“We are still ashamed of our own History”
Interviewing ex-combatants of the portuguese colonial war (1961-1974)

« Nous avons encore honte de notre histoire ». Entretiens avec d’anciens combattants des guerres coloniales portugaises (1961-1974)


Ângela Campos

Electronic version
URL: http://journals.openedition.org/lusotopie/612
ISSN: 1768-3084

Publisher:
Association des chercheurs de la revue Lusotopie, Brill, Karthala

Printed version
Date of publication: 20 November 2008
Number of pages: 107-126
ISSN: 1257-0273

Electronic reference
Ângela Campos, « "We are still ashamed of our own History" », Lusotopie [Online], XV(2) | 2008, Online since 01 February 2016, connection on 30 April 2019. URL : http://journals.openedition.org/lusotopie/612

Tous droits réservés
This paper is focused on the memories of ex-combatants of the Portuguese colonial war in Africa (1961-1974). It addresses the Portuguese colonial conflict mainly in terms of its social memory, exploring the importance of the ex-combatants’ individual interpretations and representations of the conflict. This paper argues that the absence of extensive historical reflection on this subject highlights the importance of its lived memories, especially as a means of challenging the idea of war memory as a source of shame, for the veterans and for Portuguese society in general.

Firstly, the paper presents a brief overview of the current developments on the war memory field, mentioning other national case studies. Secondly, it dwells on the public memory of the conflict and the historical identity of the Portuguese war veterans. Thirdly and finally, it will pose some questions on the process of collecting these personal memories, namely the oral history practice involved in interviewing these ex-combatants.

«Nous avons encore honte de notre histoire».
Entretiens avec d’anciens combattants de la guerre coloniale portugaise (1961-1974)

Cet article est fondé sur les mémoires des anciens combattants de la Guerre coloniale portugaise en Afrique (1961-1974) et aborde le conflit surtout dans les termes de sa mémoire sociale, explorant l’importance des interprétations et représentations personnelles des anciens combattants relativement au conflit. L’article soutient que l’absence d’une réflexion historique élargie sur le sujet souligne l’importance des mémoires vécues, spécialement comme moyen de mettre en cause l’idée que les mémoires de guerre sont motif de honte, pour les vétérans et la société portugaise en général.

L’article présente d’abord brièvement un état des travaux en matière de mémoires de guerre. Ensuite, il porte sur la mémoire publique du conflit et l’identité historique des vétérans de guerre portugais. Enfin, il questionne le processus de recueil de ces mémoires personnelles, notamment la pratique de l’histoire orale inhérente à l’acte d’interviewer ces anciens combattants.

«Ainda temos vergonha da nossa história».
Entrevistas com antigos combatentes da guerra colonia portuguesa (1961-1974)

Este artigo centra-se nas memórias de ex-combatentes da Guerra Colonial Portuguesa em África (1961-1974) e aborda o conflito colonial português sobretudo em termos da sua memória social, explorando a importância das interpretações e representações pessoais dos ex-combatentes relativamente ao conflito. Este artigo sustenta que a ausência de reflexão histórica alargada acerca deste assunto salienta a importância das suas memórias vividas, especialmente enquanto meio de pôr em causa a ideia de que as memórias de guerra são motivo de vergonha, para os veteranos e para a sociedade portuguesa em geral.

Em primeiro lugar, o artigo apresenta um breve resumo dos actuais desenvolvimentos na área das memórias de guerra, mencionando outros casos de estudo.
nacionais. De seguida, refere-se à memória pública do conflito e à identidade histórica dos veteranos de guerra portugueses. Em terceiro e último lugar, coloca algumas questões quanto ao processo de recolha destas memórias pessoais, nomeadamente à prática de história oral inerente ao acto de entrevistar estes ex-combatentes.

