enriches our understanding, but it also becomes increasingly difficult for those newly interested in the topic to gain a solid overview of the ever-expanding historiographic sprawl. Further, those teaching courses on the Algerian revolution have hitherto lacked a book offering a good summary of the events that took place over six decades ago. This is where Natalya Vince has made her contribution.

The Algerian War, The Algerian Revolution provides an excellent introduction to the Algerian struggle for independence. Instead of focusing solely on the years of armed conflict, it uses the war as a lens to access Algeria's history throughout the long twentieth century. After briefly explaining the origins of the French colonial state, the book covers the dramatic social upheaval that Algeria--and by extension the entire Maghrib--experienced during the interwar years. The afterlife of World War I and the beginning of labor migration to the metropole created a new political climate that enabled the emergence of indigenous political movements whose leaders ranged from liberal *évolués* and religious scholars to working-class organizers. The popularization of organized sports and scouting movements contributed to the politicization of the Algerian masses, which further accelerated in the wake of World War II and the massacre committed by French security forces against pro-independence protesters in Sétif on VE-Day (8 May 1945). At the same time, an increasingly repressive colonial state effectively undermined all possibilities for enacting meaningful change through the ballot box. The growing tensions ultimately culminated in the military insurgency by the newly established Front de Libération Nationale (FLN) on 1 November 1954.

The majority of the book details the Algerian War of Independence, the ebbs and flows of armed conflict that lasted until March 1962. Yet the book manages to move beyond the harrowing

violence that characterized this period. How did the FLN so quickly achieve hegemony over the anticolonial struggle as it sidelined or absorbed all established political parties? Which role did the increasing polarization of the population along ethnic lines play in fueling the conflict? How did the French authorities try to win “hearts and minds” and how did their colonial subjects react to these attempts? What did the European settler population do to prevent an independent Algerian state? How did the French army’s counterinsurgency tactics evolve during the more than seven years of fighting? These are some of the questions addressed by the author in great detail, thus turning the war from a purely military conflict into a period of profound social transformation.

The last section addresses the aftermath of the war: the exodus of the settlers and the Jewish community, the establishment of a one-party state by the FLN, and the liquidation of so-called “traitors” to the Algerian nation. Most importantly, though, Vince traces the development of multiple memory cultures on both sides of the Mediterranean. In France, the mushrooming of associations of former settlers kept the history of French Algeria alive in domestic political discourse, especially by way of the right-wing Front National. Beginning in the 1990s, the French-born descendants of *harkis* (Algerian soldiers in the service of the French army) slowly broke the taboos surrounding their family histories. Especially the rise of internet forums provided new spaces to discuss this topic. Meanwhile, in Algeria itself the War of Independence became the central historical marker around which state elites formed an all-encompassing national identity. The role played during the revolution justified one’s place in the new social order and allowed those who had allegedly made the greatest sacrifices to accrue economic and political power after 1962.

What makes this book so interesting is that it operates on two levels. Not only does it provide a coherent narrative of the Algerian Revolution and its roots and legacies, it also introduces readers to history as a field of academic practice. Every chapter contains several boxes of highlighted text explaining in further detail a specific name or event mentioned in the narrative. The significance of the Bandung Conference in 1955, the role of women during the war, why “the Lacoste promotion” has become an insult in Algeria, and many other topics thus get a much more nuanced treatment than would have otherwise been possible. Vince’s introduction to the field of memory studies is especially laudable. Nations do not remember like individuals and the legacy of the Algerian revolution is not a repressed trauma in the psychoanalytical sense, she explains. Rather we should understand public memory as highly malleable and constantly being remade by contemporary contexts. Furthermore, Vince explicitly engages with the existing historiography by delineating the different, and sometimes even contradictory, arguments made by various scholars. Did the FLN win primarily by way of its military insurgency or through its international diplomatic campaign? Was Charles de Gaulle the savior of France or a ruthless opportunist? Were the leaders of the *Fédération des élus*, such as Ferhat Abbas, timid elitists or did they lay the groundwork for mass politics during the interwar years? Vince explains that the answers to such questions vary across time and place as she carefully avoids reproducing simplistic binaries. Writing history boils down to making arguments about the past, which will ultimately be revisited by other scholars.

Despite the book’s many strengths, a few points of critique are justified. One pertains to an irritating aspect of its structure: throughout the narrative, the author continuously provides cross-references to other sections of the book that deal with the same topic. This confuses the reader at first before becoming extremely annoying. Initially, I had to spend some time to even

understand what the numerous brackets filled with obscure numbers and abbreviations meant, before eventually deciding to simply ignore them. Given that the book contains an index, I am not sure what all of this was meant to accomplish. I also think that the author could have dealt more with the European side of events. The experiences of the *pieds-noirs*, for example, do not get much coverage. The crisis of May 1958, during which settler hardliners and their allies in the military unsuccessfully tried to overthrow the government in Paris and thereby triggered the collapse of the Fourth Republic, does receive considerable attention, but its truly monumental historical significance does not become apparent. Somehow the drama of the moment gets lost. That the book foregrounds Algerian experiences makes sense, but it would have been quite interesting to learn more about how French society, both in North Africa and the metropole, reacted to the violent conflict. Finally, and most importantly, the book makes no use of secondary sources in Arabic. That is quite disappointing. Even though many Algerian historians publish in French, an important body of scholarship in Arabic does exist. This absence undermines Vince's stated goal of writing a history that integrates all perspectives.

Overall, *The Algerian War*, *The Algerian Revolution* is a good book that should be acquired by anyone interested in North African or French history. It is not only suitable for university classes but also for a general readership. Moreover, I recommend assigning this book to undergraduate students in historical methodology courses. Due to its focus on both facts and process, it provides an excellent introduction to the historian's craft. It will remain the standard reference work for the foreseeable future.

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