

From Concealment to Confrontation: France's Shifting Memory of the Algerian War

Jean-Louis Andreani¹ *

¹Groton School, Groton, MA, USA

*Corresponding Author: jandreani26@groton.org

Advisor: Romi Mukherjee, rm176@nyu.edu

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Abstract

This paper explores France's evolving collective memory concerning the Nazi Occupation and the Algerian War, focusing on the political and institutional responses that have shaped national identity. It argues that while France has made strides in acknowledging its role in past atrocities, these efforts often fall short of genuine reconciliation due to selective memory and the absence of formal apologies. Using a qualitative, historical-analytical approach grounded in primary and secondary sources, the paper critically assesses political discourses and symbolic acts of remembrance. The essay critically examines the approaches of key French leaders: Charles de Gaulle's and François Mitterrand's emphasis on unity at the expense of confronting complicity, Jacques Chirac's pivotal acknowledgment of Holocaust collaboration, and the limited advances under Nicolas Sarkozy and Emmanuel Macron in addressing the legacy of the Algerian War. Through an analysis of these historical reckonings, the paper contends that France's nation-building strategies have perpetuated incomplete narratives, thereby impeding true reconciliation. The essay concludes by advocating for comprehensive apologies and the integration of marginalized histories as essential steps toward a cohesive and honest national memory.

Keywords: French Memory Politics, Algerian War, Historical Accountability, Presidential Discourse, Colonialism, Collective Memory, Postcolonial Historiography

1. Introduction

In contemporary France, the legacy and brutalities of the Algerian War (1954-1962) remain deeply embedded in the nation's collective consciousness, yet also disavowed - collective traumas were simultaneously registered and repudiated. For many years, the French government has attempted to obscure its complicity in these atrocities, promoting narratives that downplayed or refused *tout court* the darker aspects of what transpired. This tragedy loomed silently in national memory, waiting to be "heard," "spoken," and truly "exorcized." It took France many years, even decades, to start facing the uncomfortable truths about its past. Yet, while it began to address these issues, it avoided fully confronting them and often used biased political language to discuss these national traumas without truly engaging with them. This essay asserts that French government initiatives have shaped modern France's collective memory—the widely accepted social construction of historical events that guides public understanding and national identity—and have strategically formed a hegemonic narrative, a carefully curated, dominant historical perspective advanced by political elites and state institutions. This narrative prioritizes nation-building and social cohesion, often at the expense of confronting uncomfortable historical truths and fully recognizing marginalized experiences. Specifically, this essay seeks to answer three central questions:

1. How have successive French presidential administrations strategically shaped the nation's collective memory of the Algerian War?

2. In what ways has the construction of a hegemonic narrative impeded genuine historical reconciliation between France and Algeria
3. To what extent do official acts of acknowledgment and apology serve political interests rather than reflect sincere efforts at historical accountability?

This study employs a qualitative, historical-analytical methodology to critically examine how France's political leaders have shaped national memory of the Algerian War. Through the analysis of primary sources—including presidential speeches, legislative texts, archival documents, and firsthand testimonies—and secondary scholarly works such as historical commentaries and expert analyses, this paper evaluates the strategic construction of memory narratives. By identifying patterns of selective remembrance and omissions, the analysis demonstrates how historical narratives serve political objectives and impact broader societal reconciliation.

2. Historical Context of the Algerian War

The Algerian War holds a shameful place in the nation's memory due to the numerous war crimes committed by the French, as well as the controversy that emerged from its aftermath and the moral questions it raised about colonialism, violence, and national identity. The war's death toll is uncertain, ranging from 400,000 to 1.5 million Algerians ("Ombres et lumières de la révolution algérienne," 1982; FRANCE 24, 2012). French forces systematically committed war crimes including rape, massacres of civilians, widespread torture, and forced displacements. More than 8,000 villages were destroyed, "three million people were displaced," and approximately "one million Algerians and some 10,000 colons lost their lives" (Shillington, 2013). "Hundreds of thousands of instances of torture" occurred (Vidal-Naquet, 2001, p. 118), and internment camps were extensively utilized during and after the war (Bernardot, 2008; Miller, 2013). Such brutal acts profoundly impacted both Algerian and French participants, leaving deep psychological scars. Algerian fighter Bachir Hadjadj described feeling extreme disgust after witnessing torture, recalling that French soldiers would raid villages and humiliate inhabitants ("Algerians and French Share Their Stories," 2022). Similarly, Serge Carel, a harki, expressed profound trauma and regret: "This period of time fills me with horror" ("Algerians and French Share Their Stories," 2022). Even French General Jacques Massu expressed remorse over the use of torture, illustrating the lasting emotional and societal wounds inflicted by the war.

