



THE ALGERIAN WAR AND EXODUS OF THE PIEDS-NOIRS

Challenges and outcomes of integration



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Introduction

In July 2020, French President Emmanuel Macron had demanded to the French Historian Benjamin Stora to issue a report on colonization and Algerian War aiming at reconciling France and Algeria today (Stora, 2021). This illustrates how the Algerian War and the French former colonization of Algeria still resonates today.

The name Pied-Noir refers to the one million French of Algerian origin and, by extension, the French of European descent who settled in Algeria until independence in 1962 and who were further “repatriated” to France. To what extent did the integration of the Pieds-Noirs in France succeed?

First this paper will analyze the hardships endured by the Pieds-Noirs during the Algerian War and at their arrival to France (I). Then, it will focus on the integration policy adopted by the French government (II) and the outcomes of this integration.

I. From French Algeria to France: a hard exodus

The Pieds-Noirs in the Algerian War

In 1959, there were 1,025,000 Pieds-Noirs people for 9 million Algerians (Baillet, 1975). Pieds-Noirs, as French citizen, had the same civil rights as French metropolitans whereas Algerians were treated as second-class citizen and called “indigenous” or “Muslim” and whose identity was ignored.

Revendications of independence from the Algerian people appeared before the World War II but it is on November 1, 1954 that Algeria plunged into war. In August 1955, the massacres of several hundred Pieds-Noirs and moderate Muslims perpetrated by the FLN (Front de Libération Nationale) marked the beginning of an internal civil war between those supporting French Algeria and the FLN fighting for Algerian independence (Pervillé, 2001).

In this context, the Pieds-Noirs were counting on the French government and were relieved when the President Charles de Gaulle pronounced his speech “I have understood

you” in 1958¹. However, just after, he showed himself to be a partisan of the principle of the Algerian independence which was considered as a harsh betrayal by the Pieds-Noirs.

In 1961, the unilateral truce ordered by General de Gaulle was accompanied by the creation of the OAS (Secret Armed Organization)² which adopted a policy of terror toward nationalist Muslims whereas the FLN responded with attacks towards the OAS and the Pieds-Noirs. The beginning of 1962 saw an escalation of reciprocal terrorism with numerous kidnapping and death threats against Pieds-Noirs while the French army stopped protecting them. On July 5, 1962, day of independence, 700 Pieds-Noirs were massacred by FLN forces in Oran without any protection provided by the French army which was told not to intervene.

Peace agreement and the massive exodus of Pieds-Noirs

Because of the non-respect of Evian Accords’ guarantees, the generalized insecurity, the abandonment by the French army and their disillusion, the Pied-Noirs embarked on a sudden and massive exodus which peaked in May and June 1962. Many left their homeland in the precipitation with only few belongings. Some destroyed or burned their house as a sign of despair and others left their homeland intact hoping they could return. Thousands of panicked refugees camped for weeks on the quays of Algerian ports waiting for a place on a boat to France. In 1962, 800,000 Europeans and Jews left the country leaving cities like Oran, Bône, or Sidi-bel-Abbès half empty.

A minority of Pieds-Noirs, feeling betrayed by France, settled in Spain, Canada or Argentina. Few Jews settled in Israel and 130,000 came to France. About 200 000 of French Algerians remained there after independence but eventually left in November 1963, when French land properties had been nationalized, and throughout the sixties and seventies.

¹ See Speech at the Alger Forum, 4 June 1958, available on :

<https://www.charles-de-gaulle.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Discours-du-forum-dAlger.pdf>

² Formed by French military officers in January 1961 to fight against the FLN and the independence. It was supported, in part, by the Pieds-Noirs. However, their political commitment should be nuanced since members of the OAS were about 3000 compared to one million Pieds-Noirs.

Arrival to France

The population repatriated from Algeria was estimated at 1,013,000 individuals³ - 2% of French population (Baillet, 1975). Generally speaking, Pieds-Noirs felt rejected on their arrival in France both by the locals and by the French government.

In the summer of 1962, Pieds-Noirs, arriving on overloaded boats, were received by hostile signs ("Pieds-Noirs at the sea" – "Go home") at the entrance to the port of Marseille. Many saw their containers soaked in the sea and their belongings stolen. Taxi drivers or hotels refused to provide them with their services or inflated prices. This hostility was due to:

- *Economic fears.* With the demobilization of French soldiers and the arrival of the post-war classes at the age of employment, an impossibility of professional integration was feared.
- *Biased image of wealthy colonialists.* The Communist Left caricatured Pieds-Noirs as profiteering colonists. But contrary to popular belief, 85% of the population was urban, made up of petty civil servants, artisans and merchants, whose standard of living was lower than that of metropolitan France and who had lost everything in 1962.
- *Biased image of war criminals.* They were associated with the OAS and considered responsible for atrocities and massacres against Algerians.
- *Considered responsible of the war.* Some suffered from resentment from metropolitans who were generally not in favor of war and had suffered from dead or wounded conscripts in Algeria.
- *Symbol of French defeat.* They were treated with hostility because they symbolized the defeat of France in Algeria and the end of French Empire.

Moreover, the French government was not prepared. It had estimated that 200,000 to 300,000 temporary returnees to France qualified as "vacationers" although they were refugees. Thus, there were no plans for their arrival. Many had to sleep in the streets upon arrival in France, where the majority had never set foot and had no family or support.

³ Without the 180 000 harkis, French Muslims or civilian officials

II. Efforts of integration made by the French government

Assistance provided by the French administration

The government responded to the unexpected influx of migrants by creating the Secretariat of State for Repatriates which granted a subsistence allowance to Pieds-Noirs for 12 months after repatriation.

