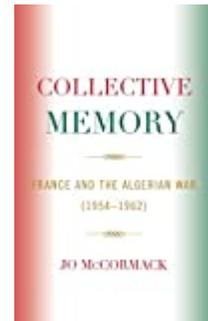




Jo McCormack. *Collective Memory: France and the Algerian War, 1954-1962.* Lanham: Lexington Books, 2007. 236 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7391-0921-2.



Reviewed by Christophe Gracieux (Institut d' études politiques de Paris)

Published on H-War (March, 2009)

Commissioned by Janet G. Valentine (U.S. Army Command and General Staff College - Dept of Mil Hist)

An Impossible Memory?

Jo McCormack, a lecturer at the University of Technology in Sydney, Australia, offers a worthy study on a complex issue: the transmission of the memory of the Algerian War (1954-62) in contemporary France. Since the fighting came to an end, the memory of the war has been passed over in silence. It was indeed a particularly traumatic period. Not only was the Algerian War a fierce conflict in which torture and terrorism were used, and in which the French government sent more than one million conscripts to fight against the National Liberation Front, it also tore apart French society. Until 1999, the French State refused to call it anything other than "peacekeeping operations." Yet, this war without a name has created deep rifts between the various groups involved. As a result, the transmission of the memory of the Algerian War has been a complicated and painful process.

In *Collective Memory*, McCormack aims to assess precisely the extent of transmission; has France succeeded in turning this dark page of its recent history? To examine this issue, the author has chosen to focus on three essential vectors, which, as Henry Rousso has shown

in his influential book on the memory of the Vichy period in France, *Le Syndrome de Vichy* (1987), are at the core of the memorial transmission process: the education system, the family, and the media. Analyzing in depth each vector of memory, McCormack uses a wide range of sources, from interviews with teachers, pupils, and historians, to educational programs, textbooks, and newspaper articles. He also often refers to collective memory theories, including those of Maurice Halbwachs and Sigmund Freud respectively. Furthermore, his work incorporates the significant findings of French historiography on numerous aspects of the Algerian War since the late 1980s. He fails to mention, however, Raphaëlle Branche's excellent historiographical synthesis, *La Guerre d'Algérie: une histoire apaisée?* (2005). McCormack pays special tribute to Benjamin Stora's *La Guerre d'Algérie et l'oubli* (1991), a pioneering study on the French collective memory of the Algerian War.

McCormack successively studies each of the three vectors of memory he has selected. He first focuses on education, which appears to be a key institution for un-

derstanding the transmission of memory of the Algerian War in France. Since the Third Republic, the French State has given schools a central role in teaching national history and in trying to build a collective national memory. Offering a broad overview of what he calls “the educational chain” (p. 46), from the history program conceived by the Department of Education to the classroom, he shows how the Algerian War is marginalized in French schools. The program for *terminale* (the final year in French high schools), actually gives very little space to the conflict. McCormack even comes to the conclusion that the war is taught less and less. It is, therefore, not surprising that French pupils have nothing but a superficial knowledge of the Algerian War. Teachers and pupils mostly attribute this lack of attention to the *baccalauréat* examination taken at the end of the year. But, according to McCormack, the Algerian War is not taught because its memory is too divisive, whereas French republican school aims at transmitting a cohesive memory.

In the same way as he emphasizes the global failure of the educative vector, the author sheds light on the lack of familial transmission of the memory of the Algerian War. While many French families have been involved in the conflict in one way or another—as settlers, conscripts, or muslim Algerians who migrated to France in the 1960s and 1970s—only a few have talked about their experience of the war. Silence prevails in these families. It is particularly the case for *harkis*’ (Algerian soldiers who fought in the French army) and Algerian immigrants’ families.

Lastly, McCormack highlights the recent role played by the media in the construction of the French collective memory of the Algerian War. Through an in-depth case study of articles regularly published in the daily newspaper *Le Monde* in 2000 and 2001, he shows how use of torture by the French army during the war has surfaced since the testimony of an Algerian woman who had been tortured was published. The media coverage of this issue greatly contributed to weakening what used to be a strong taboo. Nevertheless, like the two other vectors,

the media do not fill in all the memorial gaps. In McCormack’s opinion, not only has the coverage of torture by the media been limited, it has not paved the way for reconciliation because it has hurt many French veterans.

Throughout the book, McCormack convincingly demonstrates that the memory of the Algerian War has barely been transmitted in contemporary France, whereas there has been a huge investment in the transmission of the memory of the Second World War. If the Algerian conflict seems less and less taboo, “very little has yet been discussed or resolved” (p. 176). In fact, the transmission of the memory of the war through education, the family, and the media has been far from exhaustive. Not much taught at school, not very often discussed in families, and subjected to a partial presentation in the media, the memory of the Algerian War remains highly fragmented among the various groups. Moreover, McCormack argues that the lack of work on the memory of the Algerian War has noticeable effects on current French society by nurturing racism and exacerbating tensions, because Algerians are still the largest immigrant group in France. The author tends to overestimate the memory factor in the building of these tensions to the detriment of social and economical factors, such as unemployment and housing conditions in French suburbs. However, it is true that children of Algerian descent have to deal with identity issues which partly result from insufficient transmission of the memory of the war. This is why McCormack urges the state to take the lead in commemorating the Algerian War and to “assume its responsibility in the conduct” of the conflict, in the same way that it did with the Vichy regime (p. 181).

This work suffers from a few minor weaknesses, such as the small size of the sample of teachers and pupils interviewed; a larger sample would have made the study more representative, as the author himself admits. A more detailed analysis of the transmission of the memory of the conscripts who were sent to fight in Algeria would also have strengthened the book.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-war>

Citation: Christophe Gracieux. Review of McCormack, Jo, *Collective Memory: France and the Algerian War, 1954-1962*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. March, 2009.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=24437>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.