Any data collected for a war memory research project must be critically analysed and placed within a wider socio-historical context, bearing in mind the recent developments concerning war memory studies, particularly those deriving from national contexts where veterans’ war memories have been unrecognised\(^1\). Although the exhaustive analysis of theoretical concepts is outside the scope of this paper, a word must be said about the enormous expansion of war memory studies in the last decades. Indeed, there are numerous international works that have contributed to this widening of academic research and critical enquiry. Authors such as G. Dawson\(^2\), M. Evans\(^3\), F. Lorenz\(^4\), K. Lunn\(^5\), M. Roper\(^6\), E. Sivan\(^7\), A. Thomson\(^8\), J. Winter\(^9\), and many others, have opened up new perspectives within the field of war memory. Nowadays, researchers are well aware that history writing is extremely dependent on the socio-political context within which the remembering of a particular past takes place, both on a collective and individual level. War memories are no exception, as they reveal the way in which the conflicts are perceived from the standpoint of the present. In this context, I would like to highlight Ashplant et al. and their groundbreaking work (2004), in which these authors have identified the principal theoretical approaches to the study of war memory and commemoration, proposing the so-called “integrated” approach, which stresses the existing inter-relations that link the individual, civil society and the state, and accounting for the specific and evolving social, cultural, political, and individual contexts of war representation and meaning-making. At present, most war memory research being undertaken takes these theoretical developments into account.

**War memory: a developing field**

In terms of studies concerning specific national contexts, the works of F. Lorenz and M. Evans, just to cite these examples, illuminate the difficult questions arising

\(^1\) This paper reflects the findings of a DPhil research still in progress and draws from fieldwork undertaken in Portugal between 2005 and 2007. Its main purpose is to bring attention to the issues arising from an oral history study on the Portuguese Colonial War (1961-1974), a topic largely neglected by contemporary Portuguese history. Therefore, I would like to emphasise that I am not yet in a position to present extended and theoretical conclusions.


\(^3\) Evans 1997a, 1997b.


\(^5\) Evans & Lunn 1997.

\(^6\) Roper 2000.

\(^7\) Sivan & Winter 1999.


\(^9\) Sivan & Winter 1999.
from armed conflicts which are not collectively recognised within their societies. Indeed, the deliberate use of forgetting and sometimes distorting is not exclusive to the Portuguese colonial conflict. The same applies, for instance, to the war fought by the British colonial state against the Mau Mau guerrillas of Kenya during 1952-60 (Kershaw 1997). Similarly, in writing about the Malvinas war (1982), F. Lorenz tells us about a nation which is not comfortable with its veterans (1999: 95-112, 2002, 2003). Likewise, M. Evans states that the Algerian War (1954-1962) “for many years has been a taboo subject in France”, thus stressing his wish as a historian to “recover a neglected history” (Alexander et al. 2002: 3; 12). Like in Portugal, in the French case the general memory of the colonial war is not positive and is profoundly divisive. Veterans’ memories have not been systematically affirmed by public rituals of remembrance, with consequences for individual war memories and their expression.

According to G. Dawson et al., in these societies “an attempt to come to terms with a traumatic past” can be found regarding the colonial conflicts (1999: 11). Very often this process is accompanied by public and official amnesia. As K. Plummer stresses, memory starts to be seen much more as a “socially shared experience” (2001: 235), and much less as an individual psychological phenomenon. Wars enter people’s cultural memory when those who have an individual memory of war want to pass it on to their society. Therefore, the political and socio-historical context where individual memories exist is instrumental in this process of integration. In this sense, public amnesia and official marginalisation can silence individual memory due to the fact that there is no environment favourable to remembering.

In this context, oral history is a way of challenging and also explaining the silence, as well as of offering recognition. In my oral history practice, I aim at an explanation of this silence and its effects, whilst at the same time recovering taboo memories.

