

Decolonization, the French Empire and sites of memory

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Q. What was the nature of the decolonization process, 1945–62?

A. Decolonization was a painful process for the French. The wartime leaders of the Free French has ruled out independence (or even self-government) for the colonies, though they promoted a new vision of economic and social development through the *Union Française* established in 1946. Many feared that the loss of empire would reduce France to a smaller role in world affairs – one president of the Senate said that with its empire, France was a great power, but without it, France would only be a small bit of the European continent. Nevertheless, nationalism and anti-colonialism in the empire, a changed and increasingly anti-colonial international context and, according to some defenders of empire, a loss of imperial resolve in France led to a retreat from most of France's overseas possessions.

At the end of the Second World War, France had to quit its Middle Eastern protectorates of Syria and Lebanon. Soon Vietnamese nationalists launched an attack on the French in Indochina, where Paris had only tenuously reinstated its control after the Japanese occupation. Ho Chi Minh and his forces successfully waged war against the French, and defeat at Dienbienphu in 1954 led to French evacuation and the independence of Vietnam – though it remained divided into two countries until reunification in 1975 – and Cambodia and Laos. The year 1954 also saw the beginning of the Algerian war of independence, which was particularly difficult and violent because of the opposition of one million *pieds-noirs*, descendants of European settlers, to independence, which was not achieved until 1962. Meanwhile, without such turmoil, the French had granted independence to the protectorates of Morocco and Tunisia in 1956. In 1958, the African colony of Guinea opted for independence against French wishes. Two years later, most of France's colonies in Sub-Saharan Africa gained independence, generally through peaceful means and under arrangements by which France hoped to retain its commercial, political and cultural influence. Decolonization thus took place in a variety of ways – from a 'gentleman's agreement' with some black African countries to protracted war in Vietnam and North Africa.

The process also had great repercussions in France, especially during the Algerian War when violently opposed views in the *métropole* created great civil strife and led to the fall of the Fourth Republic in 1958 and the return to power of Charles de Gaulle. The end of *Algérie française* also brought the 'repatriation' of close to a million French men and women from North Africa, as well as the flight of Algerians who had supported the French cause. This period also saw the start of the increased migration of Maghrebin workers to France, many from the former possessions of North Africa and black Africa. The legacies of colonialism, and also of decolonization, remain important in present-day France.

Q. How has the French Empire been remembered since 1962?

A. Some people remained defenders of the old empire and denounced what they considered the 'abandonment' of the colonies. In particular, many *pieds-noirs* have continued to nurture a cult of *Algérie française*, an idealization of what they saw as their homeland and resentment at their dispossession. Many others, however, simply preferred to forget the empire, especially after 1962. Colonialism seemed part of the past, as France focused on new issues – the role of France in Europe, social changes, consumer culture, the new social movements of women and other contestatory groups. Many preferred not to think or talk about lost colonies and an era that receded into the past – colonialism seemed almost as antiquated a topic as the old pith-helmets that the colonials wore. The darker sides of the colonial experience – slavery, the use of indentured labour, torture, the deaths of tens of thousands of French soldiers in colonial battles – were banished from memory. For a generation after 1962, except for groups such as *pieds-noirs* and migrants (and colonial historians!), the French suffered from colonial amnesia.

The French have now remembered the empire. Since the 1980s, and especially since the early 1990s, the empire has been rediscovered, sometimes in a haze of nostalgia, as illustrated by such films as *Indochine* and novels including Marguerite Duras' *L'Amant*. Colonial motifs appear in interior design and in popular literature, but have also been a new theme for historians and specialists of

cultural studies. Indeed, there is a 'boom' in colonial history, with new works on such topics ranging from colonial photography to colonial prostitution. Anniversaries also have prompted a re-examination of the colonial past: the sesquicentenary of the definitive abolition of slavery in the empire in 1998 inspired renewed concern with this aspect of imperial history. The French, reluctantly, have had to face up to controversial and distressing colonial issues. The revelations by a retired general, published in 2000, that he had personally carried out acts of torture in Algeria in the 1950s – and his justification of such measures in a time of war – opened up debate on the issue of torture. The celebration of a 'Year of Algeria' in France in 2003, however, provided the opportunity for publications and exhibitions that examined the intertwined history of the two shores of the Mediterranean.

Q. What does Pierre Nora mean by 'sites of memory'?

A. Pierre Nora's multi-volume collection published in the 1980s and 1990s and translated (somewhat curiously) as *Realms of Memory* helped create a new field of historical research. *Lieux de mémoire* are sites that are repositories of national memory, including specific places such as Notre-Dame cathedral or the châteaux of the Loire Valley, and generic places such as the café or the village church-tower. They also comprise books, concepts such as the 'Republic', and images and icons, key moments in French history (for instance, the Vichy regime) or traditional ways of understanding French life (an example of which is the division between political 'right' and 'left'). Some historians have criticized the idea of 'sites of memory' because of this diversity, but others find it useful in order to explore the history of French identity in its many, and changing, manifestations. Even such ordinary aspects of daily life as street names can be examined to look at how the French understand their past and envision their future. 'Sites of memory', even such concrete incarnations, as with statues, are dynamic and evolving, testimony to the continual re-assessment of French history, culture and identity.

