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The legitimating function of individual discourse: Remembering the Harkis' tragedy

Isabelle Clarke and Daniel Costelle with Michaël Gamrasni, *La Blessure : La tragédie des Harkis*. Paris: Editions Acropoles, 2010, 252 pages. ISBN 978273850338-8 (only available in French edition)

The original group of Harkis consisted of approximately 200,000 Muslim Algerian soldiers and their families who fought alongside the French colonial army in Algeria's fight for independence from 1954 until 1962, in what was officially recognized by the French government as 'operations to maintain order'. The Harkis voluntarily joined the French colonial army in the expectation of an improvement in general social conditions and preparatory work towards independence, as was the case with their neighbouring countries of Morocco and Tunisia. In return for enrolment, the Harkis received a decent monthly wage and other social security rights. In those days, Harkis occupied a key position in the restless Algerian society, making them suitable 'translators'. Harki soldiers spoke both Algerian and French and understood the local, pluralistic norms amongst the many different North African tribes inhabiting Algeria. Being educated in the colonial school system, the Harkis had had foresights of social and economic standards possibilities in France and were susceptible to the colonial promises for a better future for the people of Algeria. Looking more closely, the real motivations for the French colonial army in engaging Harkis were probably to better understand the tactics of, and increase chances of infiltration into, the networks of the Algerian rebellion led by the National Liberation Front (FLN). Eventually, the French were unable to suppress the rebellion and Algeria's cry for sovereignty. In the independence negotiations between the French government and FLN representatives during the early months of 1962, the safety of this group of 'collaborators and traitors', as the Harkis are even today regarded by their fellow Algerians, was promised. Ways of relocating the group of Harkis to France were discussed but found unnecessary by both parties because of promises made by the new Algerian authorities. After proclaiming Algeria's independence on 5 July 1962, however, the majority of the Harki soldiers and their families ended up being slaughtered in an organized genocide by the FLN and other Algerian tribes. Deportation programmes to camps in France were hastily

instigated by the French government for the remaining ex-soldiers and their families.

In *La Blessure: la Tragédie des Harkis*, personal narratives of Harki men and women are gathered. *La Blessure* is not a traditional research report book but is the recited text of a television documentary directed by Isabelle Clarke and Daniel Costelle. The documentary was partly funded by French public television. The historian Michaël Gamrani advised in both the documentary and the book, and wrote several additional historical clarifications on the Harkis and the Algerian events from 1945 until just recently.

The book contains three parts. First is a short introductory chapter on the general situation leading up to Algerian independence. The second and major part contains personal testimonies of several Harki men, two Harki women and a French army commander of the Harkis, who were all interviewed by the directors in a long session for the original documentary. Within these testimonies the often unresolved struggle between the Algerian-French or French-Algerian identities of the Harki soldiers and their close family resides. The intimate narratives of these ex-soldiers depict the circumstances and reasons why, and how, they chose to fight alongside the French colonial army. Their authentications deal with the consequences of the soldiers' personal choices on the development of their own, their wives and children's identities. The third part is a fact sheet with chronological key events of the Algerian war, which is informative when the need for an accessible overview of facts around the independence of Algeria and the role of the Harkis arises for readers. In addition to the documentary text, the book offers a chronological outlook on the ambiguous French involvement in Algeria and the history of the Harkis. Many concrete explanations of terminology, including the exact definitions of words such as 'pied-noir' (Algerians with a European immigrant background) or 'supplétifs' (different categories of auxiliary soldiers in the French colonial army) are also documented.

Collective memory and individual identity formation

The insights taken from the personal testimonies in part two are the book's most valuable contribution. These stories unfold the personal reasons of the Harkis towards enrolment in the army of their occupiers. They bring understanding of the Harki soldiers' sudden and brutal disarmament by the French army and chart the events leading up to the betrayal, despair, rage and the witness of their fellow Harkis being slaughtered. The deportation programmes offered for their nuclear families resulted in disruptive changes in the embeddedness of the Harkis to their overall family and tribal lives and fundamentally changed their personal and social relationships.

Although safe from fear of death, some Harkis lived in the designated but closed camps in France for more than 20 years. More than just retelling the stories of several Harkis, the testimonies in the book reflect both the construction and current state of the torn identities of the Harkis both on the individual as well as on the collective level. Their life stories hover between their beautiful memories of Algeria's treasures, their personal reports of horrifying torture sessions and 'cultural castration' of the Harkis by other Algerian tribes which the Harki soldiers and their families underwent, and their current suffering with post-traumatic stress syndromes and reluctance to share their stories with their kin.