In fact, many veterans still do not talk because their memories are traumatic, or are afraid of the possible repercussions of telling what they did in the past. In this sense, public silence is, in some instances, sustained by a psychological reluctance to talk on the part of some ex-combatants, and thus certain types of memories remain private and unassimilated. Breaking the silence, those who talk are in search of “a past… [they] can live with”, both individually and as members of a society, in a continual memory-making process of “composure”, as argued by A. Thomson (1994: 8-9). Therefore, both personal memories and personal narratives evolve over time as a result of composure, through which the veterans try to find memories they feel reasonably comfortable with, being aware of and affected by the public to whom the narratives are expressed (Roper 2000: 181-204). In this process, available cultural narratives – other veterans’ memories, books, television, war veterans’ campaigns, and similar – contribute to the personal narrative. These two postures adopted by the veterans – talking or remaining silent – symbolise a split between a desire to forget about a traumatic past and a necessity to link personal memory and historical memory.
**The public memory of the Portuguese colonial war (1961-1974)**

In order to gain a better understanding of the Portuguese context, an introductory explanation is necessary. The Portuguese colonial war (1961-1974) consisted of three fighting fronts in Angola, Guinea-Bissau and Mozambique. The conflict started in Angola in 1961, at a time when colonialism was severely condemned internationally, and ceased in 1974. In June 1951 the terminology “colonies” had been officially replaced by the phrase “overseas provinces”, and the same process was applied to “Portuguese Colonial Empire”, which was then renamed “Ultramar Português”, this last expression meaning something like “Portuguese territory beyond the sea”. The **Forças Armadas Portuguesas** (Portuguese Armed Forces) were meant to reflect the colonial policy of the regime, and so, during thirteen years of war, about 820,000 men were mobilised and sent to Africa. This was a long and violent guerrilla war – officially called “overseas campaigns” – fought thousands of miles away, in another continent. At the end of the conflict, on the Portuguese side, it was estimated that there had been 8,831 dead, around 30,000 wounded, close to 4,500 mutilated and over 100,000 soldiers suffering from posttraumatic stress disorders.

Despite the strong oppression felt under the dictatorial regime, considerably large sections of Portuguese society were against the colonial war. Although in the majority of cases this opposition was not clearly expressed, many individuals found ways of manifesting their disagreement with the conflict. This is noted by A. Pinto, who stresses that

> “even though the social impact [of the war], which translated into an increasingly anti-war public opinion, is hard to reconstruct given the dictatorial nature of the political system in force in Portugal at the time, the war and its parade of violence marked Portuguese society in a long lasting way” (Pinto 2001: 48).

Initially, in 1961 when the conflict started in Angola, there was a widespread conception that accepted – although with some variation – that Portugal and its colonies formed a political unity: a common motherland. The regime amply used this notion in its propaganda in favour of an immediate armed action against the so-called “terrorists”. “Para Angola, rapidamente e em força” (“To Angola, quickly and massively”) was the motto, and brutal images of mutilated Portuguese settlers were shown in the Portuguese media. The initial reaction was one of defence of the colonial territories. In the words of one of my respondents:

> “[...] people thought that we had, indeed, every right to our colonies [...] and maybe we didn’t find it such an absurdity to go there and defend, sacrifice ourselves [...] for the motherland. [...] generally, people thought it was a fair war.”

---

10 Portugal’s population in 1960 was of 8,889,392 people. The mobilised forces equalled to over 7% of the active population; 40% of the national budget was channelled to National Defence. See Afonso 1994.


12 L. José interviewed by Ângela Campos in Viana do Castelo, Portugal, July 2007. [All the interviews mentioned in the text are by Angela Campos].
However, from the beginning of the war, and unlike what the official propaganda stated, anti-war positions were expressed in Portuguese society. The dissenting voice of the Portuguese Communist Party warned, as early as December 1961, that the colonial wars that would ensue would be a “national disaster for the Portuguese people” (Bebiano 2002: 293-313). Besides this political party, which manifested its anti-war views from the first moment, the anti-colonial feeling was also significantly strong within University students. Indeed, after a number of student actions and strikes in 1962, the colonial cause rapidly began to lose adherents. The number of dead and wounded became more visible and many chose to leave the country before conscription. This is stressed by R. Bebiano:

“The flux of youngsters fleeing incorporation in the army and mobilisation for the colonial war was indeed amazing, without any resemblance to what happened then in the other European states: in 1961 the percentage of absentees was 11.6%, in 62 it had already increased to 12.8%, in 1963 reached 15.6%, in 1964 had risen to 16.5%, between 1965 and 1968 was around 19%, and between 70 and 72 stayed very close to 21% (Ibid.: 302).”