Moreover, the war aggravated tensions within France, as the influx of Algerian immigrants heightened social and cultural divisions. The number of Algerians in France skyrocketed, going from 211,000 in 1954 to 350,000 in 1962 ("Algerian Immigration into France," n.d.). The Harkis were subject to memory politics "on both sides of the Mediterranean" (Sims, 2016): in Algeria, they were vilified as traitors to the independence movement, while in France, they were marginalized and largely excluded from the dominant national narrative, further entrenching their sense of alienation. As Benjamin Stora asserts, while France engaged in a forty-year policy of deliberately forgetting about the conflict, Algeria mythologized the war as part of the nation-building process (Stora, 1991, p. 8).

3. The Marginalization of the Harkis

After the conflict ended, the Harkis sought refuge in France but faced immediate marginalization. Confined to isolated, substandard camps for periods ranging from "weeks or months" to "over a decade" (Miller, 2013), they endured unhealthy conditions, military oversight, and segregation justified by the French government as "re-education" aimed at instilling French language and morals (Archives nationales [AN], 1965, p. 104). Rather than genuine integration, these camps enforced social exclusion, contradicting France's proclaimed values of liberty, equality, and fraternity. Despite such systemic discrimination, many Harkis maintained loyalty to France, reflecting the deeply internalized colonial psyche—where the colonizer was simultaneously perceived as oppressor and protector. As one Harki child stated: "It's true that France locked us up in Harki camps, we did not go to school, we were discriminated against everywhere, we were treated as Arabs, but it's France. It's like a mother who hits her children, but she's nevertheless our mother and we must pardon her and love her" (Zalamit, 2006). Scholars similarly document how Harki testimonies frequently depict France metaphorically as a "mother country," reflecting a complex emotional

bond marked by love and betrayal (Crapanzano, 2011, pp. 142–143). This troubling statement reflects the deeply ingrained colonial psyche, where the colonized internalize their subjugation and view the colonial power as both oppressors and protectors. The analogy of France as a violent yet beloved mother underscores the psychological dependency created by colonial systems, where loyalty to the colonial power persists despite systemic abuse. It reveals the extent to which colonial structures distort relationships and identities, fostering a sense of obligation to the very system that marginalizes and dehumanizes its subjects. This dynamic highlights the enduring emotional and cultural scars of colonialism, which persist long after political decolonization. Using various websites, the Harkis also diffused an anti-colonial narrative to describe the relationship between France and Algeria. Such examples include statements like “Algeria was a French creation” (Massi, 2006) and “the falsification of history resides precisely in considering Algeria as a sovereign and constituted power that was invaded and occupied by a colonial power” (Khader, 2006). Such denial of pre-colonial Algerian sovereignty is supported by historians, who document how French colonial rhetoric consistently portrayed Algeria as lacking nationhood before French colonization, thus serving as justification for colonial rule (Stora, 1991, pp. 15–16; Shepard, 2006, p. 54). This mentality explained their actions: “That is why the Harkis fought for France. It was their country. It’s normal to fight for your country against those we call ‘terrorists’” (Zinc, 2008). This statement highlights a paradox within the Harkis’ identity: while their rhetoric denies Algeria’s historical sovereignty, it also reflects a need to rationalize their alignment with France. By framing their allegiance as “normal” and positioning Algerian nationalists as “terrorists,” they inadvertently adopted colonial narratives that justified French rule. Historians confirm that many Harkis rationalized their wartime alignment with France by adopting colonial narratives, particularly framing the Algerian FLN as “terrorists” and their own allegiance as defense against violent extremism (Shepard, 2006, pp. 213–215). This internalization of colonial ideology not only shaped their perspective but also served as a defense mechanism, enabling them to reconcile their marginalized status within both Algeria and France.