The stories of the Harkis in this book describe not only the horrifying circumstances encountered in Algeria but also their new lives with the necessary adjustments to France, their 'other homeland', in finding fulfilment after deportation. The responses of the Harki soldiers, as heads of their families, towards the French authorities' efforts of financing housing, education and employment programmes specially designated for the Harkis often differ from those of their children. Because of the shame and unimaginable levels of violence that many of the Harki soldiers encountered, they often were and are incapable of sharing their stories with their children. This has resulted in many, currently existing, inter-generational misunderstandings and anger between Harki soldiers and Harki children. While some of the testimonies recite the soldiers' – and some of their wives' – individual gratitude for security from ethnic violence offered by deportation to France, they testify at the same time how their children feel collectively stigmatized and discriminated by the overall French population in social interaction. Overall, the reader obtains a profound and confronting insight into the shaping of the Harkis' individual identities as a result of the wounds struck by their agonising encounters with levels of ghastly ethnic violence in the later years of their time spent in Algeria.

Remembering the Harkis' tragedy

In France, the Harkis' personal and collective memories remained unrecognized by French authorities for more than 35 years. The stories in the book describe how the absence of an official recognition of the collective Harkis' memory has made Harki soldiers and their families question their personal choices and identity construction in the historical events around Algeria's independence struggle. To acknowledge the Harkis' past, the French authorities installed a Remembrance Day on 25 September 2001. This annual memorial day serves as an official day of recognition of the agony of the Harkis as a corollary of their choice to serve their

colonial occupier at one time in history and their enduring suffering by doing so. One function of public state collective commemoration days is that they help inform and thus support individual Harkis in balancing their own sense of self as a personal identity together with their collective identities as both Algerian and French in their interactions with fellow Algerians in France, and the limited interaction they had with the French because of the enclosed living in camps. Measures of positive discrimination such as the housing and education programmes sought to facilitate the individual lives of the Harkis. The French Republic upholds a strict separation between church and state, and by law all citizens are regarded to be equal. Public recognition of minority groups and their past are therefore not issues to be legally considered. This is because in France, in a way, positive discrimination measures are considered to endanger the potential empowerment of minority groups, which could result in unequal distribution of power between minority groups and the rest of society.

Since the early 1990s, under the presidency of Jacques Chirac, France has attempted to deal with its ambivalent responsibilities in two of the French Republic's dishonourable historical episodes: the 'Syndrome of Vichy' (Rouso, 1987) and the 'Syndrome of Algeria' (Enjelvin, 2004). In both syndromes, the central issue is how to reconcile differences between official historiography and the individual and collective memories of these ordeals for the players involved (Enjelvin, 2004). The situation of the Algerian Harkis is particular harrowing for its highly political, national and international, long unrecognized and cruel ethnic nature. The legitimating function of individual discourse of the book's stories of the Harkis in creating awareness for, and inducing social acceptance of, the Harkis' tragedy is evident. The book brings increased understanding of, and permits the readers intimate identification with, the Harkis' troubled processes of identity formation and adaptation, and explains their current place in both Algerian and French society. Therefore, notwithstanding the profound insights in the construction of the torn identities of the Harkis that readers take away, the reports in this book create a hunger for further understanding of the complex historical and cultural circumstances in which the Harkis' history occurred and the roles of the different players involved. This is partly because of the original shape of the medium chosen by the directors – a documentary of which the book is, in a sense, a by-product. For this reason, when looking for additional information on the topic, the following book title struck me, written by Vincent Crapanzano, a professor of comparative literature and anthropology at the City University of New York's Graduate Center: *The Harkis: The Wound That Never Heals* (2011).

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Sensed victims – Illusions of a coming to terms with the past

Ulrike Jureit and Christian Schneider, *Gefühlte Opfer – Illusionen der Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2010. ISBN 9783608946499

The history of nationalism in Germany, e.g. the founding of the German nation state in the nineteenth century, is deeply entangled with institutional anti-Semitism. That was the case before the extreme populist governmental turn to National Socialism in 1933, and remained at the margins of the post-1945 West German society as the silenced witness of an ethno-nationally framed idea of a homogenous nationhood. The ethnic definition of the German nation was also the subtext to German unification in 1989.¹ More than 20 years later, in June 2011, a public attack² denouncing anti-Semitism as an element of left-wing politics, and said to be cherished within the German Socialist party *DIE LINKE/Bündnis 90*, does not come as a surprise.

A study by Samuel Salzborn and Sebastian Voigt (2011)³ ‘proves’ that there are persistent anti-Jewish stereotypes at the centre of socialist/left-wing politics and underneath a largely anti-Zionist arguing criticism of the occupation and, as some say, ‘apartheid’ politics of the state of Israel. In response to this attack, Gregor Gysi,⁴ political celebrity and leader of *DIE LINKE*, pushed ahead a statement all party members had to subscribe to: asking them to distance themselves from any pro-Palestinian support activities (e.g. ‘Gaza support Flotilla’).⁵ What is worrying about this recent move is a ‘totalitarian-light’ version defining the limits around critique of a twenty-first-century hegemonic nation state (not that different from, let’s