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Research article

Remembering the Algerian War in France: The Role of Interest Groups in Framing Ontological (In)Security

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Abstract

The Algerian War occupies a particularly contentious and emotionally charged place in France's national memory – serving as the source of a veritable war of memories that is regularly fought on various political and scholarly battlegrounds. Previous research has shown that the tension between republican universalism and the colonial crimes committed during imperial conquest has produced a colonial legacy that sits uncomfortably at the heart of French identity. Contributing to this scholarship, this article employs the theoretical premises of ontological security theory to examine France's incomplete reconciliation with its colonial past. By analysing how interest groups generate ontological insecurity through the contestation of the state's official narrative in their pursuit to gain official recognition and commemoration, this analysis provides a novel understanding of bottom-up memory lobbying in France. It thus examines how Harki memory entrepreneurs and associations commemorating the 1961 Paris massacre strategically frame their demands for recognition by attacking the Republic's ontological security. The study suggests that a closer analysis of bottom-up threat constructions to the state's ontological security order contributes to a more holistic understanding of the internal deliberation of the state's sense of self.

Keywords: *Algeria, France, memory studies, memory activism, non-state actors, ontological security*

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Introduction

On 28 March 2024, the French National Assembly passed a resolution that officially recognises the massacre of Algerian protesters on 17 October 1961 in Paris. In support of the resolution, its primary signatory, Sabrina Sabahi, argued that 'this is about defining the way we look at ourselves' by commemorating those 'forgotten by the history of France' (Assemblée nationale 2024).[1] Despite marking an important step towards the recognition and inclusion of marginalised memories in France, the process of coming to terms with the past and particularly the memory of the decolonial war in Algeria continue to be polarising topics. Since the French state's official recognition of the Algerian *War* in 1999 – previously it was officially referred to as an 'operation to maintain order' – debates forming part of this 'guerre des mémoires' (Stora & Leclère: 2007) have become more salient.

The significance of the Algerian War for the broader post-colonial moment in France should be understood against the backdrop of Algeria's relevance in the broader French imperial project. As the Algerian-born French historian Benjamin Stora (2021a: 119) highlights, 'the extensive colonisation by Europeans, the discovery of oil and gas, the nuclear experiments in the Sahara Dessert, and the cruelty of a war that lasted more than seven years' between 1954 and 1962, have constituted Algerian centrality and singularity in the history of France.

Despite, or perhaps because of, Algeria's centrality to the French imperial project, its loss marked the beginning of a deliberate politics of amnesia, codified through a series of amnesty laws from 1962 onwards. Nevertheless, the limits of the state's attempt to deliberately suppress the memory of the Algerian War of decolonialisation became increasingly evident. As Jansen observes, 'since the 1990s, in countries such as France, Italy and Germany, it is possible to identify a "rediscovery" of colonial history in academic, public and sometimes even political discourse' (Jansen 2010: 266). This rediscovery was largely driven by 'memory entrepreneurs', actors committed to the public recollection of the past to create common points of reference in the present and for the future (Morin 2024; Pollak 1993). These memory entrepreneurs have thereby reinvigorated public debates about the Algerian War and obliged French political elites to confront historical wrongdoings.

The entry of previously suppressed memories into public, academic and political spaces of deliberation has fuelled a 'memory war' (Stora & Leclère 2007) over how

1 All translations from French to English were done by the author.

France ought to reckon with its history of colonisation and imperial violence – a subject that has been extensively studied.[2] Scholars have also examined how shame and the contradictions within French Republican identity, often oscillating between universalist ideals and exclusionary hermeneutics, inform the French politics of memory.

These studies resonate strongly with the now well-established literature on ontological security studies (OSS), which explores how states seek to preserve a coherent sense of self in time through the protection of the state's identity. By managing shame and guilt through hegemonic narratives and behavioural routines, states attempt to establish and maintain a sense of ontological security thereby legitimising political action and policy shifts. It is therefore striking that OSS has not yet been applied to analyse France's changing, yet incomplete process of coming to terms with its colonial past.

Moreover, although non-state actors (NSAs) are frequently acknowledged in studies on memories of the Algerian War, little attention has been paid to the specific framing strategies employed by these interest groups in their endeavour to achieve official recognition by the French government. As such, the specific ways in which NSAs exert pressure, the ways shame and guilt are mobilised as tools to advance arguments and the extent to which the recollection of the memories of the Algerian War constitutes an anxiety-inducing process for French policymakers have thus far not been systematically examined.

To fill this research gap this article employs the conceptual frameworks of OSS to examine France's incomplete reconciliation with its colonial past as well as framing theory to focus on the role of interest groups in creating ontological insecurity through the mobilisation and contestation of aspects of the hegemonic state narrative to gain official recognition and the inscription of so-called 'cloistered memories' (Eldridge 2016: 8). As such, this article explores how memory entrepreneurs and NSAs can attack the ontological security of a state through strategic framing activities in order to politicise their demands and secure official recognition.

Because of recent policy shifts towards full or partial recognition of their advocacy, two groups are of particular interest to the present inquiry and have therefore been chosen as analytical in-depth case studies to investigate interest groups' demands for recognition and commemoration in France. The first group are the *Harkis* – France's auxiliary soldiers during the Algerian War, and their descendants. The second group is composed of activists advocating for the official

2 The author most connected to the colonial history of France in Algeria, as well as its impacts on contemporary France politics, is historian Benjamin Stora. See *inter alia*, La gangrène et l'oubli: La mémoire de la guerre d'Algérie, (1991); La guerre des mémoires: la France face à son passé colonial, with Leclère, T. (2007); and Doit-on s'excuser de la colonisation ? With Blanchard, P. (2025).

recognition of the Paris massacre that took place on 17 October 1961. Respectively, these memory entrepreneurs began to advocate and lobby in the 1980s for the official recognition and an apology by the French government for the suffering they experienced as a consequence of discriminatory government policy. Since then, both groups have achieved an, albeit partial, fulfilment of their demands of recognition for their suffering during the two-term presidency of Emmanuel Macron. However, whereas the *Harkis* secured an official state apology in 2021, as well as an official acknowledgment of state responsibility and reparation payments through law n°2022-229 in 2022, the associations working towards an official recognition of the Paris massacre as a state crime received only partial recognition in 2024 through resolution n°273. The former's recognition by law officially establishes state responsibility whereas the latter's recognition by resolution continues to negate a state crime.