Nonetheless, most young men of military age chose to comply with military service. There were some constraints to be taken into account:

“I thought of that [running away], but where would I go to? I didn't have anyone, didn’t have any money […] I risked it, like many others, in good faith, in defence of darling motherland […] people were afraid of taking chances at risk of being caught.”

Those who refused to comply with military service, instead of deserting, would rather miss the inspection, a procedure associated with the authorities’ decision on whether an individual would or would not leave the country (Martelo 2001).

Although the opposition to the colonial war was expressed more systematically by different non-unified left-wing movements, some individual forms of resistance were increasingly being felt within urban areas among intellectuals and youngsters, particularly students or those who had been integrated in the Armed Forces – the groups that in a way or another would be more affected by the continuation of the conflict. “I was already rather politised at the time, we were already having meetings here in Porto”, states one interviewee, among others. As the war intensified and the number of fighting fronts increased, spreading into Guinea and Mozambique, opposition to the conflict tended to become more noticeable. The war seemed to prolong itself indefinitely and for many students and military men this meant an interest in political and ideological literature and an increasing awareness of African national movements. Some personal testimonies reflect this reality: “My knowledge about politics was not much, but […] I couldn’t stand the system […] and talked to many University students”

students of the Universities of Lisbon and Coimbra protested more vehemently. The more politised student movements in Lisbon, Coimbra and Porto, some of them with connections to the working youth, became even more radical after the academic year of 1970-1971. In 1973, the opposition forces grew in strength and during the Congresso da Oposição Democratica (Congress of Democratic Opposition), which took place in Aveiro, the importance of “developing an ample national campaign demanding the end of the war” was stressed (Bebiano 2002: 296).

Certain groups expressed these views in a more active and sometimes radical manner. Some examples, just to cite a few, were: FPLN, Frente Patriótica de Libertação Nacional (Patriotic Front of National Liberation) – created in 1962, one of the main aspects of its propaganda was the opposition to the war; LUAR, Liga de União e Ação Revolucionária (League of Revolutionary Unity and Action), was created in 1967; in 1970, emerged ARA, Ação Revolucionária Armada (Armed Revolutionary Action) – the Communist Party’s armed branch that supported the fight against fascism and the colonial war; MRPP, Movimento Reorganizativo do Partido do Proletariado (Reorganising Movement of the Labouring Class Party) appeared in 1970; the BR, Brigadas Revolucionárias (Revolutionary Brigades) arise in 1972, and in 1973 the CLAC, Comités de Luta Anticolonial e Anti-Imperialista (Committees of Anticolonial and Anti-Imperialistic Struggle).

As R. Bebiano points out, some of the left-wing struggles also involved cultural tools like the literary production of the 1960s (Fernando Assis Pacheco and Manuel Alegre, for example) and the famous intervention songs about the war, which were powerful yet veiled weapons against the regime’s colonial policy. The songs of José Afonso, for instance, influenced anti-war positions both in the streets and in the barracks and became an icon of the resistance against the dictatorial regime. Indeed,

All this approach of an important sector of Portuguese society to anti-war resistance and defence of independence conceptions was thus aroused and stimulated, in the domain of political practice and cultural activity, by the different oppositions to the left of the regime (Bebiano 2002: 47).

Apart from the militant efforts of the left, some Catholic activists organised anti-war demonstrations, debates and vigils and seemed to become increasingly keen on mobilising people’s consciences against the colonial conflict. These pro-peace actions, although rather passive and careful not to politically provoke the regime in a direct way, were particularly effective in the late 60s and early 70s; the vigil of Capela do Rato, in Lisbon, on the 31st December 1972 being a great example of protest against the war (ibid.: 40-47).

Simultaneously, many emigrated Portuguese people – some of them political exiles or deserters living in different countries like France or England, for instance, and most notably in Paris – were actively organising anti-war groups and actions of anti-fascist and anti-colonial political activism among workers (the so-called economic immigrants), dissidents and deserters. There they could experience “how it was to live in a democracy”.

