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Natalya Vince. *Our Fighting Sisters: Nation, Memory and Gender in Algeria, 1954-2012*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015. ISBN: 978-0-7190-9107-0 (hardcover, £70.00).

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Natalya Vince's *Our Fighting Sisters* explores the lives of Algeria's *mujahidat*, the women who, as combatants, detainees, or providers, were so critical to the country's War of Independence. No one has approached the critical role of Algerian women in their country's fight for independence from the perspectives of oral history. No one has used the resulting archive of interviews to interrogate the ways in which women's contributions to the *Front de Libération Nationale* (FLN) were -- or, more often, were not -- acknowledged and remembered by the post-independence Algerian state. Put differently, by focusing on women's experiences, Vince demythologizes the Algiers regime's construction of idealized national narratives of anti-colonial struggle. In doing so, *Our Fighting Sisters* crosses a number of disciplinary boundaries, both between history and social science and within the discipline of history itself. On the one hand, while the already extensive published output on French colonialism in Algeria shows no sign of slowing, only a few scholars in English -- Marnia Lazreg (from a sociological perspective) and Neil MacMaster (from a historical one) -- have squarely addressed issues of gender during Algeria's war against France.¹ On the other hand, while both Lazreg's and MacMaster's recent work is immensely revealing, neither scholar has ventured much beyond Algerian independence in 1962 to tackle questions of memorialization and the social condition of Algerian women. As Vince explains, her goals are different. Exploring the lives and attitudes of female war veterans, she raises fundamental questions about the relationship between Algerian women and the post-colonial state that claims to represent them. Taking female veterans as her foil, Vince explores the wider marginalization of Algeria's women after 1962, despite the hopes raised during the War of Independence that the FLN would spurn patriarchal structures in much the same way as it rejected colonial ones. How is this achieved? In terms of sources, largely through the analysis of the twenty-eight interviews that Vince conducted with FLN women

¹ Marnia Lazreg, *Torture and the Twilight of Empire: From Algiers to Baghdad* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2008); Neil MacMaster, *Burning the Veil: The Algerian War and the 'Emancipation' of Algerian Women, 1954-62* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009).

fighters, activists and supporters. This distinct methodological approach, while predicated on oral history, also draws heavily on gender studies and recent histories of memory in tense or conflicted societies.²

As these comments indicate, we do not want for studies on France's violent departure from Algeria. But we are chronically short of studies that place Algerian women at the centre of events.³ Equally significant here is the absence of English-language studies analysing the status of women's situation in independent Algeria. So, too, the conflict between state-sponsored constructions of an idealized nationalist past and the diversity of public memories of the War has been left substantially untouched.⁴ Other work on gender discrimination as a partner to colonial racial discrimination, and on forms of feminist activism – both historical and contemporary – in North Africa and the Middle East, offers resonant debates with which Vince engages thoughtfully in her opening chapters.

Our Fighting Sisters also draws on the best practices in oral history. Since its original development in the 1970s, this strand of historical methodology has been theorized and refined by social historians committed to restoring agency to individuals and communities marginalized from their own national or political histories. Martin Evans was a pioneer of this method in relation to Algeria's colonial conflict and Natalya's debt to his work is evident here.⁵ The growing sophistication of oral history methodology has perhaps been most vividly demonstrated of late by Michael Rothberg's highly controversial *Multidirectional Memory*, and in James Mark's *Unfinished Revolution*.⁶

Vince might now be added to that list. Her book's core evidence derives from interviews with former nationalist fighters, activists, and other women who, in varying ways, assisted the FLN's insurgency against French colonial rule. It is hard to underestimate either the value of this resource or the originality of the insights derived from it. For one thing, the interviews were systematically conducted, allowing for a comparison of responses between them. For another, the interviewees appear, in the main, to have provided remarkably frank and fulsome accounts of their activities, their memories, and their sense of the war's changing significance in the post-independence years. Most striking, however, is Vince's subtlety in reading between the lines. She writes with great sensitivity here. The awkward pauses come loaded with

² For a useful introduction, see Katharine Hodgkin and Susannah Radstone (eds.), *Memory, History, Nation: Contested Pasts* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction, 2006), especially Part II.