By employing an outcome-oriented process-tracing (PT) methodology, this article utilises a qualitative approach to construct an in-depth case study analysis of the contemporary moment of recognition and commemoration of the Algerian War in France. To ensure the applicability of the findings, a diversity of primary and secondary sources have been analysed. The primary sources include *inter alia* speeches, court documents, parliamentary debates and legal documents. Data triangulation across these sources enables the cross-validation of causal inferences, thereby fulfilling the demanding methodological requirements of PT. This ensures the reliability and internal validity of the case studies at hand.

This article argues that the modification of the official narrative of the Algerian war is the consequence of pressure exerted by memory entrepreneurs who, by highlighting injustices and demanding the inclusion of their memories into the official memory, achieved a rewriting of the hegemonic account. To do so, this article begins by outlining how the omission of colonial crimes in the so-called *roman national* has been interpreted by the existing literature. The article then goes on to highlight relevant studies on narratives and narrative contestation within OSS. In the third part, this study explores how the *Harkis* and associations commemorating 17 October 1961 have, to different extents, successfully introduced subversive frames of historical events that question the hegemonic narrative, and achieved the (partial) reception of their demands of state apology and official commemoration.

This study argues that, by framing incoherences in the hegemonic state narrative through the introduction of counter-narratives, NSAs can attack the ontological security of the state. In order to (re-)establish ontological security, while also making sense of the newly introduced frames, the state is pressured to re-narrate its understanding of the state's 'self'. Thus, state representatives are expected to establish a logical autobiographic narrative that incorporates the subversive frame, because of the state's 'internal efforts to maintain their self-reflexive narratives,

their positive views of [the] self' (Subotić 2016: 614). The expected outcome is an amended narrative that compromises between previously dominant and newly incorporated frames, since uncertainty 'can only be overcome with the definition of a new frame which gives meaning to the new reality' (Voltolini 2016: 1505). Overall, this article concludes that the introduction of OSS to the study of memory politics in France allows for a more holistic understanding of the reconfigurations in the Republic's memory landscape by positing that new state-narratives respond to subversive framing strategies by memory entrepreneurs and are narratives to fulfil France's ontological security needs.

The colonial fracture in French Republican identity

The monumental work *Les Lieux de mémoire* represents a central point of departure for the investigation into France's ontological security and sense of self. Under the academic leadership of historian Pierre Nora, seven volumes on significant sites of memory were published in France between 1984 and 1992. In the final volume of the English translation, Nora stresses that the Republic as supplier of French national identity through the provision of 'history as the myth underlying the destiny of the nation' has now ceded 'her' place to society at large (Nora 1989: 633). Here he is referring to the state's authority over the '*roman national,* which explains the past for the nation-state's citizens in order to rationalize the nation's present and to look ahead to its great future' (Yanhong 2020: 151). Postmodernity has called into question the *roman national* through the introduction of memories that were previously suppressed by the historical narrative of the French nation-state (Yanhong 2020). Consequently, France's national narrative risks 'being shattered' (Yanhong 2020: 165). Overall, Nora argues that the loss of the state's monopoly over the *roman national*, which allows it to determine national history *qua* national myths, represents the root cause for the fragmentation of contemporary French society.

The ground-breaking echo of *Les Lieux* as one of the most influential works on memory in the late twentieth century stems, however, not only from the topics that were included, but also, significantly, from those that were not. The amnesiac omission of France's colonial enterprise in *Les Lieux* seems, 'from the standpoint of current academic trends . . . nothing short of fantastic' (Mann 2005: 412, see also: Jarvis 2021). This colonial lacuna has been attributed to Nora's Eurocentric, elegiac construction of the French Republic (Anderson 2009), and is clearly disclosed in the introduction of the first volume of *Les Lieux.* Here, Nora alleges that 'independence has swept into history societies newly awakened from their ethnological slumbers by colonial violation' (1989: 7), pointing to the apparent ahistoricity of France's colonies and thereby supposedly justifying their exclusion from the relevant history-memory nexus of Nora's enquiry (Achille, Forsdick & Moudileno 2020). As a consequence, Perry Anderson points out,

> the entire imperial history of the country, from the Napoleonic conquests through the plunder of Algeria under the July Monarchy, to the seizure of Indochina in the Second Empire, and the vast African booty of the Third Republic, becomes a *non-lieu* at the bar of these bland recollections. (Anderson 2009: 161)

The result of this omission is twofold. On the one hand, *Les Lieux* serves as a somewhat melancholic attempt to create a '*union sucrée*', through which 'the divisions and discords of French society would melt away in the fond rituals of post-modern remembrance' (Anderson, 2009: 162). On the other hand, it is also a comprehensive snapshot of a time when the debate about France's colonies – and the memory of the Algerian War in particular – were not established as *lieux de mémoire* but rather as *lieux supprimés* – that is, places of non-memory excluded from the state's narrative about the past. Following the wars of decolonisation, the end of the French empire and the fall of the French Fourth Republic, de Gaulle made wilful forgetting the Republic's 'primary strategy toward the Algerian War' (Derderian 2002: 29).

However, this suppression of collective commemoration of the colonial enterprise was unsuccessful in imposing a general amnesia. Individuals who were directly affected by colonial crimes maintained the 'private' memory of the war (to employ Nora's term). Since the 1990s, much has been done to remedy the determined forgetting of the colonial enterprise in France. This increasing confrontation with painful and traumatic memories of the Republic's imperial past must be understood against the backdrop of the broader international environment in which the demands for official recognition and state apologies for atrocities have been growing. To describe the post–Cold War era, various scholars have employed the term 'memory boom' (Langenbacher 2010: 13), the 'age of apology' (Barkan & Karn 2006: 8) and an era of 'international morality' (Barkan 2001) that is characterised by a large number of restitution cases, official apologies and commemorative days (Bachleitner 2021). Because of this recollection, national governments have been put under pressure to recognise their nation's past wrongdoings and to acknowledge previously suppressed and marginalised memories.

