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Dónal Hassett, *Mobilizing Memory: The Great War and the Language of Politics in Colonial Algeria, 1918-39*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019. xiii + 238. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$80.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9780198831686.

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In the four short years of the First World War, France suffered tremendous losses, with nearly 1.4 million military deaths and another 4.2 million wounded.^[1] To this day, signs in the Paris metro remind riders that wounded veterans have priority seating, and poignant monuments to the *poilus* dot the whole of France. Precious few of these monuments, however, acknowledge the sacrifice of France's colonial troops during that war, let alone during the other major conflicts of the twentieth century. Historians of French empire have introduced important analyses of the treatment and experiences of some of these troops, notably from French West Africa.^[2] In *Mobilizing Memory*, Dónal Hassett contributes to this body of literature by interrogating the significance of military service and memories of sacrifice to political claims-making in interwar Algeria.

If we already know about the unequal and at points cruel treatment of colonial troops in wartime, Hassett instead asks what happened once they returned home. He emphasizes the importance of taking stock of the entire interwar period, contending that a focus on only the first years after the war obscures the range of political ideas that circulated in Algeria—crucially, beyond anti-imperial nationalism. This periodization also allows Hassett to introduce an impressive array of historical actors, including settler European politicians, Jewish veterans, and Muslim widows, all of whom found that “the Great War was a potent source of legitimation” (p. 3).

Hassett focuses on political discourse in its various guises, such as the publications of veteran organizations and individual pension petitions, making use of archives held in Algiers and Oran, the Service historique de la Défense (SHAD), and the Archives nationales d'Outre-mer, in addition to numerous newspapers. He points to surprising moments when opposing claims-makers used the same vocabulary to argue different points, and other moments when the vocabulary itself risked undermining the racial hierarchies that bolstered French rule in Algeria. Wartime sacrifice “provided a transcendent form of political language” that was “omnipresent in public discourse” (p. 3). Ultimately, however, this book shows how the seemingly universal experience of loss and suffering could be used to deny rights and express difference as much as it could be used to demand equality.

Hassett's clearest historiographical engagements are with Emmanuel Blanchard and Sylvie Thénault's call for nuanced examinations of what the "world of contact" meant in colonial Algeria, and with Gregory Mann's analysis of the obligation between the French imperial state and Malian veterans in the twentieth century. In the larger historiography, the "world of contact" thesis at first focused narrowly on the notion that imperial reform was truly possible in the interwar period. This thesis would be abandoned as later works offered sometimes pat narratives that assumed the inevitability of independence. Blanchard and Thénault argued that historians must take a wider view of the "world of contact" in order to account for myriad voices—as well as the range of forms of violence—present in colonial Algeria.[3] Hassett embraces this idea by introducing a host of actors and analyzing their "language of contact" (p. 210). In lively and highly readable language, Hassett brings diverse voices and argumentative tactics to the fore.

Hassett's second engagement is with Mann's characterization of "a new political language of reciprocity, entitlement, and state responsibility" after the Great War, structured on "the intersection of the European experience of grief and commemoration with strong idioms of mutual if uneven obligation" in French West Africa.[4] In Algeria, with its large settler population and its peculiar administrative regime, this uneven obligation and the ability of diverse actors to mobilize the language of sacrifice led to tense confrontations. These rhetorical battles about who merited rights under French law played out in the pages of newspapers and in the streets. Having paid a blood tax for France, the indigenous argument went, Algerian men now deserved representation and more.[5] Nevertheless, the interwar period witnessed the failure of the expansion of rights, notably in the abortive 1936 Blum-Viollette proposal.

Mobilizing Memory centers different actors in each chapter, making it easy to picture assigning the entire book or a section to advanced undergraduates studying the interwar period or the French empire. Chapter 1 offers a concise overview of the rights regimes in pre-World War I Algeria and of the engagement of colonial troops in the Great War. Chapter 2 examines the complexities of the "Wilsonian moment." Hassett addresses both the 1919 loi Jonnart, which extended limited franchise to indigenous veterans, among others, and the Blum-Viollette project. Despite being years apart, both attempts at reform relied on expectations about the Republic's obligation to Algerian men who had fought in the trenches. Nevertheless, as Hassett details, the "moral economy of sacrifice" could be mobilized not only to demand rights, but to reify existing hierarchies (p. 76). Hassett takes pains to point to the diversity of political ideology even among indigenous groups, which included Messali Hadj's nationalist *Étoile nord-africaine* and the reformist *Fédération des élus musulmans d'Algérie*, of which Ferhat Abbas was a leading member. Meanwhile, settlers called for their own form of self-determination with evocations of Australia and New Zealand's relationship to Great Britain. Groups fighting for reform and for settler-led autonomy alike relied on (sometimes dubious) statistics about their community's wartime sacrifice to demand recognition.

Chapters 3 and 4 focus on the mobilization of Great War tropes by the left and right. Chapter 3 details the war's impact on the Algerian labor movement and how that fit within the larger landscape of French labor politics. In 1919, the first waves of the repatriation of (mainly non-indigenous) soldiers corresponded with strike action by some trade unions. On May Day of that year, marches in Oran and Algiers included both settler and indigenous participants, and the left "seemed to have successfully organized across the boundaries of race for the first time" (p. 82). For its part, the "conservative press reported the indigenous participation with a certain trepidation, while the more radical right openly denounced the presence of 'Arabs' alongside

Europeans” (p. 99). Hassett points to moments when local groups, such as dockers in Mostaganem, acted in solidarity with their indigenous fellow-members, and when such solidarities broke down. It would have been useful here to know more about the importance of place, or even the ethnic makeup of various locales, to this story. Was rhetoric similar across urban and rural settings? In towns with larger or smaller settler populations?