4. Political Narratives and Memory Politics

Shockingly, this attitude was also promoted by the French government: on the 23rd of February, 2005, Law No. 2005-158 was passed by the National Assembly, stating that schools should “acknowledge in particular the positive role of the French presence overseas, particularly in North Africa, and accord to the history and sacrifices of combatants in the French army originating from these territories the important place to which they have a right” (Otto, 2013). This is a clear example of how government legislation, ordinary media, and popular culture can directly influence the construction of historical narratives to serve a particular political agenda. By presenting colonialism as a benevolent and constructive force, the atrocities committed during the war by the French are downplayed and legitimized. This also indicates a desire to “misinform” children of the next generation, making them unaware of the country’s shady past, effectively erasing and changing memory. France avoids a critical confrontation with the darker aspects of its colonial past, instead framing its narrative in ways that obscure the suffering and resistance of the Algerian people. This deliberate framing demonstrates how memory narratives are strategically utilized to sustain national unity and avoid the political consequences of full historical accountability. The focus is shifted toward a sanitized version of history that highlights colonial “contributions” while sidelining its violent realities. By selectively amplifying pro-colonial ideologies, the state creates a narrative that hinders the process of genuine historical reckoning and reconciliation, perpetuating a distorted collective memory.

5. Presidential Responses to Historical Accountability

The law sparked major controversy among the population because it mandated that French schools emphasize the “positive role” of colonialism, particularly in North Africa. Critics argued this approach amounted to historical revisionism, obscured colonial violence, and marginalized the suffering of colonized populations. Facing widespread public backlash and condemnation from historians and minority communities, Chirac eventually repealed it (Lotem, 2016), asserting that “writing history is the business of historians: it should not be circumscribed by laws” (“History Should Not Be Written by Law,” 2005). Chirac was also appalled when he found out that torture was used during the

war, and when he was informed (Human Rights Watch, 2001) that former general Paul Aussaresses claimed torture was “efficient” and that his conscience was clear, he ordered Aussaresses to be suspended from the Legion of Honor and asked Defence Minister Alain Richard to propose eventual disciplinary action (“Chirac ‘Horried’ by War Claims,” 2001; (James & International Herald Tribune, 2001). Chirac also tasked historians to quickly shed light on the war period, urging them to study archives made available for the first time last month. Finally, Chirac also made efforts to acknowledge the suffering and sacrifices of the Harkis (“Chirac Hails Algerians Who Fought for France,” 2001), such as organizing public ceremonies like the 25 September 2001 Day of National Recognition for the Harkis.

Chirac’s behavior, reflecting a commitment to confronting uncomfortable truths and promoting historical accuracy, was not shared by his successor Sarkozy. The latter refused to apologize for colonial misdeeds, vaguely stating that terrible crimes were committed on both sides and did not elaborate further (Agence France-Presse, 2007). He also argued that leaders should focus on the future and not “beat their breasts” (Reuters, 2007), maintaining that building a constructive relationship required looking forward rather than dwelling on the past (Aaron, 2007). When around 160 Algerian and Moroccan politicians, lawyers, and human rights advocates published a joint appeal for France to acknowledge the “trauma caused by the colonization of Algeria,” as an effort to heal ties, it was ignored (Reuters, 2007). When Sarkozy planned to visit Algeria, he was not welcomed with open arms. Mohamed Said Abadou, an influential Algerian war veterans’ leader was quoted saying the president was not welcome until he apologized for the colonial past: “Sarkozy is not welcome in Algeria [...] and we won’t turn the page with France until we get an apology” (News24, 2007). To top it all off, Sarkozy’s previous “Kärcher” comments, in which he referred to using a high-pressure cleaner to rid the Paris suburbs of “scum” during the 2005 riots (“Nettoyer au Kärcher,” 2022), further inflamed tensions and reinforced the perception that he held deeply negative views toward communities of North African descent, including Algerians. His remarks were inflammatory and derogatory, solidifying harmful stereotypes that cast Algerian and other North African immigrants as violent and unassimilable. This instance highlights how political rhetoric can actively perpetuate historical divisions and further undermine the possibility of genuine reconciliation. Thus, the rift between these communities and the French state was aggravated, making reconciliation and integration increasingly difficult.

