

Examining the Way France Treated Harkis after the Algerian War

By Louis Onoratini

Humanities 104

Dr. Munger

May 8th, 2020

Peter Gourevitch's book, "We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed with Our Families" deals with the Rwandan Genocide which occurred in 1994. Throughout the book, one particular church's story is heavily detailed and what the people that lived there went through.¹ As I read the book and learned about the tragic fate of the thousands of Tutsis, I remembered an often-overlooked part of France's history: the Algerian war.

This conflict started when France took over the territory of Algeria in 1830. Starting then, the French government mistreated the Berber population who lived there previously to French people arriving.² These people were treated as second-rate citizens and France never truly recognized them as part of the country. From the start, there was a clear difference between Christian or Jewish white French citizens living in Algeria and the indigenous Muslim French citizens living in Algeria. However, the French government considered Algeria to be a department of France. Because of this injustice and a push from the USSR, in November 1954 the FLN (National Liberation Front) orchestrated many attacks on French officials as well as other parts of the population.³ This was when the war for the independence of Algeria started. This war was a shameful war for France, not because they eventually lost the territory in 1962, but because of the way they treated the harkis fighters after the war ended. Not only did France let a genocide orchestrated by the Algerians on the harkis take place, they also perpetuated a horrendous segregation on French soil between the harkis and the rest of the French citizenry.

During the Algerian war, a minority of Berber fought on France's side. The French military needed people who knew the land and looked for help in the Native population of

¹ Gourevitch, Peter. *We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed with Our Families*. New York, NY: Picador, 1996.

² Cohen, William B. "The Harkis: history and memory." *Algeria and France 1800-2000: Identity, memory, nostalgia*, (2006): 168-180. Accessed March 26, 2020.

³ Cohen, William B. "The Harkis: history and memory." *Algeria and France 1800-2000: Identity, memory, nostalgia*, (2006): 168-180. Accessed March 26, 2020.

Algeria. Some of these young men chose to fight for France because of clan rivalries or hatred for the FLN. Furthermore, a number of them, as scholar William Cohen states, “joined because of French military pressure.”⁴ Some officers would bully the young men into joining the French side or even make them pass as traitors of the FLN in order for them to be forced to join the French army. The bulk of them joined in order to be able to get some money and feed their families. Their name originated from the “Arabic word for movement, haraka, which aptly represented their function of patrolling the nearby countryside for supporters of the FLN”.⁵ Despite the help these people provided France during the fighting, after the war was over, a great number of them were left to die at the hand of their angry compatriots who saw them as traitors. This led to a genocide. As the Convention written by the UN explains, genocide is “Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part”.⁶ As the scholar Jeannette Miller states, “Estimates from historians and reports by government officials about the number of harkis assassinated by Algerians from March 1962 onward range from tens of thousands to a hundred thousand, which does not include those who survived acts of torture”.⁷

When both parties came to the negotiation table in 1962, repatriating the French citizens living in Algeria was part of the treaty that was signed in order to achieve peace.⁸ However, after

⁴ Cohen, William B. “The Harkis: history and memory.” *Algeria and France 1800-2000: Identity, memory, nostalgia*, (2006): 168-180. Accessed March 26, 2020.

⁵ Miller, Jeannette E. "A Camp for Foreigners and "Aliens": The Harkis' Exile at the Rivesaltes Camp (1962–1964)." *French Politics, Culture & Society* 31, no. 3 (2013): 21-44. Accessed March 28, 2020. www.jstor.org/stable/24517999.

⁶ “Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide.” OHCHR. United Nations, 1996. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crimeofgenocide.aspx>.

⁷ Miller, Jeannette E. "A Camp for Foreigners and "Aliens": The Harkis' Exile at the Rivesaltes Camp (1962–1964)." *French Politics, Culture & Society* 31, no. 3 (2013): 21-44. Accessed March 28, 2020. www.jstor.org/stable/24517999.

⁸ Miller, Jeannette E. "A Camp for Foreigners and "Aliens": The Harkis' Exile at the Rivesaltes Camp (1962–1964)." *French Politics, Culture & Society* 31, no. 3 (2013): 21-44. Accessed March 28, 2020. www.jstor.org/stable/24517999.

the war ended, France made no considerable effort to repatriate all harkis people into France. While France helped other citizens at risk to flee Algeria, the pieds noirs who were French, a great number of harkis were left to die. This occurred because, while the French government saw the pieds noirs coming back to France as a repatriation, it saw letting the harkis into France as a migration.