For France, this confrontation with so-called 'fragmented memories' or 'cloistered memories' of its colonial empire has been a delayed, strongly disputed and highly emotional process (Stora 1992). Since 'one of the defining features of the French state is how it defines the nation as a soul and a spiritual principle' (Mbembe 2011: 109), Bédarida argues that 'the French have a particularly strong commemorative conscience . . . because history plays a central role in the national culture and the individual identity of every citizen' (Cohen 2002: 220).

As such, the narrative underlying French Republican identity is not only pervasive, but constitutive of France's self-identity and international legitimacy. Marcussen et

al. aptly highlight that the 'state-centred republicanism – the duty to promote revolutionary values such as brotherhood, freedom, equality and human rights, in short, "civilization" – constituted a continuous element in the discourse about political order' (Marcussen et al. 1999: 628). The construction of French identity on the basis of republican values on the one hand, and 'anti-republican' crimes committed by the Republic on the other, explain why France 'has grappled for years with the dark side of its history, including the collaborationist Vichy regime, its colonial history, and its protracted withdrawal from Indochina and Algeria' (Langenbacher 2010: 15).

As mentioned in the introduction, the Algerian War retains a particularly contentious and emotionally charged place in French public discourse as 'the multilayered and often entangled narratives reflect the fragmentation of memorial landscape along community lines' (Achille et al. 2020: 15). Underlying this 'war of memories' (Stora & Leclère 2007) is a sense of declinism that is directly opposed to the perceived former *grandeur* of the French empire and its export of hexagonal enlightenment and universalism (Mbembe 2011: 105). Central to this memory war is the 'colonial fracture' which investigates the interplay between the ideas of republicanism and the legacies of empire (Mbembe 2011). A 2006 publication by Blanchard, Bancel and Lemaire firmly captures the dispute surrounding colonial legacies in contemporary France, arguing that:

> The history of colonialism and the memories through which this history is socially constructed affect France's very identity as a nation, questioning the ways in which our national history is (re)presented, but also, in part, the myth of the supposed uniqueness of the "French genius" – an imagined composition of revolutionary values and universal duty, republican righteousness and indiscriminate tolerance of the Other, of the "civilising mission" and fear of difference. (2006: 9)

It is this tension between republican universalism and the Republic's colonial crimes that makes the process of coming to terms with France's colonial history a source of ontological insecurity. As Henry Rousso has highlighted, like the Vichy regime's crimes against humanity, the Republic's crimes during the Algerian War are 'marked by internal divisions, a tarnished image of France as guardian of human rights and represented two decisive stages in the relative decline of French power' (Rousso 2002). As such, facing its past 'demons' is a markedly anxiety-inducing process for the French Republican self-imagination and thereby a source of ontological insecurity.

Ontological security through narrative construction

Introduced to the studies of International Relations (IR) two decades ago, ontological security has gained traction in asserting that states securitise their

national identities and behavioural routines within the international system. Broadly, 'ontological security is security not of the body but of the self, the subjective sense of who one is' (Mitzen 2006: 344). As opposed to traditional IR security theories, ontological security understands 'security as being' rather than 'security as survival' (Steele 2005: 527). OSS thus questions mainstream understandings of 'the primacy of physical security in IR' as determining state behaviour (Gustafsson & Krickel-Choi 2020: 877). By successfully proposing an alternative explanation for security-motivated behaviour of states, OSS has been increasingly employed by political scientists and IR-scholars, contributing to the considerable methodological and theoretical expansion of ontological security theory.

Within OSS, the IR-scholar Brent Steele emphasises the importance of narratives for the constitution of the self and as such for the establishment of ontological security. He argues that 'the power of memory and organizing that memory through a historical narrative . . . serve(s) to motivate nation-states to organize their Selves first and foremost, getting that Self in order to interact with the "others" of international politics' (2008: 60). Steele thus highlights the importance of self-identity, biographical continuity and state narratives *within* the state. In this understanding, the collection of information in and through the past results not only in structures of meaning but is made possible by their mnemonic narration since the narrative serves as 'a "meta code" arising between our experience of the world and our efforts to describe the experience and bestow it with meaning' (Berenskoetter 2014: 269).

The ability to narrate and justify the existence of the state by highlighting certain aspects of the national biography, by inventing traditions to create structures of meaning and by forgetting (or at least attempting to) painful and traumatising experiences, is fundamental not only for the existence of the state, but for the community it establishes. As Berenskoetter notes, the 'political potency of a national biography lies in its function to provide a community with a basic discourse, or master narrative, which guides and legitimizes courses of action and provides ontological security' (2014: 279). Overall, narratives are crucial to understanding the ontological security-seeking behaviour of nations. Because of their significance for nation building, for creating a sense of historical continuity and for operationalising historic myths to create adherence to a national consciousness, incorporating the study of narratives into OSS is key to understanding how states come into being and maintain their being-in-the-world.

For the present investigation, Steele and Berenkoetter's complementary conceptualisations of ontological security through self-reflexivity is significant in two ways. Firstly, they foreground historical continuity and narrative construction as relevant conditions for ontological security. As such, behaviour is self-monitored by the need to justify and contextualise actions, such as policy shift, within the broader self-identity construct. Secondly, they highlight the process of internal

deliberations of the national 'self' between different actors that participate in the policy-making process to determine a course of action.

As will be shown, interest groups attack these narratives and question the historic myths that create national cohesion, thereby forcing the state to respond to their demands through the establishment of a new narrative that includes their specific histories, commemorates their suffering and recognises their memories.

Recognising *Harki* suffering: Camps as *lieu de mémoire*

'As a child, I cried with [my mother] over a history I did not understand. Her tears became mine, her fears followed me in my nightmares. . . . The past took up all the space and haunted the present.' (Telali cited in Eldridge 2016: 209)

The *Harkis* case offers a telling example for the present enquiry regarding the ability of interest groups to attack the state's ontological security through strategic lobbying and framing activities to gain official recognition. Significantly, on 23 February 2022, law n°2022-229 was promulgated by President Macron, recognising the responsibility of the state for the undignified treatment and living conditions of the *Harkis* and their families that emigrated from Algeria to France after the end of the Algerian War. As will be shown, Macron's decision to formally apologise, as well as to install reparation payments was the result of successful lobbying activities by *Harki* activists.