When François Hollande came into office in 2012, succeeding Sarkozy, the dominant narrative was not altered. He did not formally apologize to the Algerians, “[stopping] short of apologising for the past,” but instead acknowledged France’s colonial legacy by stating: “I recognize the suffering the colonial system has inflicted” (“François Hollande Acknowledges Algerian Suffering,” 2012). However, while previous presidents remained silent about the October Massacre, during which French police violently suppressed peaceful Algerian protesters in Paris, resulting in dozens of deaths, Hollande stood out by addressing it; he was “the first high-ranking official to own up to the tragedy, unnerving the French right. Two months later, he doubled down with his apologetic speech to the Algerian Parliament” (Pecastaing 51), a stark contrast from the silence maintained by previous presidents about the 1961 massacre of peaceful Algerian protesters. Yet, it is important to remember that there was still no apology, only an acknowledgment.

Additionally, similarly to Sarkozy, Hollande advocated for turning the page and embarking on a fresh start, asserting that this new beginning must be “supported by a base,” which he defined as the truth: “nothing is built in secretiveness, forgetting, denial” (“François Hollande Acknowledges Algerian Suffering,” 2012). Yet Hollande’s reluctance to offer a formal apology suggests that his acknowledgment of past traumas might have been more about creating a reason to move on than a genuine effort to address them. This reflects how memory, in such cases, often becomes utilitarian—a tool employed to serve political and social objectives rather than a sincere reckoning with history. In this instance, memory promotes closure or appeases public sentiment without requiring meaningful accountability or systemic change. The question, then, is not merely about memory itself but how it is wielded, often as an instrument to justify selective narratives or strategic forgetting. While Hollande did recognize the suffering inflicted by the colonial system, his hesitation to provide a complete apology raises questions about whether mere acknowledgment is enough to overcome a legacy of secrecy and denial. Indeed, Professor of Middle East Studies, Camille Pecastaing comments on the long-term effectiveness of this apology, claiming it remains questionable: “it is not clear that, aside from their value as theater, Hollande’s regrets will have measurable effect, one way or the other.” Pecastaing compares his gesture, seen as a one-off statement, to President Obama’s 2009 Cairo speech, which

ultimately did little to change the dynamics of Middle Eastern relations. Hollande’s actions were viewed as unlikely to bridge the rift between France and Algeria, with Pecastaing suggesting that historical grievances may not significantly influence current relations: “time passes and the crimes of French colonialism do not reflect on contemporary French society.” Acknowledgment alone is insufficient. Without a formal apology, France’s efforts to address its colonial past cannot be considered a genuine attempt to turn the page. Moving forward requires more than just recognition; it demands a sincere apology.

6. Contemporary Challenges: Macron’s Ambivalence

Years later, with Emmanuel Macron running for the presidency, there was still no apology. During his 2017 election campaign, Macron condemned the occupation of Algeria as a “crime against humanity” and described French actions as “genuinely barbaric” (“Macron Calls Colonialism a ‘Grave Mistake,’” 2019). However, despite this strong denunciation, he did not actually apologize, explicitly stating that there would be “no repentance nor apologies.” Macron’s refusal to formally apologize underscores the political limitations inherent in confronting colonial memory. His strategic balancing act of recognizing atrocities without offering official remorse reveals an attempt to simultaneously appease progressive demands for accountability and conservative resistance against national self-criticism. This ambivalence, though politically expedient, ultimately perpetuates a partial narrative that delays meaningful reconciliation. While denouncing past actions is a step forward, it is clear that a genuine apology is necessary to address historical grievances and move toward real reconciliation. There has already been lots of condemnation; more needs to be done now, and the crucial step forward is offering formal apologies.

