

Verily, The Truth is Coming From France

by Michael Curtis



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RÉPUBLIQUE FRANÇAISE

They'll be a change in the political weather, a change in the way of living. French life is changing. Bans on smoking in public places, cuts in the Grandes Vacances, the long school summer holidays, the virtual disappearance of the game of boules, the Paris plage along the Seine, free bicycles around town, fewer holiday tables under the trees in April. Not surprisingly French politics are changing, if less dramatically, with it. France is still haunted by the memory of things past, by the wounds of the past, its years under Vichy and the long colonial control of Algeria. The country has found the art of losing hard to master, but opinion is growing among the politically active that it is time to come to terms with its history and acknowledge the truth.

Reminders of and reevaluations of French colonial history have come to the fore with actions concerning a sensitive issue,

the treatment of the Harkis. On September 25, 2018, French President Emmanuel Macron announced he would grant the Legion d'Honneur, the country's top honor, to six Harkis and the co-founder of an organization that has fought for their rights, and also give the Order of Merit to 19 other Harkis.

"Harki" is a term that is sometimes used pejoratively but it denotes a significant group of people. The Harkis are native Muslim Algerians who served as auxiliaries, professionals, volunteers, or officials in the French army during the Algerian war of independence, 1954-62. An estimated 450,000 Algerians worked for France in some capacity during that period. In that war of independence there were 1.5 million Algerian victims, according to Algerian sources. French figures suggest that both sides suffered a total of 400,000 casualties in a war characterized by atrocities committed by both sides, the use of napalm by one side, the recourse to torture by the other.

The figures are not clear or exact, but it is officially stated that 60,000 Harkis were allowed into France after Algerian independence in 1962, while 55,000-75,000 remained in Algeria. Were they brave patriots or traitors? Everybody has his own date. The Harkis acting for France have been unfairly equated with those who were collaborators with Vichy in World War II. Their decisions and actions were rarely, if ever, motivated by ideological factors. Their activity has to be seen in the context of at least two factors. One was the poverty of the Algerian rural population, and therefore the choice of young Algerians to join the French forces to get a job to support their families. The other was that the very violence of some of the mujahideen of the National Liberation Army, in killing Algerians loyal to France in addition to attacking French military posts, led some to side with the French.

The war ended with the Evian Accords on March 18, 1962. About a million settlers, "pied-noirs" fled Algeria to live in France. But hostilities continued in Algeria and in France.

Thousands of Harkis were assassinated by fellow Algerians after declaration of independence on July 3, 1962. In France, friction remained including the killing of a number of French police. In response, the prefect of Paris police, Maurice Papon imposed a curfew, 8 p.m. to 5.30 a.m. on the Algerian community in the Paris metropolitan area. On October 17, 1961, the Paris wing of the FLN, Algerian National Liberation Front, organized a peaceful demonstration at various places in Paris. The French police massacred many, perhaps 200, of the demonstrators, throwing many of the bodies into the Seine.

It is doubly interesting that the police prefect was Maurice Papon, the politically adaptable figure who had started his career as a socialist in 1936. During World War II he was pro-Vichy and a senior official in the prefecture at Bordeaux. There he was responsible for authorizing the deportation of 1,690 Jews, including 22 children, to Drancy from where they were sent to death in Nazi camps. These activities remained unknown until 1981 when the *Le Canard Enchaîné* made them public. He was arrested and after a long trial delay he was convicted in 1998 of "crimes against humanity" and sentenced to 10 years prison, from which he was released in 2002.

Papon had a successful career, civil servant, a member of the National Assembly, and Minister of the Budget. Ironically, President Charles de Gaulle awarded him the Legion of Honor in 1961, the year of the Paris massacre. Papon agreed many Algerians were killed in Paris, but falsely attributed it to fighting among rival Algerian factions. He disclaimed any responsibility for improper actions by the Paris police. In contrast, forty years later, Bertrand Delanoë, Socialist mayor of Paris, born in Tunisia, on October 17, 2001, unveiled a plaque near the Saint Michel bridge from which "many" Algerians were thrown into the river on October 17, 1961. It reads "to the memory of the Algerians, victims of the bloody repression of a peaceful demonstration."

There are, as Delanoë commented, parts of Paris's history that

are painful, but which have to be discussed and accompanied by actions. France is gradually coming to terms with its painful past including the 132 years of colonial rule in Algeria. Changes were gradual. President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing was the first French president to visit officially independent Algeria, and that was in 1975. On September 25, 2001, President Jacques Chirac who, at first refused to acknowledge French responsibility for its actions in Algeria, called for a day of national recognition for the Harkis.

President Nicholas Sarkozy in 2007 admitted the colonial system had misdeeds, sufferings, and injustices, but refused to apologize or express repentance. However, in April 2012 Sarkozy admitted that France had failed to do its duty and protect the Harkis. His successor François Hollande in 2012 went further, saying that for 132 years Algeria was subjected to a "deeply unjust and brutal" system.

In 2017 Emmanuel Macron, the first president born after the Algerian war, was even more extreme asserting that the colonization of Algeria was a crime against humanity, although crimes and atrocities were committed on both sides. He admitted that in 1956 the French parliament had given the army special powers to restore order, and to arrest and detain suspects. On September 13, 2018 he admitted that France had instituted a system that facilitated systematic torture in the 1950-60s. Forthrightly, Macron admitted the torture and execution by French soldiers of Maurice Audin, the 25 year old mathematician and anti-colonial activist abducted from his home on June 11, 1957 during the Battle of Algiers, and never seen again. Audin had since become a symbol of French brutality in Algeria. What is important is that this is the first time a French president broke with the attitude of denial and in a landmark way admitted France had used torture, a weapon considered legitimate at the time.

In the center of Algiers there is a Place Maurice-Audin. It is unlikely there will be a similar street name in Paris, but the

logic of recent French actions suggest that the lessons of the past have been drawn, and that the admissions of the truth can help build a better future.