The *Harkis* represent a community of native, mostly Muslim Algerians who were employed as auxiliaries of the French Army throughout the Algerian War. With the end of the war looming and an independent Algeria on the horizon, morale amongst *Harki* soldiers dropped as fears of reprisals from pro-independence fighters heightened considerably. Plans to prepare for the arrival in the metropole of the European settlers in Algeria and their descendants became concrete by early 1961. Importantly, the *Harkis* were classed as '*Français de souche nord-africaine*' (FSNA)[3] and differentiated from the '*Français de souche européen*'.[4] In 1962, the French army employed this differentiation to determine who would be granted French citizenship and repatriated, and who would become Algerian and have their French citizenship revoked (Morin: 2022). As Morin highlights, the *Harkis* lost French citizenship and were classified as 'undesirable' and 'incompatible' with the Republic (2002: 116)

By 1962, the year of Algerian independence, widespread violence was being carried out against the soldiers who had fought with the French. It was during this time that the term '*Harki*' became synonymous with the word 'traitor' in Algeria, and encouraged brutal reprisals, including forced labour, assault, torture and massacres. From July 1962 onwards, massacres began to unfold against the *Harkis*,

3 'French person of north African stock', referring to 'origin'.
4 'French person of European stock', referring to 'origin'.

leading to between 60,000 and 70,000 deaths, as well as to the imprisonment of over 10,000 *Harkis* (see Hautreux 2006; Morin 2022). Because of this widespread discrimination and violence, many *Harkis* and their families emigrated to France seeking refuge.

However, the *Harki* migrants from Algeria were neither expected nor welcomed by the government in Paris, which had previously implemented a strategy to encourage FSNA to stay in independent Algeria. Consequently, the Republic was unprepared for the wave of immigrants that arrived in the decade following the ceasefire. To accommodate the *Harkis* upon their arrival in France, many were lodged in precariously built housing – the '*hameaux de forestage*'[5]. There, the *Harkis* and their dependents lived in enclosed camps, isolated from the surrounding area, and lacking electricity, clean water and heating. The military personnel in charge of guarding the camps was often recruited from amongst the ranks of former colonial officers who were considered knowledgeable about 'Muslim affairs' (Morin 2022). As Eldridge highlights, 'the camps have become emblematic of the experience of *Harkis* and their families in France and have come to stand as a symbol of the wider process of marginalisation and forgetting to which the auxiliaries were subjected' (Eldridge 2016: 26).

Unsurprisingly, this isolated and totalitarian form of shelter was foundational to the *Harkis'* memory of abandonment. The living conditions within the *hameaux* quickly became the object of public contestation when, in the 1970s, protest against the dire conditions began to spread. For instance, in 1975, four *Harki* children took the director of the camp in Saint-Maurice-l'Ardois hostage, demanding the closure of the camp and the 'full integration of French Muslims into the national community' (Pierret 2007: 187). Though only one of many protests, their demands aptly illustrate the extreme living conditions which led to their protest as well as their experience of rejection by the Republic as a collective form of identification. As such, in the 1970s, *Harki* groups and activists predominantly opposed their living conditions within the camps and their restricted access to public spaces.

From the 1990s onwards, protestors additionally emphasised a commemorative dimension. Often led by second-generation *Harki* immigrants, protestors demanded official recognition for their families' suffering. As Eldridge notes, 'reappropriating the past was seen as a way . . . to obtain retrospective historical justice, by rewriting the narrative of their parents' past but also as a way of enabling them to situate more clearly their own identity in the present' (2016: 158). This narrative construction led to a universalisation of the *Harkis*' respective memories and experiences which, in reality, were extremely diverse. For instance, only about half of the *Harkis* who came to France were housed in the camps and hamlets

5 Eng.: 'forest hamlets'

either temporarily or permanently. Nonetheless, the camps became a universal symbol for all *Harkis*, since they offer a particularly effective '*lieu de mémoire* that encapsulates the notion that the *Harkis* were abandoned by the French' (Eldridge 2016: 226). This unification around emotionally evocative symbols of abandonment led to an increasing output of documentaries and novels in the 1990s which altered the public profile of the *Harkis* and their families in France.

Moreover, the protests in the 1990s witnessed the emergence of a great number of *Harki* associations, so that by the 2000s over 500 registered *Harki* groups were in existence (Eldridge 2016). Although most of them were inactive, some associations were able to develop a national profile, actively lobbying politicians, inviting members of parliament to their meetings, coordinating their protesting efforts and thus influencing the decision-making process.

The 'Association justice, information et réparation pour les Harkis' (AJIR) stands out for its particularly successful mobilisation efforts, having been involved in the arrangement of the first National Day of Homage to the *Harkis* in 2001. This is in addition to its successful lobbying efforts in contribution to the preparation of the infamous 2005 law which required educators to teach about the positive impact of the French colonial project (Eldridge 2016). The discourse promoted by the *Harki* activists is, as Eldridge highlights, 'fundamentally framed by the idea that *Harkis* have been the casualty of a catalogue of betrayal and abandonment perpetrated by others' (Eldridge 2016: 275). The increasingly high profile of national associations rallying for the cause of the *Harkis* and their descendants through media attention and direct access to policy makers, gave these activists a mediatised platform to introduce a subversive frame to the hegemonic state narrative which had largely silenced *Harki* memory.

Exemplifying the successful attack on France's ontological security is the process leading up to the recognition of the undignified treatment within the camps. As one of the largest and most important *lieu de mémoire* for the *Harki* activists, the Camp de Rivesaltes has played a fundamental role in the formalisation and validation of *Harki* memory framing. The transformation of the camp into a place of commemoration by 2015 contributed to the formalisation of *Harki* frames of victimhood and abandonment.