The harkis that got repatriated to France were housed in former refugee and prisoner camps as well as forest hamlets. While a few were able to leave the camps after a short stay, most of them ended up living there for many years. The obvious mistreatment of these people occurred because of a lack of preparedness on the French side. After the war, France made no plans to welcome any of these fighters into their borders even though they were aware of the fate that awaited them back in Algeria. As the French-Algerian scholar Lydia Hadj-Ahmed states, “Le chercheur a employé les termes de « dégage ment » et « liquidation », termes utilisés à l’époque respectivement par l’armée et par le pouvoir politique”.⁹ Translated, the research has shown that the terms “kicking-out” and “liquidation” were used both by the Algerian military and the politicians in power.¹⁰ These words were used during the signing of the peace treaty between France and Algeria which proves that French officials knew the risk harkis were facing in Algeria.

On April 24th, 2012 Nicolas Sarkozy, who was president of France at the time, recognized France’s historical responsibility regarding the harkis and their current situations. He decided to eradicate a law that previously stated that all education about France’s colonial past

⁹ Hadj-Ahmed, Lydia. "Les Harkis, Des Mémoires à L'histoire." *Vingtième Siècle. Revue D'histoire*, no. 123 (2014): 202-04. Accessed March 28, 2020. www.jstor.org/stable/24673897.

¹⁰ Translated by Louis Onoratini.

should say that only good came out of colonialism.¹¹ Voting down this law was seen as a big step towards the reconciliation of the two parties. However, as Simms analysis of Pervillé proves, some scholars believe France took that step simply to reconcile their relationship with Algeria and not to help the harkis.¹²

Pervillé's hypothesis is confirmed when one looks at the current situation of the descendants of harkis throughout France.¹³ Most of them live in the urban parts of France and have a hard time rising through the social ranks. In an effort to understand what the harkis had to go through after escaping a genocide I have decided to analyze their situation in one particular camp called Rivesaltes. This camp was located 13 kilometers away from Perpignan and measured two by four kilometers. In its years of service, it saw more than one-hundred thousand harkis live in it.¹⁴

In the following paragraphs I will showcase the conditions the harkis were forced to live in during their stay at Rivesaltes. I will do this in order to prove that France directly and purposefully let them live in such conditions in order to ostracize them from the French society. This was done in an effort to prohibit them from thriving in the French society because of racist and anti-Islam beliefs.

The first eight hundred harkis arrived at the Rivesaltes camp on September 15th, 1962. Very quickly, the population in the camp rose to 7,700 because of incoming transfers from other

¹¹ Simms, Laura Jeanne. "RETHINKING FRANCE'S 'MEMORY WARS' Harki Collective Memories, 2003–2010," n.d.

¹² Hadj-Ahmed, Lydia. "Les Harkis, Des Mémoires à L'histoire." *Vingtième Siècle. Revue D'histoire*, no. 123 (2014): 202-04. Accessed March 28, 2020. www.jstor.org/stable/24673897.

¹³ Simms, Laura Jeanne. "RETHINKING FRANCE'S 'MEMORY WARS' Harki Collective Memories, 2003–2010," n.d.

¹⁴ Miller, Jeannette E. "A Camp for Foreigners and "Aliens": The Harkis' Exile at the Rivesaltes Camp (1962–1964)." *French Politics, Culture & Society* 31, no. 3 (2013): 21-44. Accessed March 28, 2020. www.jstor.org/stable/24517999.

camps.¹⁵ As France was underprepared and barracks needed to be rebuilt, all of these people were housed in tents until the barracks were done. As Jeannette Miller points out, “Their placement in tents was significant because these structures reinforced the harkis' exile from their surrounding community and their perceived inferiority to neighboring French citizens.”¹⁶ The societal divide this camp created between the two populations only increased with time.

An obvious testament to the subpar living conditions experienced in the camps were the barracks. When reconstructing them, the government made them 20 to 25 square meters and each included three to four units. Each unit would house a family and only had two rooms and 3 windows. As scholar Jeannette Miller explains, “These structures well exceeded the legal population limit for public housing facilities structured by the state: according to a 30 June 1961 decree, dwellings for more than three occupants needed to contain at least three rooms.”¹⁷ Seeing as the government did not even respect its own laws in this camp shows the extent of the horrors that happened in Rivesaltes.