It would have been interesting also to read more about how this cross-cultural mobilization took place and to what degree the left appeared self-aware or deliberate about this mass movement. Overt calculations about questions of race emerge in a lively way in Hassett’s treatment of right-wing ideology. Chapter 4 demonstrates that, despite moves towards cross-racial solidarity by the left, “the extreme right [...] developed a specific rhetoric around the Great War that was designed to legitimize its vision of a renewed empire,” through both dismissal of non-Europeans and also a paternalistic celebration of the settler-indigenous relationship (p. 108). One of the most striking contributions of this chapter is Hassett’s discussion of how Algerian Jews answered anti-Semitism with celebrations of their wartime service, as well as the paradoxical nature of extreme right rhetoric that spewed anti-Semitism but struggled to dismiss Jewish sacrifice for the *Union sacrée*.

In Chapter 5, Hassett introduces the notion of “segregated primacy” (p. 154), meaning the privileged place of indigenous veterans relative to the larger indigenous society, but still subjugated by the settler population. Taking up Blanchard and Thénault’s assertion that the “world of contact” must be examined more broadly, he emphasizes that Algerian veteran groups were “intermediaries between ex-servicemen and the colonial state” (p. 142). These groups were heterogeneous, including organizations claiming both indigenous and European membership and others serving only one section of Algeria’s population. Here again, reliance on tropes about Great War service remained paramount to larger political claims-making, and once more, groups with divergent visions of Algeria’s future mobilized the same vocabulary to level radically different demands. Inequality operated at multiple levels. The *Amicale des mutilés du département d’Alger* denounced the unequal provisioning of free healthcare between European veterans from Algeria and their continental compatriots, but worried little that this same inequality impacted indigenous men, too. Seemingly without guile, the *Amicale* protested in language that Hassett notes “bore a striking similarity to that mobilized by indigenous political reformists [...]. The hypocrisies and contradictions in French republican colonial discourse were never the sole preserve of those who sought to reform or even destroy the colonial system [...].” (p. 147). It is a jarring and important assertion, and one on which Hassett could have expanded.

The sixth chapter focuses on petitioners, including wounded veterans and war widows. Drawing on the SHAD’s rich archives, Hassett introduces a range of claimants whose shared vocabulary of sacrifice and deservingness demonstrates how widespread this language became in the interwar period. This chapter offers the clearest depiction of French administrative racism, in no small part because of the inconsistent and unequal distribution of support to the families of indigenous war dead in comparison to their European counterparts. Hassett explicitly considers the role of the public scribe as the “author” of the petitions, penned on behalf of typically illiterate indigenous women. He convincingly argues that the reader should trust that these petitions indeed represent the voices of the women concerned, but also meditates on the mediated nature of the sources. Hassett’s analysis of the sources here would lend itself to classroom assignments, such as offering an entry into a discussion about who creates an archive and how historians use them. Hassett could have tangled more with questions of gender in this chapter, given the focus

on women petitioners. As he notes, “Widows in particular had recourse to a language of supplication grounded in their assigned gender role as dependents” (p. 189). Indeed, this book would be striking if read in tandem with recent work on gender and empire, such as Judith Surkis’ *Sex, Law, and Sovereignty in French Algeria, 1830-1930*, published the same year as Hassett’s monograph.[6] As it stands, Hassett hints at the significance of gendered language and assumptions about masculinity throughout, notably in the case of anti-reformists leveling the insult of shirker (*embusqué*) at indigenous intellectuals as a way of discrediting them, discussed in Chapter 2.

In all, Hassett’s work makes clear that “the war became a fiercely contested source of legitimacy, as rival groups sought to establish a monopoly over the symbolic and political capital conferred by participation” in the Great War (p. 210). By lingering on the multiple voices emerging from Algeria’s different populations, from extreme right-wing political thinkers eager to reaffirm racial hierarchies to young, indigenous widows confident that the state owed them and their children a debt, Hassett offers a complex portrait of interwar Algeria. Taking this period as an object of study in its own right, he allows the reader to take stock of the many visions for Algeria’s future dreamt of and promoted in the years following the war. This in turn enriches a study of the more familiar outcomes that emerged after the next great conflagration, the Second World War.

NOTES

[1] “World War I Casualties,” *Repères*, accessed 2 February 2021, <http://www.centre-robert-schuman.org/userfiles/files/REPERES%20%E2%80%93%20module%201-1-1%20-%20explanatory%20notes%20%E2%80%93%20World%20War%20I%20casualties%20%E2%80%93%20EN.pdf>.

[2] Richard S. Fogarty, *Race & War in France: Colonial Subjects in the French Army, 1914-1918* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008); Gregory Mann, *Native Sons: West African Veterans and France in the Twentieth Century* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006); Gilbert Meynier, *L’Algérie révélée: la guerre de 1914-1918 et le premier quart du XXe siècle* (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1981); Marc Michel, *Les africains et la Grande Guerre: l’appel à l’Afrique (1914-1918)* (Paris: Éditions Karthala, 2003).

[3] Emmanuel Blanchard and Sylvie Thénault, “Quel ‘monde du contact’? Pour une histoire sociale de l’Algérie pendant la période coloniale,” *Le mouvement social* 236, 3 (2011): 3-7.

[4] Mann, *Native Sons*, p. 65.

[5] Hassett uses the English word “indigenous” to connote the population pejoratively referred to as *indigène* in the colonial period, and I adopt his terminology here.

[6] Judith Surkis, *Sex, Law, and Sovereignty in French Algeria, 1830-1930* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019).

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