Significantly, the Camp de Rivesaltes is part of a broader history of negligence, transit and pain. It was first inaugurated to house unwanted foreigners and refugees who arrived in France during the Spanish Civil War. Under the Vichy regime, the camp played a 'key role in France's collaboration policy by rounding up foreign Jews and deporting them to Auschwitz' (Mémorial du camp de Rivesaltes n.d.). From 1962 until December 1964, the *Harkis* and their families were placed in Rivesaltes. After 1964, the camp was used for Guinean soldiers fighting for France as well as soldiers from North Vietnam. Until the 1990s, the camp was sporadically used by the army but largely forgotten by the wider public.

However, with the wave of *Harki* protests in the mid-90s, local civil society organisations began to erect monuments to commemorate the different groups that had transited the camp. First, in 1994, a memorial was constructed commemorating Jews that were deported from Rivesaltes to extermination camps in the east. On 2 December 1995, a second commemorative stele was placed at the site reading, 'in honour of the *Harkis* community which, loyal to the flag and the values of the Republic, honours all its soldiers who died for France during the various conflicts the Republic has known'. Slowly, the camp became an object of public commemoration and *lieu de mémoire* for memory entrepreneurs.

An important turning point presented itself in 1997 after original documents accounting for the deportation of Jewish internees at Rivesaltes were found at the local waste collection centre. Following this discovery, journalist Joël Mettay published an article about the historical documents. His commentary triggered a local scandal about the negligence of the authorities who had disposed of the papers which accounted for crimes against humanity during the Holocaust. Subsequently, a national petition was launched by two local teachers, Claude Delmas and Claude Vauchez, entitled '*Rivesaltes: mémoire ou amnésie collective*'[6] calling for an end to the 'more or less deliberate, collective forgetting' and the creation of a centre of historic research, reflection and exchanges at Rivesaltes (Pette 2023). Thus, the camp became the subject of political deliberation and, in 2000, a commission made up of several associations involved in issues of commemoration was set up. Moreover, local civil society organisations such as the association '*Trajectoire*'[7] supported the collection of eyewitness accounts and documents for exhibitions (Welter 2014). Additionally, local associations established the first international contacts and began to raise awareness of the camp at international human rights conferences (Welter 2014).

Importantly, the link established between the Jews' internment during the Vichy Regime and the *Harki* community's transit through the camps following the end of the Algerian War lent considerable weight to the *Harkis'* memory framing of mistreatment and abandonment. As Rausch shows, in a repeated blending of past and present, the Rivesaltes Camp and the forest hamlets are labelled concentration camps in an attempt to prove France's complicity in the persecution of the *Harkis* (Rausch 2023: 223). This assessment is supported by Eldridge, who has shown that the language employed by *Harki* activists was 'rooted in the concepts of persecution and genocide' and thereby 'strongly reminiscent of that which accompanied the reawakening of Jewish memory in the 1970s' (Eldridge 2016: 276). The creation of a place of commemoration at Rivesaltes would serve to formalise this link, placing the *Harki* victims of France's abandonment next to the Jewish victims of France's collaboration in the Holocaust.

6 Eng.: 'Rivesaltes: memory or collective amnesia?'
7 Eng.: 'Trajectory'

In 2015, the memorial was opened after nearly 17 years of political campaigning and lobbying efforts by local NSAs and national interest groups including AJIR and the '*Comité National de liaison des Harkis*' (CNLH). Notably, throughout this long period of campaigning and with the opening of the memorial in 2015, the official narrative that had previously ignored the abandonment of the *Harkis* and later rejected the state's responsibility in this abandonment was fundamentally altered. As Berenskoetter argues, if 'governments sustain their legitimacy in part by providing and representing an authentic national biography for their society, then challenging their rule requires the formulation and dissemination of an alternative narrative that resonates with a large section of that society' (2014: 280). Through the establishment of a link between the Jewish and *Harki* internees at Rivesaltes, the framing of the *Harki* community as abandoned and the transformation of the camp into a *lieu de mémoire,* French state officials were compelled to re-narrate the official historical accounts and recognise the *Harkis*.

Thus, to reestablish ontological security, the new narrative is framed as a return to Republican values. As exemplified by the press kit released prior to the opening, the Rivesaltes memorial is presented as highlighting the 'Republican values of humanism' aiming 'to raise public awareness of the dangers that weakened democratic values in the past and which have, and continue today to jeopardize the freedom of men and women everywhere' (Mémorial du camp de Rivesaltes 2015). During the opening ceremony, then Prime Minister Manuel Valls evoked the values of the Republic, arguing that they can be found in remembering and creating places of memory: 'Hope often died at Rivesaltes, in the eyes of these children, these men and women, marooned, humiliated and oppressed. But today hope must live again, for this is the soul of eternal France: hope and exigency' (Valls 2015). By discursively establishing a break between the history at Rivesaltes and the contemporary Republic, Valls situated the painful memories of France's history within a broader narrative of hope, inclusion and universalism. According to Valls, the exclusion of minorities at Rivesaltes denies the humanism for which France symbolically stands. The commemoration of this marginalisation, however, reestablishes the Republican values. The lesson that should be drawn from this memory lies in 'giving a chance to those who come to live in France, embrace its values and aspire to become French, [while] refraining from casting that suspicious, inquisitive gaze on them - the gaze of yesterday' (Valls 2015). Overall, the transformation of the camp from *lieu oublié*[8] to *lieu de mémoire* should be attributed to the activism of local associations and their work against (deliberate) forgetting. The politicisation of the project, the support of local state and NSAs as well as the framing of abandonment successfully led to the completion of what is today one of the largest places of commemoration for the *Harki* community.

8 Eng.: 'Forgotten place'

Moreover, with the 2017 election of French President Emmanuel Macron, the *Harkis'* central demands relating to an official apology and reparation payments gained new impetus. In 2020, Macron commissioned historian Benjamin Stora to write a report to address the question of the commemoration of the Algerian War in France and to propose recommendations to reconcile the diverse memories. When the report was published in 2021, *Harki* associations were dissatisfied with the result, highlighting that their demands had been excluded from the final document. On 10 January that year, in an open letter spearheaded by the association AJIR and signed by the presidents of numerous *Harki* associations, the representatives requested to meet with the president to discuss reparation payments for the living conditions in the camps as well as the promulgation of a law officially apologising for their abandonment (AJIR Pour les *Harkis* 2021a).