As the camp grew and barracks were finished, it quickly became obvious that the harkis lived in a very unsanitary environment and were having trouble getting used to the harsher French weather. These two factors led to the spread of diseases and an especially bad outbreak of tuberculosis. Dr. Aujaleu, who was the Ministry of Health’s public health director at the time, started to tell the government this was occurring because of the poor sanitary conditions the

¹⁵ Miller, Jeannette E. "A Camp for Foreigners and "Aliens": The Harkis' Exile at the Rivesaltes Camp (1962–1964)." *French Politics, Culture & Society* 31, no. 3 (2013): 21-44. Accessed March 28, 2020. www.jstor.org/stable/24517999.

¹⁶ Miller, Jeannette E. "A Camp for Foreigners and "Aliens": The Harkis' Exile at the Rivesaltes Camp (1962–1964)." *French Politics, Culture & Society* 31, no. 3 (2013): 21-44. Accessed March 28, 2020. www.jstor.org/stable/24517999.

¹⁷ Miller, Jeannette E. "A Camp for Foreigners and "Aliens": The Harkis' Exile at the Rivesaltes Camp (1962–1964)." *French Politics, Culture & Society* 31, no. 3 (2013): 21-44. Accessed March 28, 2020. www.jstor.org/stable/24517999.

harkis were living in.¹⁸ However, the rest of the government did not listen to his explanation and instead blamed the outbreak on the poor hygiene of the foreigners. Three months after making his remarks, Dr. Aujaleu himself started to follow this governmental narrative of racism. This narrative of racism and classism caused the deaths of many harkis and led to horrendous living conditions. What France did on its own soil was repugnant and can almost be called an apartheid. The French government was fully aware of what it was doing and purposefully mistreated these people in order to ostracize them from the rest of society.¹⁹

Using tents, barracks and by distancing harkis from the rest of the French people, the French government worked to take the harkis population out of the French society as much as possible. Other than physical barriers, the French government used the unhygienic state of the camps to vehicle a narrative of “nasty foreigners” when it came to harkis and more broadly Muslims. All of this work created a real divide between French Muslims and the rest of the French citizens. This divide is still trying to be bridged to this very day.

The living conditions in this camp were atrocious and inhuman. I argue that this camp made harkis seem to be less than humans and attempted to hurt their group as much as possible. France was supposed to be a safe haven for them but to their dismay, their torture continued. They were not wanted anywhere and, even though France did not directly kill a great number of them, I believe it indirectly contributed to the deaths of many of them. Furthermore, the conditions in this camp created a divide between the citizens of France at the time and the harkis. Even if all of the harkis descendants are now also citizens, the divide between the two

¹⁸ Miller, Jeannette E. "A Camp for Foreigners and "Aliens": The Harkis' Exile at the Rivesaltes Camp (1962–1964)." *French Politics, Culture & Society* 31, no. 3 (2013): 21-44. Accessed March 28, 2020. www.jstor.org/stable/24517999.

¹⁹ Miller, Jeannette E. "A Camp for Foreigners and "Aliens": The Harkis' Exile at the Rivesaltes Camp (1962–1964)." *French Politics, Culture & Society* 31, no. 3 (2013): 21-44. Accessed March 28, 2020. www.jstor.org/stable/24517999.

communities is still very present and social mobility for the descendants of harkis is more challenging than for most other demographics. This divide was created by the French government. Instead of truly helping the harkis flee a genocide, France turned a blind eye to it. Starting in the 1970's, steps have been taken to immerse the harkis and their families into French society. Sadly, the integration of a new population into a society has always been tough for any nation. The integration of Muslim people into French society has always been an uphill battle and it continues to be. Furthermore, with the rise of the Front National and a lot of populist parties throughout Europe, it seems that the case is far from closed.

Bibliography

Cohen, William B. "The Harkis: history and memory." *Algeria and France 1800-2000: Identity, memory, nostalgia*, (2006): 168-180. Accessed March 26, 2020.

Gourevitch, Peter. *We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed with Our Families*. New York, NY: Picador, 1996.

Hadj-Ahmed, Lydia. "Les Harkis, Des Mémoires à L'histoire." *Vingtième Siècle. Revue D'histoire*, no. 123 (2014): 202-04. Accessed March 28, 2020. www.jstor.org/stable/24673897.

Miller, Jeannette E. "A Camp for Foreigners and "Aliens": The Harkis' Exile at the Rivesaltes Camp (1962–1964)." *French Politics, Culture & Society* 31, no. 3 (2013): 21-44. Accessed March 28, 2020. www.jstor.org/stable/24517999.

Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide." OHCHR. United Nations, 1996. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crimeofgenocide.aspx>.

Simms, Laura Jeanne. "RETHINKING FRANCE'S 'MEMORY WARS' Harki Collective Memories, 2003–2010," n.d.