This necessity for deeper accountability continues to be highlighted, this time by recent revelations. In a significant admission, President Macron publicly acknowledged for the first time that French soldiers were responsible for the torture and murder of a prominent Algerian independence figure and subsequently covered up his death (“Ali Boumendjel: France Admits ‘Torture and Murder,’” 2021). French authorities “previously claimed that he had committed suicide while in detention, a lie that his widow and other family members had campaigned for years to see overturned” (Al Jazeera, 2021). Macron’s reluctance to openly address this issue until pressured suggests an underlying pattern of concealing uncomfortable historical truths. His actions illustrate how contemporary French administrations prioritize political pragmatism over genuine historical accountability, reinforcing incomplete historical narratives. It is likely that numerous other stories similarly remain untold, obscured by historical neglect or insufficient public and political pressures needed to compel leaders to acknowledge and confront these unresolved aspects of France’s colonial past.

7. Summary of French Presidential Responses

President	Years in Office	Key Actions & Statements	Impact on Reconciliation
Charles de Gaulle	1959-1969	Promoted silence, strategic forgetting	Established selective memory; hindered reconciliation
François Mitterand	1981-1995	Limited acknowledgement, no formal apology	Maintained ambiguity; minimal progress
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Jacques Chirac	1995-2007	Recognized French complicity in Holocaust; condemned torture, acknowledged Harkis	First meaningful steps toward reconciliation
Nicolas Sarkozy	2007-2012	Refused formal apology; emphasized looking forward	Reinforced historical denial; strained relations
François Hollande	2012-2017	Acknowledged colonial suffering and 1961 Paris massacre, stopped short of apology	Partial transparency; incomplete reconciliation
Emmanuel Macron	2017-Present	Condemned colonialism strongly; acknowledged specific atrocities but explicitly rejected formal apology	Ambivalent approach; symbolic but incomplete accountability

8. Conclusion: Toward Genuine Reconciliation

The Algerian War challenges France to face its colonial past with present ideals. Not only does selective forgetting create fragile unity and a misleading sense of closure, but it also ignores accountability. France's confrontation with its colonial legacy must move beyond symbolic gestures. Instead, it must move towards actions that address the material and emotional effects of its past. To achieve true unity, France must address and heal from suppressed trauma by embracing all narratives rather than selectively choosing only some. An engaged and truthful reckoning demands a multidimensional approach that links acknowledgment with justice. Reparations, alongside structural reforms, are central to this process. They serve as both a recognition of harm and a tangible commitment to rebuilding trust with affected communities. For France, reparations must be accompanied by efforts to integrate colonial histories into educational curricula and create public memorials that honor the victims of colonial violence. As demonstrated in other contexts, such as Germany's reparations to Holocaust survivors, material redress can play a crucial role in fostering reconciliation and addressing systemic injustices.

These efforts should also be paired with initiatives that foster an inclusive collective memory by creating spaces for dialogue where competing narratives can coexist and be critically examined. Truth commissions, testimonial projects, or other community-driven initiatives can provide platforms for acknowledging silenced voices and confronting the complexities of colonial history. Together, these steps would help dismantle the selective narratives that shape France's understanding of itself, paving the way for a more inclusive and accountable national identity.

Ultimately, embracing the truth means using apology as a starting point for change, not as a conclusion to close the doors of the past. Reparations, education, and inclusive memorialization must work together to confront the past. By addressing its colonial legacy with transparency and accountability, France can move beyond denial and omission, building a future that reflects justice and the shared stories and memories of all its citizens. This journey is not about diminishing France's achievements but enriching its identity by confronting the contradictions at its core, acknowledging that strength lies in vulnerability and greatness in humility. Such efforts are not only necessary for historical reconciliation but also vital for shaping a Republic that lives up to its principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity. Only by listening to the silenced and honoring the unspoken truths can France become a nation that embraces, rather than erases, its diversity.

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