

## **Collective Memory and Reconciliation: The Case of the Harkis in France**

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### **Abstract**

This essay examines the ways in which the descendants of harkis (Algerians who fought in the French Army in the Algerian War of Independence) have created and transmitted collective memories that challenge both the French national narrative and narratives created by other harkis, while consistently emphasizing reconciliation and social cohesion. It investigates how the harkis use various media including films and memoirs (which are classified as cultural carriers of memory) as well as websites (organizational carriers of memory) to communicate their memory to other members of their community and the rest of French society. Different forms of media carry different memory narratives, which often offer contradicting interpretations of events, and have led to confrontations among harkis about how to best present their history. Although these carriers of memory have constituted sites of conflict, however, they have all sought to fit the history of the harkis into the national narrative, and to assert their French identity. Some have also sought reconciliation with the rest of the Algerian community in France. The case of harki collective memory, then, is one in which members of a particular ethnic group are challenging the national narrative while still seeking national unity, social cohesion, and reconciliation.

### **Essay**

An instance of collective memory important for understanding the way conflicting collective memories function and coexist within a national context is that of the harkis.

The term “harkis” refers to Muslim soldiers who fought in the French army during the Algerian War of Independence (1954-1962). Following Algerian independence, twenty thousand harkis and their families fled to France to escape retaliatory massacres carried out by the victorious Algerian nationalist party, the National Liberation Front (the FLN). Many harkis and their families lived in internment camps in France for decades, but have since dispersed throughout France.

For over forty years, their former compatriots living in both Algeria and France have branded the harkis as “traitors” or “collaborators” for their role in this conflict. The harkis’ wives and their children have also carried the stigma by association. Within populations of North African origin in France, the term “harki” has now come to be used as a slur to designate anyone seen as collaborating with the French of European origin. The French State, in the context of a general national “forgetting” of the Algerian War, ignored the harkis because their existence aroused painful memories of the divisive conflict. Like other elements of the population of Algerian origin, then, the harkis were not incorporated into French collective memory or historical education. Most harkis internalized this shamed and marginalized identity, and stayed silent for many years about their past.

Starting in the 1990s in France, there has been increased national awareness of the Algerian War and renewed interest in what took place during these years. Younger generations of Euro-French and Franco-Algerians who did not live through the war have made efforts to understand and remember this conflict and their own family’s involvement in it. Second-generation harkis have also taken part in this process of reconciliation with the past. Since 2003, the harkis have become more visible in France

as second-generation harkis have begun speaking out about their experiences, and those of their parents, through memoirs and novels, scholarly texts, association websites, court cases and films.

In contrast to their parents' silence about their traumatic past, these harkis have actively worked to construct a harki collective memory and identity group. These expressive outlets have served as ways for harkis to explain their controversial past both to each other and to people outside their community. Although these outlets have also constituted sites of conflict as harkis disagree about how to best present their history, their aim has consistently been to fit this history into the national narrative, and to assert their French identity,. Some have also sought reconciliation with the rest of the Algerian community in France. The case of harki collective memory, then, is one in which members of a certain ethnic group are challenging the national narrative while still seeking national unity, social cohesion, and reconciliation.

Harki collective memory, like French national collective memory, is transmitted through a number of different carriers. In *The Vichy Syndrome*, historian Henry Rousso identified certain "carriers" of memory, which he defined as "any source that proposes a deliberate reconstruction of an event for a social purpose," and described how they help shape the collective memory of an event.<sup>1</sup> While Rousso identified four general categories of carriers of French memory: official, scholarly, organizational, and cultural, only the latter two types of carriers have been used consistently by the harkis. Rousso explained that organizational carriers of memory are constructed by groups of people

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<sup>1</sup> Henry Rousso, *The Vichy Syndrome: History and Memory in France since 1944* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991), 219.

who “join organizations for the purpose of preserving and unifying the personal memories of group members. Groups sometimes become attached to a rather static image of the past, which they then promote actively as well as passively.”<sup>2</sup> Cultural carriers of memory present more diversified views of the past, and express what appear to be highly individualistic memories through a variety of media, such as literature, film, and television. Rousso noted that since these carriers present their message in artistic form, this message is usually implicit rather than explicit.<sup>3</sup>

Organizational carriers have been mainly employed by second-generation harkis, predominantly sons of harkis, who have begun to form and join organizations dedicated to preserving the harki memory and to providing a platform for collective action. These associations have held a strong appeal for harkis and their descendents looking to participate in a community, and over five hundred harki associations exist in France today. Although some harki associations were formed as early as 1971, when harkis began leaving the internment camps, these early associations existed only on a local level. The second generation of harkis, however, has carried out a “veritable revolution” in the realm of associations, creating new organizations, making them more public, and coordinating between them.<sup>4</sup> Since 2006, harki associations have taken advantage of the opportunities offered by the internet to create websites on which they can express their views. The two most popular association websites are “Harkis.info” and the “Coalition Nationale des Harkis et des Associations de Harkis.” These websites have allowed the associations to reach a wider audience of harkis, as well as non-harkis. This has made

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 221.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Harkis.com, “Regard universitaire sur les associations de Harkis,” [http://www.harkis.com/article.php3?id\\_article=159](http://www.harkis.com/article.php3?id_article=159), (accessed April 15, 2008).

them important carriers of organizational memory. The sites provide a forum open to anyone for discussions about the harki past and identity, and these organizations can thus claim to represent more of the harki population than the cultural carriers, such as memoirs or films.