In their letter, the *Harki* associations address Macron directly, expressing the hope that as 'President of the Republic, for the honour of France and of all those who died for her, you will pass this long-awaited law during your term in office' (AJIR Pour les *Harkis* 2021a). In response to this letter, the president received four representatives of the associations on 10 May 2021 at the Elysée to discuss a law recognising the responsibility of the state for their abandonment and allocating reparation payments (AJIR Pour les *Harkis* 2021b). Having promised during the meeting to provide an official response to the request for legislation, Macron invited 120 *Harkis* and their relatives to the Elysée Palace on 20 September 2021. During this reception, Macron officially recognised the abandonment of the *Harkis* and apologised, stating 'this is not a meeting with the *Harkis*, it's a meeting with the truth, with France, with a part of us' (Macron 2021). As Valls had done at Rivesaltes, so too did Macron present France's past actions not only as an affront to the *Harkis*, but against Republican values in general: 'France abandoned and turned its back on [the *Harkis*]. Faced with those who had loyally served it, our country was faithful neither to its history nor to its values' (Macron 2021). Macron presents the recognition of *Harki* suffering as a reestablishment of Republican values and coherence. Inscribing France's past crimes against the *Harkis* into the official memory thus becomes a Republican act *sui generis.*

Overall, the activism and framing activities of the *Harkis* led to their official recognition as victims of the French state. The activism of second-generation *Harkis* from the 1990s onwards helped raise the public profile of the *Harkis.* Here, the establishment of the camps as a collective *lieu de mémoire* gave a tangible image to the collective struggle of all *Harkis* and provided a physical link for the discursively established parallels between the suffering of the Jews under Vichy and the *Harki* abandonment by the Fifth Republic. The creation of a place of commemoration at Rivesaltes was, as has been shown, the result of an alliance between local activists and national associations who relentlessly lobbied for the construction of the Rivesaltes memorial. The continuous engagement by the national *Harki*

associations, most importantly AJIR, led to further official measures that would ultimately cumulate in the official apology, as well as reparation payments in 2022.

To conclude, by effectively attacking the French state for abandoning them, stressing the '*sang versé pour la République*'[9], the *Harkis* were able to draw out and politicise inconsistencies in the hegemonic narrative of their reception in France following the Algerian War. By questioning the hegemonic narrative and thereby attacking the ontological security of the Republic, the *Harkis* achieved official commemoration, received a state-apology and financial compensation, and were able to inscribe their memory of abandonment into the state narrative.

The recognition of the 17 October 1961 Paris massacre

'On the riverbank I see the welcoming-committee that wants to turn this bridge into our coffin. The [opposing] flanks stare at each other, [and] a deathly silence settles between the two shores of the Seine. Then, a voice shouts: "Down with the curfew!" and the bullets start to rain' (Médine 2006).

Seventeen October 1961 has become emblematic of the wider violence that reigned over the Algerian community living in France during the Algerian War. As one of the bloodiest state repressions of a street protest in modern history (House & MacMaster 2006), the Paris massacre was the result of excessive violence by police forces against peaceful protestors. The precise number of deaths remains subject to controversial debate amongst historians and commentators. Some analysts have put the number at more than 200 killed and thousands injured (Einaudi 1991), whereas others have concluded that between 20 and 30 Algerians died as a consequence of police violence (Brunet 1999). Whether one follows the minimalist approach of Brunet or the maximalist number of Einaudi, 17 October 1961 cannot be taken out of the context of the broader terror and police violence that dictated the lives of Algerian migrant communities in France. As House and MacMaster highlight, the psychological and physical violence to which the Algerian workers were routinely subjected, 'became endemic within the police force and . . . show that the events of 17 October 1961 were not an anomaly but a manifestation of a deeply entrenched culture of aggressive racism' (House & MacMaster 2006: 80). Within this system of random stop-and-search operations in Paris, Algerians were regularly subjected to racial profiling, abuse, physical assault, humiliation, arrest and torture.

By 1961, with the end of the Algerian War looming, Maurice Papon, the prefect of the Parisian police at the time and who would later become a symbol of excessive police violence and state terror, intensified the systemic brutality. As a consequence of attacks by the pro-independentist Front Liberation Nationale (FLN), 'the Prefect of Police unleashed a wave of remorseless terror against the Algerian

9 Eng.: 'Blood spilled for the Republic'

immigrants' (House & MacMaster 2004: 95). Within this framework of excessive state violence, a discriminatory curfew was imposed that exclusively targeted Algerian residents of Paris. The intensification of police violence, the imposition of a discriminatory curfew and a rising number of bodies of North-African origin found in the Seine and different canals in Paris and the Île-de-France region created fertile ground for a series of FLN-organised demonstrations.

As such, in response to the October curfew, the FLN organised a protest in Paris on the eve of 17 October. At least 30,000 men, women and children moved peacefully through the large Parisian boulevards to reach the public centres of the capital. Following commands to hold their ground and not give way to the protestors, the Republican Security Corps and gendarmerie fired live ammunition into the crowds and beat the protestors with batons, iron bars and wooden sticks. The beatings were aimed at the heads and stomachs of protestors, as subsequent hospital records show. House and MacMaster write that the onslaught of police officers against protestors was so 'savage . . . that thirty of the fifty clubs (*bidules*) issued by the police district commander Mézière were broken' (House & MacMaster 2006: 118). Moreover, at different bridges in Paris, protestors were beaten to unconsciousness and thrown over the railings to drown in the Seine. Many dead would be found in the following days, downstream from these bridges. Other corpses were collected and removed by the police. Most of the eyewitness accounts that remain from these so-called *ratonnades* stem 'from the fact that at least one Algerian had survived a murderous attack, often against the odds and through an ability, although wounded, to reach the banks of the Seine' (House & MacMaster 2006: 136). However, many others who were killed remain unknown, which is why the number of deaths at the hands of the police remains an estimate.