³ Key exceptions are Djamilia Amrane, *Les femmes algériennes dans la guerre* (Paris: Plon, 1991), and Monique Gadant, *Le nationalisme algérien et les femmes* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1995).

⁴ Jonathan Hill's *Identity in Algerian Politics: The Legacy of Colonial Rule* (Boulder, CO.: Lynne Rienner, 2009) and Lazreg's first book on *The Eloquence of Silence: Algerian Women in Question* (London: Routledge, 1994) are the only major exceptions in this regard. Lazreg's more recent book, *Questioning the Veil: Open Letters to Muslim Women* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2009), has a more contemporary focus than Vince's book.

⁵ See Martin Evans, *The Memory of Resistance: French Opposition to the Algerian War, 1954-1962* (Oxford: Berg, 1997); *idem*, *Algeria: France's Undeclared War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

⁶ Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford, CA.: Stanford University Press, 2009); James Mark *The Unfinished Revolution: Making Sense of the Communist Past in Central-East Europe* (New Haven, CT.: Yale University Press, 2010).

meaning. The ascriptions of praise or blame are carefully explained. Most vivid is the shared realisation among the interviewees that their original hopes of liberation – for nation, for region, for women – remain substantially unfulfilled. Vince’s text is deeply moving as a result.

Alongside its evaluation of *mujahidat* histories on their own terms, the book is principally concerned with three things. One is the connection between changing representations of former women fighters by the Algerian regime and by younger-generation Algerians in particular. Another is the wider legacy of the War of Independence in Algerian society from 1962 (officially, the end of the war) to the present day. Bringing these two points together, the last element is to study the use and misuse of contested historical memory in the nation-building projects of a post-colonial nation that is profoundly divided between haves and have-nots, regime insiders and their opponents. In each of these objectives, the book succeeds. Interview transcripts are nicely inter-woven with the prose. And the historical narrative of events, which is predominant in the opening three chapters, blends well with the more reflective consideration of changing representations of the ‘fighting sisters’ in the subsequent chapters. Using nationalist women activists as its avatar, the book is also an indictment of a classic deep-state apparatus in which power became vested in shady combinations of security officials, army leaders, and an FLN gerontocracy that has largely reneged on its early promises of emancipation and genuine political inclusion for Algeria’s women.

For all its originality in approach and findings, the book does not exist in a historiographical vacuum. As Vince readily acknowledges, outstanding work has been done in recent years in which the position of women in Algeria’s War of Independence figures centrally. Recent works by Marnia Lazreg (on torture and other rights violations),⁷ Raphaëlle Branche (on army practice and on rape),⁸ Neil MacMaster (on women’s increased exposure to violence and misrepresentation during the war),⁹ and Patricia Lorcin (on settler women’s writings)¹⁰ have transformed our understanding of what the conflict meant for women and how they lived through it. But none of these works is centrally occupied with Algerian women’s lives after independence. None looks more broadly at the changing status of Algerian women under civil law and within the country’s ‘official’ memorialization of its independence struggle. And, with the partial exception of Neil MacMaster’s *Burning the Veil*, none shines a light on the experiences of rural women, many of them illiterate and with little trace in the formal archival record, who formed the great –and hitherto silent – majority of the female population. Specialists in women’s history and historical memory will find rich pickings throughout, and perhaps most of all in a searing final chapter, “Being remembered and forgotten” in which the post-colonial disappointments of nationalist activism and modernist idealism are laid bare.

⁷ Lazreg, *op cit.*

⁸ Raphaëlle Branche, *La torture et l’armée pendant la Guerre d’Algérie: 1954- 1962* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001); *idem* and Fabrice Virgili (eds.), *Rape in Wartime* (Basingstoke: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2012).

⁹ MacMaster, *op cit.*

¹⁰ Patricia M.E. Lorcin, *Historicizing Colonial Nostalgia: European Women’s Narratives of Algeria and Kenya, 1900-Present* (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2012).

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