Websites also constitute a new type of source that is particularly useful for memory studies. Because of the public nature of discussions on the sites, historians can observe quite clearly the construction, and policing, of memory as a historical process. Website administrators establish on the site an official memory for the association, which they update through various articles expressing their official response to current events. Furthermore, they regulate what is posted on the discussion board forums by both removing offensive posts and by lecturing posters about the proper perspective on issues of collective memory and identity. Websites constitute a particular kind of collective memory carrier, theoretically open to all who seek to make a post, unlike most traditional associations. They offer the opportunity to observe the continuous policing of memory that can only be inferred in other associations.

Sons of harkis writing on the association websites contest the traitor identity assigned to the harkis by many of their Algerian counterparts, as well as their absence from the French national narrative, by portraying the harkis as heroic French soldiers. By promoting a narrative of the harkis as having defended France (since Algeria had been part of France) from the FLN terrorists, they position the harkis in the French narrative of the war and assert their own claims to this history. They maintain a distinction between French of Algerian origin (whose parents, according to these harkis, were the FLN terrorists) and their own, fully French identity. Moreover, sons of harkis on these

association websites promote a unified and static version of the past and vehemently denounce any interpretations that do not exactly fit their own, whether they are expressed by individual harkis or non-harkis, including academic historians.

Cultural carriers of memory, in the form of memoirs, novels, and films have also become important ways that the harkis present narratives of their past. These cultural carriers provide testimonies of individual suffering, from the beginning of the Algerian War to the present day. Their audience appears to be the Euro-French community and non-harki Algerian immigrants, from whom they seek to evoke sympathy and understanding. Harki memoirs have constituted a popular form of cultural carriers, as evidenced by the fact that six personal memoirs and collections of testimonies were published in the three-year span between 2003 and 2006. One of these memoirs, *Leïla: Avoir Dix-Sept Ans Dans Un Camp De Harkis* (Leïla, Seventeen Years Old in a Harki Camp), was made into a feature film, entitled *Harkis*. It was shown at primetime on France 2, a major national television network in France, and is now available on DVD. *Harkis* was heavily advertised in major French newspapers before its showing and it has reached an even wider audience than the memoirs, making it arguably the most visible representation of harki collective memory in French society. All six of the memoirs were written by two daughters of harkis, Dalila Kerchouche and Fatima Besnaci-Lancou.

These female memoir writers are the carriers of a highly individualistic, personal, and ambiguous memory. They entertain the idea that harkis are traitors and ultimately exonerate their fathers from this identity by portraying the harkis as victims (of the colonial system, the FLN, the French army, and French racism). Daughters of harkis

seek reconciliation with other people of Algerian origin in France. By portraying the harkis as victims of French colonialism and racism, they emphasize experiences that both groups share. They also seek reconciliation with the French, as their stories are not couched in resentment, but rather in terms of eventual assimilation and forgiveness. This narrative of victimhood has been well-received by the Euro-French population, who have been very receptive to these women as representatives of their community and have demonstrated a willingness to accept the misdeeds of their parents' generation. The harkis fit into the French narrative of the Algerian War and its aftermath as the innocent by-products of French colonialism and discrimination.

Memoirs and association websites thus frame their narratives of the harki past in distinctive ways. Although they share a general understanding of the history of the harkis, they emphasize different moments and offer contradictory interpretations of events. Disagreements arise as a result of differences in the way these two carriers of memory function and who produces them. Even though both carriers are produced by second-generation harkis, memoir writers represent individuals and do not have the same motivations as organizational leaders, who act in the name of the collectivity. Furthermore, the forms of harki collective memory are gendered, as it is women who write the memoirs and predominantly men who join the associations and establish the websites. Harki is a male-coded category, since it was originally as soldiers that people become harkis, and their families become harkis by association with this male figure. Women writers, however, contest the designation "harki" in a way that men, even the

sons of harkis, do not. Disagreements over framing have led to important conflicts among harkis.

These carriers of memory are competing for the same memory space within their community, but they are also competing to influence French memory of the harki past. Both memoir writers and harkis in associations react strongly to the exclusion they have experienced from the French and Franco-Algerians and therefore want to correct and influence the dominant understandings of their history. It is this experience of exclusion that unites them as harkis and forms the basis for their harki identity. All carriers of harki collective memory seek to rehabilitate the harki image to gain some form of integration and acceptance into French society. They have simply developed different narratives about their relationship to France and different ways of asserting their French identity. Thus, harki collective memory functions within the context of French national memories of the war and its aftermath, and seeks to integrate itself into these memories, not to create a separate memory community.

The harkis' narratives should therefore be included in the national narrative and in historical education. Minority groups frequently challenge official state memory and suggest their own historical narrative, and these particular narratives are the products of the vacuum left by the period of French amnesia regarding the Algerian War. The historian Benjamin Stora has used the term "war of memories" to describe the current debate over the history of colonialism and decolonization that has arisen to fill this vacuum. He argues that groups such as harkis, pieds-noirs, descendants of slaves, and grandchildren of colonial subjects each have their own memories and interpretations of

this past, and are fighting to get some sort of recognition and reparation.<sup>5</sup> He notes that some people fear the effects of these disparate memories among the descendants of rival groups on national unity.<sup>6</sup> This case reveals, however, that different and conflicting narratives do not necessarily imply social division or separatism. Through their various collective memories, the harkis are not asserting multicultural difference (they never emphasize their Muslim identity), but are instead trying to claim their place in French history and promote national unity.

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<sup>5</sup> Benjamin Stora and Thierry Leclère, *La Guerre des Mémoires: La France face à son passé colonial* (Paris : Editions de l'Aube, 2007), 11.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid, 45.