Media reports and official accounts on the following day disguised the extent of the violence. The prefect explained that the exchange of gunfire was the consequence of FLN men shooting bullets at police officers, who returned fire in self-defence. Moreover, according to these reports, only three protestors had died while 13 police officers had been injured (Einaudi 1999). This official narrative would remain in place until the late 1990s.

As will be shown, the emergence of a counter-narrative in the 1990s, which employs a 'truth-and-justice' frame to highlight the state's official policy of falsification, attacked the official narrative and by extension the state's ontological security, forcing policy makers to respond and re-narrate the events. As House and MacMaster highlight 'the 1990s saw an important change to include the formulation of specific demands to government and attempts at wider awareness raising' (House & MacMaster 2006: 296). The push for commemoration in the 1990s was decidedly driven by newly formed associations, historians and academics, who questioned the official accounts of the massacre and elaborated counter-narratives that illustrated the extreme violence with which the police had

treated protestors. This new counter-narrative challenged the official narrative, which continued to maintain that only three protestors had died during the protests as a consequence of FLN-incited violence. Importantly, the three decades of suppression of the memory of the Paris massacre through a falsified official report makes the introduction of a counter-narrative that highlights the 'lies' (Le Cour Grandmaison 2017) of the state particularly threatening for France's ontological security. As such, coordinated pressure by different associations, the publicity through increased media attention, as well as the construction of a 'truth-and-justice' frame by memory activists created a threat to France's ontological security, compelling officials to react and establishing a new narrative of the events.

Central to this new impetus in the 1990s was the creation of the association *Au Nom de la mémoire* (ANM) by journalist Samia Messaoudi, film director Mehdi Lallaoui and historian Benjamin Stora. ANM published the book, *Le 17 Octobre, l'oubli revisité* as well as the film *Le Silence du fleuve*, organised conferences and protests to open the sealed archives as well as annual marches to commemorate the Paris massacre. Concurrently with these public campaigns, the historian Jean-Luc Einaudi published a comprehensive study of 17 October 1961, entitled *La bataille de Paris,* based on the archives of the FLN – he was not granted access to the French national archives – and on eye-witness accounts and interviews. His study provided the 'single most single most ground-breaking and influential investigation of the events' and offered, along with the increased activism by civil-society actors, 'another source of counter-knowledge with which to challenge the official French' narrative (House & MacMaster 2006: 7, 295).

The immediate reverberations of the publication in the media, as well as the united call for the commemorations planned on 17 October 1991 by a number of civil society associations and political parties, led to the gathering of over 2,500 people. The 30th anniversary of the massacre thus witnessed the assembly of a significant number of historians, state- and NSAs to commemorate the Algerian victims of 17 October 1961. ANM, moreover, organised the placement of a stele by the Pont de Bezons to remember the Algerians that had been thrown into the Seine. The stele was subsequently removed by the local authorities, 'indicating the sustained opposition by the French state to recognise its crime' (Einaudi 2001: 14). Nonetheless, the increased visibility of the Paris massacre and, importantly, the publication of Einaudi's *La Bataille de Paris* led to a large outpouring of articles and reports throughout October 1991. These articles almost unanimously proclaimed that the massacre had cost over 200 Algerian protesters their lives – a number that remains staunchly contested. As such, the activism of different associations as well as historians created the impetus for an increasing number of publications, documentaries, exhibitions, songs and articles about the Paris massacre.

Moreover, undoubtedly ending the collective amnesia of 17 October were two trials involving both Papon and Einaudi. In the first of these trials Papon was ac-

cused of crimes against humanity committed as head of the police in Bordeaux during Vichy in the 1940s. In this position, he collaborated in the deportation of the Jewish population from the Gironde region until 1944. The 1997 Bordeaux trial against Maurice Papon created a link between his involvement in the Holocaust and his crimes committed as Parisian prefect in 1961. Although the attention was primarily on the deportation and extermination of French Jews under the Vichy regime, a link was established between his oversight of crimes during the Holocaust and the Paris massacre during the Algerian War. The question of historical continuity was aptly summarised by historian Pierre Vidal-Naquet in an article for *Le Monde* in 2001 where he asked if we should not 'remember that the man who put the Jews into the trains to Auschwitz, was the same man of the 17 October 1961 massacre? Can we judge one side of Papon, but forget about the other?' (2001).

In the highly mediatised trial of Papon in 1997, Einaudi was invited by Gerard Boulanger, the leading lawyer who had filed the charges against Papon, to testify about Papon's actions as prefect of the Parisian police during the Algerian War (Einaudi 2001). However, because the amnesty laws passed after 1962 prohibited the judicial persecution of the prefect's actions during the Algerian War, Einaudi's testimony remained a symbolic act linking the genocide of the Jewish population with the massacre of the Algerian protestors. Boulanger explained, 'the sons and daughters of the Jewish victims gave the floor to the Arab sons and daughters of the 1961 *ratonnades*' (Boulanger, cited in Riceputi 2015: 87), establishing a symbolic alliance between the victims of Papon's persecution and, importantly, creating an untenable link between the Fifth Republic and the Vichy Regime. This emotionally evocative framing of historical continuity between World War II and the Algerian War enabled the memory of 1961 to emerge into the public eye, questioning the previously hegemonic narrative about the Paris massacre and forcing a re-narration of the events.

The controversy around the term 'massacre' which Einaudi employed to characterise the 1961 police violence in his book and again during the 1997 trial against Papon, led to a second lawsuit. This time, Papon demanded compensation from Einaudi for defamation. This latter trial, which commenced in 1999, enabled Einaudi's public defence of his characterisation and put the 17 October 1961 centre court. For the first time, victims of the violence stepped forward to speak publicly about the abuse they had experienced and witnessed during the 1961 protest. Einaudi's own investigation, as well as the witnesses that testified, led the judges to concede that a 'massacre' had indeed happened and Papon lost the trial against the historian. As House and MacMaster highlight, 'this was probably the most significant victory for campaigners in the long history of the struggles for recognition that wide-scale killings had taken place during the 17–20 October period' (House & MacMaster 2006: 314).