The great need for housing to accommodate the returnees led to the creation of new towns such as Carnoux-en-Provence in 1966 and accelerated the building of HLMs (low-rental housing). The new cities provided not only housing, but also a wide range of services and facilities. Some regions such as Île-de-France, Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur practiced positive discrimination, reserving up to 30% of the places in HLMs for Pieds-Noirs (Malet, 2012).

Finally, loans were facilitated with 30,000 Pieds-Noirs farmers, industrialists and merchants who received a loan of 2,275 million francs in their favor (Baillet, 1975)

A geographical redistribution to favor assimilation and employment

Above all, the government wanted to encourage returnees to leave the South and acquire professional training. Indeed, the returnees tended to settle around the landing towns in the South: Toulouse, Bordeaux, Sète and Marseille. However, these regions were not dynamic whereas Northern regions were short of manpower. Moreover, for the French government the Pieds-Noirs needed to be mixed with the locals in order to be assimilated instead of being grouped together where they would feel nostalgia and wouldn't be able to integrate. Therefore, at their arrival, Pieds-Noirs were encouraged, mainly by bonuses, to go in the North, in Paris region or empty regions in Alsace where jobs were more numerous.

In addition, as the number of merchants and farmers was too large, and as these jobs were already in decline, the government adopted a policy of retraining: a bonus of 25,000 francs was offered to former self-employed workers who agreed to become salaried employees (Baillet, 1975).

Also, in March 1963, the great campaign "Priority to Employment" was launched. All aids and allowances would end after one year of stay and since 3/4 of the jobs offered were for specialized and qualified workers, the Secretariate for Repatriates set up company

contracts to allow workers to have training financed by the State.⁴ But only 400 contracts were signed. This failure was not limited to the professional training.

III. Outcome of integration

Unequal socio-spatial integration

The geographical and socio-professional distribution shows that the objective was not achieved: from 1963 to 1968, the repatriated population of 8 departments in the South of France increased by 50% while the increase of the Pieds-Noirs in France was only 7% (Baillet, 1975).

In the developing regions of the North, economic and social integration worked, and the Pieds-Noirs easily found the desired job. However, the inability, for some, to adapt to national life meant low activity or the disorganization of the couple⁵. It also meant the fly towards the South to look for friends from Algeria or even towards other countries like Spain or Argentina where the climate is similar to Algeria. Marseilles thus receives 3,000 repatriates a year, while the Center, East and North were getting increasingly empty (Baillet, 1975).

In the South, the integration was incomplete. Considering themselves, rightly or wrongly, as "intruders", the returnees tended, especially the small employees and the inactive, to group together in a neighborhood, where they maintained the cult of remembrance. Rather than getting a job remunerated in the North, they preferred to keep their lifestyle and landscapes closer to their past in the South; they are construction workers, small wage-earners, janitors or guardians.

Contribution to France's economic growth

However, after the harsh reception they received, the Pieds-Noirs quickly integrated, contributing to the economic boom of the sixties. In 1964, the national economy had assimilated more than 300,000 workers, 90% of the Pied-Noir active population. The Employment Agency placed only 50,000 individuals while the others acted by themselves

⁴ The repatriate would be hired in a company and had to learn their new activity for a third of their working time, with the State taking in charge this unproductive period; the companies concerned could thus, at the State's expense, train their own employees.

⁵ Indeed, women and children were the first to arrive in France and this break in the couple has often continued.

(Baillet, 1975), asserting their personal qualities, but also the need for work. As a young working population, they adapted easily to their new jobs.⁶

The Pieds-Noirs, who had been reclassified in commerce and the hotel business, were concerned with modernizing their shops. Breaking with tradition, they changed the exterior appearance of their stores or cafés, forcing the French to imitate them. Their friendliness and exoticism made them successful in the transformation of cafés and restaurants. The merguez and couscous triumphed even in Strasbourg. This new spirit was also illustrated by the boom in sardine fishing in the Mediterranean⁷. Finally, they participated in renewing agriculture lots in the Southwest through the contribution of capital and subsidies.

They contributed to the economic boost and current dynamism of previously dormant regions and cities such as Montpellier, Perpignan, Nice, and especially Marseille. From 1962 to 1968, they accounted for 50% of the population growth in Marseille and Perpignan, 60% in Toulon and 70% in Nice (Baillet, 1975). They brought new life to certain agricultural regions in the Southwest and the Massif Central.

Finally, armed with loans and repatriated capital, between 1962 and 1965, the repatriates freed up 20 billion francs, increasing the consumption of 3% (Baillet, 1975). Without any properties nor goods, they have given a boost to construction, furniture and closing companies.

Conclusion

Today the hardships endured by the Pieds-Noirs during the Algerian War as well as the outcomes of their integration are still debated. Even today, associations of Pieds-Noirs ask the French State to give them justice. Because they still have the feeling to be badly accepted and to be considered as responsible for the Algerian War whereas they were the victims. In this sense, the Stora Report recommends, for example, to set up a joint commission of French and Algerian historians to shed light on the abductions and murders of Europeans in Oran in July 1962 (Stora, 2021). Even though they were repatriated 60 years ago they are still present in the economical and political landscape. Indeed, they represent 1,2 million constituents in 2012 and 3 million if their children and great children are taken into account. However, this

⁶ half of the households are between 25 and 40 years old compared to one third for the metropolitans (Baillet, 1975)

⁷ 40% of the sardine boats over 10 barrels in 1972 belonged to Pied-Noirs (Baillet, 1975)

community is still divided by those fighting for the recognition of their rights like the compensation of the goods lost in 1962 and those who'd rather forget. This division is more explicit between the Pieds-Noirs commemorating the "heroes" of the OAS and those against this celebration.

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