Q. What are the colonial sites of memory?

A. During the colonial era, the authorities tried to imprint colonialism on the French landscape, in large part to stimulate fervour for the colonial enterprise. Many traces remain in both the provinces and in Paris. If you walk around Paris, you can see streets named for explorers such as La Pérouse, missionaries such as Cardinal Lavigerie, and colonial military figures and administrators such as General Faidherbe. You can spot statues of the colonial great and good – the bust of the Mekong explorer Francis Garnier in the Avenue de l'Observatoire and General Gallieni outside the Invalides. In the Invalides, you can see the tomb of Marshal Lyautey, one of the leading colonial statesmen, a military officer in Indochina and Madagascar and the ruler of Morocco. In a Montmartre cemetery, there is the tomb of an Orientalist painter, Gustave Guillaumet, decorated with a statue of an Algerian girl. There are also monuments, such as the monument to the Marchand expedition – which came face to face with the British at Fashoda in 1898 – although, in an act of monumental revisionism, the statue of Marchand himself was dynamited away in the 1970s. Someone taking a colonial tour of Paris can also see the buildings of empire – the old Colonial Ministry, the colonial training academy, the seminary of a missionary society, the Paris mosque, residence for colonial students at the Cité universitaire, and the former colonial museum, the old colonial botanical gardens. Each has its own history, both a colonial history – what it represented at the time of empire – and a post-colonial history – how it has evolved since the end of empire.

For instance, in the Bois de Vincennes there is a large building erected for the 1931 Colonial Exhibition, the 'Musée Permanent des Colonies', as it was called. Architecturally, it is a Modernist structure; the outside is decorated with the world's largest bas-relief, portraying the benefits the colonies gave France, including agricultural products such as tropical fruit, hardwoods, rubber and rice. Inside, the auditorium contains murals showing what France gave the colonies – justice, medicine, science. The building is thus a summary of colonialist ideology. The museum was renamed the 'Musée de la France d'Outre-Mer', when the word 'colonial' became a rather old-fashioned nomenclature. With decolonization, France had no use for a colonial museum, so it was transformed into a museum of African and Oceanic arts. By the 1970s, many of the rooms with colonialist art were closed to the public or used as storerooms, an attempt to hide the colonial past. (The outside bas-relief could hardly be covered up, but a gilt statue of 'La France colonisatrice' had been moved away from the entry.) By the 1990s, the museum was trying to re-invent itself with shows on contemporary non-Western art. In 2003, the collections were closed, and will be sent to a newly-built museum of African, Oceanic and pre-Columbian American art which will open in the Quai Branly. Meanwhile, the Palais de la Porte Dorée, as it is now called, holds temporary exhibitions, and its *salons historiques* (with murals carefully restored) and aquarium remain open to the public. From being a confident expression of

French colonial prowess, it became a embarrassing relic of an outmoded belief, and now has been preserved as part of the colonial patrimony in Paris

There are also anti-colonial sites, for example, a plaque along the Seine and another one in a Métro station that commemorate those who were killed during demonstrations against the war in Algeria. Not surprisingly, anti-colonial sites are less prominently marked than ones that are vestiges of the colonial era and its ideology, but they are reminders that there is in France a history of anti-colonialism as well as of colonialism.

History and memory are regularly 'revivified'. The old colonial museum in Paris may have been closed, but in Marseille, the French are building a new 'Mémorial National de l'Outre-Mer', a museum of French overseas expansion (which it will be interesting to compare to the British Empire and Commonwealth Museum in Bristol). In the past couple of years, President Chirac has dedicated a memorial to the soldiers killed in the Algerian War, and the mayor of Paris, Bertrand Delanoë, named a *place* for Maurice Audin, a mathematician in Algiers who opposed the war and who was arrested, tortured and killed at the hands of the French police. These suggest the existence of competing, and radically different memories, and of a continued national ambivalence about the colonial past.

Finally, there are the living 'sites of memory': the veterans and their associations and commemorations, the *pieds-noirs* and others who had family connections with the colonies, and those residents of contemporary France who trace their family origins to French overseas possessions. Their memories and mementoes, and sometimes their wounds and scars, are also sites of French colonial memory.

Key publications by Robert Aldrich

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'Putting the Colonies on the Map: Colonial Names in Paris Streets', in Tony Chafer and Amanda Sackur (eds), *Promoting the Colonial Idea: Propaganda and Visions of Empire in France* (London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), pp. 211–23.

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Further reading

Eric Jennings, 'Remembering "other" losses: the Temple du souvenir indochinois of Nogent-sur-Marne', *History and Memory*, 15(2) (2003): 5–48.

Patricia A. Morton, *Hybrid Modernities: Architecture and Representation at the 1931 Colonial Exposition, Paris* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).

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