As a consequence of the pressure imposed by civil society and the media, Prime Minister Lionel Jospin eased access to the archives – a demand long made by associations and activists concerned with the exposure of the events of October and November 1961. Significantly, these preliminary and cautious steps to recognise the demands of the associations and historians were mainly taken up by the French socialists who formed part of the government during the cohabitation period between 1997 and 2002. By 2000, Jospin acknowledged 'the tragic events of 17 October 1961 which caused the deaths of dozens of Algerians' (Einaudi 2001: 67). Though still avoiding the term 'massacre' and refraining from recognising the state's responsibility for the events, his declaration nonetheless marked an important step towards official confrontations with the memory of 17 October 1961 and an official deviation from the previous narrative. As such 'the debates of the late 1990s had rendered inoperable the official French policy of silence in place since 1961 and made the 17 October repression a central event in debates on the war, nearly forty years after it took place' (House & MacMaster 2006: 314). The framing of the memory the 17 October 1961, as a 'massacre' and the establishment of historical continuity between the crimes of the Vichy regime and the events of the Algerian War led to the development of a successful counter-narrative that reintroduced the memory of 1961 into the collective memory. Through the work of activists, civil society organisations and historians, the prior narrative promulgated by Papon and state officials was sufficiently questioned through the imposition of a 'truth-and-justice' frame, paving the way towards state acknowledgment by 2000. However, although recognising the 'tragedy', the new official narrative introduced a 'bad apple'-frame which deflected blame away from the state to the person of Papon (the 'bad apple').

Since 1991, The levels of politicisation and solidarity that were achieved with the 30th anniversary of the massacre have not been reproduced. Nevertheless, because the narrative continued to avoid the term 'massacre' and maintain the 'bad apple'-frame, activists and associations have continued to advocate for an official recognition, however splintered. As such, specific partisan activism on the left achieved the successful official recognition of the Paris massacre in 2024. Following intense negotiations and using the 'niche parlementaire' – one day every month during which the agenda setting is reserved for opposition parties – the MP of Nanterre Sabrina Sabahi was able to successfully spearhead the 2024 resolution which officially recognises the violence on 17 October 1961 as a 'massacre'. Nonetheless, the wording of the final text was extensively restricted by members of Macron's Renaissance (Allombert 2024). While the term 'massacre' was successfully inscribed into the resolution, the 'bad apple'-frame remained in place deflecting responsibility on 'the authority of Police Prefect Maurice Papon on 17 October 1961' (Assemblée nationale 2024). Overall, although the recollection of 17 October 1961 and official recognition as 'massacre' has been a success,

the fact that this resolution continues to reject state responsibility is considered by Olivier Le Cour Grandmaison to be 'an Élysian tale, insofar as Macron holds Maurice Papon exclusively responsible' (Le Cour Grandmaison 2024). As such, the tale of the 'bad apple' continues to be in place, protecting the state from assuming responsibility for the massacre committed in the heart of Paris.

In conclusion, the recovery of the memory of 17 October 1961 in the 1990s after three decades of official silencing, and indeed disinformation, should be understood as the result of concerted memory activism by anti-racist organisations who sought official recognition and commemoration of the Paris massacre. The trials of 1997 and 1999 exposed the memory of the massacre to the general French public. The link drawn between World War II and the Algerian War, as well as the establishment of a 'truth-and-justice' frame constructed 'a social reality by culling a few elements of perceived reality and assembling a narrative that highlights connections amongst them to promote' the interpretation of 17 October 1961 as a massacre (Entman 2007: 164). This framing forced state officials to reinterpret the official account of the events and concede that a suppression had occurred. The events of the 1990s and the new narrative established by 2000 are examples of how civil society actors and memory activists were able to sufficiently politicise the memory of 17 October 1961, creating uncertainty to which the state had to respond. The new narrative that sought to reinstate a sense of ontological security, redirected blame away from the state and on the Prefect Papon. The 2024 recognition of the Paris 'massacre' can best be explained by the continued partisan activism on the left and the work of memory activists who refused to accept the official description of 17 October as a bloody 'repression' rather than a 'massacre'. The incompleteness of the recognition that redirects the blame to the former prefect is the result of a 'bad apple'-frame that deflects blame and shame by refusing to acknowledge the government's responsibility in the massacre.

Conclusion

In the 63 years since the end of the Algerian War, its memory has undergone profound changes and reconfigurations. Although officially silenced and suppressed by the state over three decades, different narrative frames about painful, traumatic and formative episodes of the Algerian War continued to circulate as cloistered memories within the communities directly affected. Predominantly promoted by the children of these communities, their experiences became the object of wider consideration through protests, books, films, songs, exhibitions, judicial proceedings and annual commemorative practices from the 1980s onwards. In their demands for recognition, interest groups framed 'current social and political debates in ways that raise uncomfortable questions for a nation which has always promoted itself as a harbinger of progress and a bastion of equality' (Eldridge 2016: 4). Successful framing strategies have called into question the Republic's

self-image, thereby forcing the government to respond to the demands of memory entrepreneurs and associations.

Using the cases of the *Harkis* as well as of different memory activists and associations commemorating the Paris massacre, this article has shown that NSAs can attack the ontological security of the state through strategic framing activities. In doing so, this article contributes to a more comprehensive theoretical understanding of the securitisation of state identity and the autobiographical narrative in France. The case studies presented in this study provide evidence of how interest groups can highlight inconsistencies and injustices in the state's official narrative of the Algerian War. The politicisation of their demands and their attack on the state's ontological security forced state officials to confront and amend the previously hegemonic narrative in order to include the new frames. Methodologically, this study has provided a detailed analysis of framing strategies employed by interest groups and their impact on France's narrative of the self. Through its in-depth focus on NSAs, this article illustrates how framing strategies can successfully be employed to effectuate bottom-up policy shifts and the alteration of the hegemonic narrative. Overall, rather than understanding policy shifts in France's recognition of colonial crimes as an elite-driven process, this paper has demonstrated how the sustained mobilisation and contestation by NSAs reshape the boundaries of the thinkable, sayable and demandable in national discourses on colonial crimes.

Finally, this article's inexhaustive case-study approach invites further research on the role of memory entrepreneurs in the shifting commemoration configurations in the memory politics of former colonial powers regarding racist and colonial crimes.

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