



FILHOS DE IMPÉRIO E PÓS-MEMÓRIAS EUROPEIAS  
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THE PORTUGUESE  
COLONIAL WAR  
AND ITS IMMORTAL WOUNDS

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Bruno Sena Martins

In his story 'The Witness,' Jorge Luis Borges suggests that, from a certain perspective, the battle of Junín ended and disappeared forever after the death of the last man who fought in it. If we agree with Borges' hypothesis that an event or deed dies with its last witness, then we could say that the Colonial War does not have many decades left to live and will disappear forever with the last soldiers who fought in it.

May 14<sup>th</sup> marked 44 years since the first meeting of dozens of disabled military personnel in the esplanade of the Estrela garden. That meeting led to the formation of an ad hoc committee that became the Association for Disabled Veterans (ADFA). Nowhere exemplifies the abandonment and social exclusion the members of ADFA experienced as well as the place in which they invariably languished on their return from the war: the Lisbon military hospital. Whether because of the severity of their clinical needs or because of the scarcity of medical care available given the huge number of wounded patients relative to the available infrastructure, many disabled ex-combatants stayed for long stretches, sometimes years, at the hospital. The names of some units are revealing. The so-called 'Deposit of the Indisposed' speaks to the sense of abandonment expressed by many of those who lived there (who felt that they had indeed been literally 'deposited'). 'Texas,' the popular nickname for an annex of the Main Military Hospital, registers its atmosphere of chaos and widespread disorder (a new *wild west*).

For decades, ADFA has militated against the erasure of memories of the Colonial War from Portuguese society and public space. The organisation emerged out of the hazardous conjuncture of the Colonial War and its aftermath, and was born only a few days after the inauguration of democracy on April 25 1974. Yet given the continued neglect of the war-disabled and their claims to social significance, ADFA became convinced that revolution had done nothing to change state politics' disregard for them. The revolutionary climate and its exalted expectations for the future crystallised a social order in which the memory of war became unwelcome, threatening the notion that Portuguese colonialism had been benign. Given the length of the war, the colonial-racist politics that underpinned it, and the intense



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frustration and exhaustion of the combatants, those who sought to remember and condemn the past were silenced. There was little public appetite either for a collective confrontation of the massacres and war crimes, or for individuals to take responsibility for the violence they had directed at figures now hailed as heroes of democracy.

The estimated 15,000 combatants who today make up ADFA, living with various disabilities – blindness, deafness, paraplegia, cerebral palsy, post-traumatic stress disorder – are only one part of the Colonial War's afterlife. To bring this partiality into view we need only think of the similar situations of those who fought in liberation struggles, or of the many soldiers the Portuguese army recruited locally in the colonies. At the end of the war, these latter were overwhelmingly left in the new African states without rights or recourse to the status of 'Disabled Veterans.'

Although nuanced in recent years by increasing discussion of its history, the Colonial War still lingers phantasmagorically behind the shared assumptions of Portuguese society. The people whose lives were irreversibly marked by the armed conflict that happened more than 40 years ago in Angola, Guinea Bissau and Mozambique assert their existence and demand recognition. They resist the relegation of the Colonial War to the sphere of personal memory. The experience and political agenda of ADFA and its associates have long denounced the unsustainability of proscription and interdiction. In the form of words, objects or wounds passed down from generation to generation, the memory of the Colonial War will live on far beyond the death of the last combatant. ADFA's recently published book, 'Disabled Veterans: the generation of rupture' (2017), narrates the struggles of those who crossed into Portuguese democracy condemning a war they neither wanted nor were able to forget. I recommend it to you. Monumental in terms of the information it gathers together and deftly handles, the book is a valuable contribution to a conversation between those who lived through the war and the subsequent generations. It indicates that such a conversation remains possible. In understanding the impossibility of erasing the war even after the last witness dies, we come to see the full resonance of the fantastic in Borges' work.

Translation by **Alexandra Reza**

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*Algériennes 1954-1962* | 2018 | Deloupy e Meralli

## WAR MEMORIES AND MEMORY WARS

Paulo de Medeiros

Approximately midway through the recent graphic narrative authored by Swann Merali and Deloupy, with the title *Algériennes 1954-1962* (Marabout, 2018), the reader comes across a startling statement: 'this has become a war of memories' (64). It is spoken by Djamila, who had been an Algerian resistance fighter. It refers to the official exhibition on the war of independence, which is then seen as nothing more than an attempt at celebrating the actual government in power. Startling maybe, but not wholly unexpected, since academic debates in France have been using that term for the past decade. The essays collected in a book edited by Pascal Blanchard and Isabelle Veyrat-Masson, *Les guerres de mémoires. La France et son histoire* (La Découverte, 2008) make clear how important the clashes among the various forms of collective memory are for the construction of national identity. Merali and Deloupy's book is very well aware of such issues, yet has other goals. In other words, if the question of the



memory of the war of independence is inseparable from the national identity of both France and Algiers, what this book mainly focuses on is the irreducible complexity of History: neither violence nor monstrous cruelty, but also not courage and resistance in the face of the most brutal forms of dehumanization, can ever be private or exclusive prerogatives of any one group.

The plot is simple as it follows the narrator's search to learn about the past. Béatrice's father had served in the French army during the Algerian war. She decides to explore that part of history still held as taboo by great part of society, and over which her father keeps absolutely silent. As Jennifer Howell, drawing on the work of Marianne Hirsch, states when it comes to graphic novels in French, 'post-memory is not completely innocent'. In this instance what stands out is the care taken to avoid any group at all from appropriating memory. If there would be any noticeable tendency to point out, then a greater solidarity among women. The narrative structure with its deployment of the crossed destinies of the various female characters risks creating too romanticized an image of such solidarity. For instance, the courage shown by Lucienne, the narrator's mother, when she gives her child into the arms of Malika, the guerrilla fighter who had just set off an explosive charge in the centre of Algier, thus allowing her to pass through the check point, can be seen as somewhat unreal. Yet, it has a fitting counterpart in the cruel racism of the female teacher who taunted and tormented her Arab pupils.

One can place this graphic novel within a tradition of resistance and critique as undertaken for instance by Joe Sacco in *Palestine* (1993-1995), or, thinking about the Portuguese case and its colonial wars, in *Os Vampiros* by Filipe Melo and Juan Cavia (2016). And mention must be made of the seminal role taken by Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (1980-1991). The combination of fiction and historical elements, as well as a certain emphasis given to the visual, has come to show itself as key for the processing of post-memory. Photography, as Mariane Hirsch made clear, becomes a crucial element in such a process. In that regard *Algériennes 1954-1962* could even be held as a sort of model: Béatrice's decision to embark on a trip to Algeria is triggered by a photograph showing the family home of Saïda, a friend of her mother's, to which she had never returned. Having arrived in Algiers, it is yet another photograph – showing three female guerrilla fighters at a museum exhibition – that unravels the entire process of rediscovering the past. This is not the first time that the Algerian War is represented in a French graphic novel and, perhaps, also in Algerian ones. *Là-bas* by Didier Tranchet and Anne Sibrant (Dupuis, 2013) is only the most



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recent example. But this is the first time that the narrative of the female guerrilla fighters, more silenced still than others, is the main topic. The great originality of this volume is not limited to that though. Beyond refusing simplistic dichotomies, it might just reside in the way it continuously opens up new questions over the past as well as the future.

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