Although the student actions and the Armed Forces’ dissatisfaction in the early 70s may, perhaps, be considered the most visible face of Portuguese society’s...
opposition, the variety of combined actions and manifested views mentioned above had a notable impact on the public opinion about the continuation of the colonial war. They encompassed geographic areas and social sectors that, although probably not supporting these movements actively, became more understanding of the reasons evoked by the latter and thus diverged more from the official propaganda concerning this matter.

In fact, with the conflict demanding more and more soldiers, in the early 1970s many families were already affected by the colonial war in different ways. However, and regarding this conflict, it has to be highlighted once again that due to “the fascist and censorial character of the regime” a great number of people in Portugal, perhaps the majority of the masses, “ignored the contours and its real dimension”, and consequently “even today Portuguese society has great difficulties in discussing the colonial question” (L. Rosário 2001: 78-79). This recognition of their political unawareness is acknowledged by several interviewees, who reflect various aspects of this reality. If some emphasise the idea of duty – “I didn’t have any political consciousness, neither anyone had […] I was fulfilling a duty”¹八 – others point at the ideological influence of the political system in force: “I didn’t have either political or ideological conscience, I was unable to interpret the facts, I was also very much shaped by the values of the regime, of *Estado Novo*, through education”¹九. For many, the lack of information about the conflict was evident – “I didn’t understand [the war] so well because my political training was nonexistent”²零 – and understanding the war was not a priority: “I didn’t know anything about politics […] the only politics I knew about was working and supporting my family.”²一 In many cases, this contributed to a sense of uselessness and inadequacy regarding the presence of Portuguese troops in Africa:

“[…] politically, perhaps we were there because we were defending the motherland, because Salazar said so […] we knew little about what the colonial war was […] and I, to a certain extent, completely unaware of what was going on, was perhaps one of those who said ‘of course, we have to go’; later, after being there, I realised things were not quite like that.”²二

“[…]we were aware that we were doing nothing there […] I never saw a soldier fighting with the aim of winning the war.”²三

To a great extent, the feeling that this war had no purpose led to the 1974 revolution. In fact, on 25 April 1974 a democratic revolution put an end to almost fifty years of fascism, virtually incarnated in the figure of Oliveira Salazar (1889-1969), and to the colonial war. The *Forças Armadas* played the leading role in the revolution – the same armed forces that had been fighting in Africa until then. From 1974 on, their image is almost exclusively associated with the democratic revolution. About their participation in the colonial conflict there seems to be a persisting silence. In the words of an officer:

---

¹八 R. Bento interviewed in Lisbon, Portugal, March 2006.
²零 L. José interviewed in Viana do Castelo, Portugal, July 2007.
²一 C. Daniel interviewed in Leça da Palmeira, Portugal, August 2007.
“[…] the military should acknowledge that they were the most responsible for maintaining that regime […] we should admit that we collaborated in a dictatorial process.”

Indeed, according to one of the ex-combatants interviewed:

“So if the war happened at the time of fascism […] we can’t run away from it, we can’t run away from that reality – fascism, old regime, the war happened at that time.”

If, and quoting D. Ritchie, “public memory represents a society’s collective conceptions about the past” (Ritchie 2003: 36), the specificity of the Portuguese case appears to lie in this political contradiction: the Armed Forces are simultaneously the men who were fighting for the maintenance of the Portuguese Colonial Empire in Africa and the democratic liberators of 1974. This political issue remains an extremely delicate subject in contemporary Portugal. The ex-combatants’ mother country was a dictatorial regime in 1961 and a newborn democracy in 1974. This unresolved tension between fascism and democracy, right and left, makes it even harder to remember the colonial conflict and its veterans. Without a doubt, this is not a consensual topic: “the colonial war was associated to fascism and since it’s shameful to be fascist or salazarist or such, one has to forget these people [the ex-combatants].”

According to the principles of the old regime, the end of the war was a shameful betrayal and meant the loss of national territory. The new democratic Portugal accepted the right to independence of the former colonies, and presented the war as a waste of time, resources and human lives. The official post-1974 discourse tends to follow this last view and put the colonial war into the context of fascism, therefore placing a major emphasis on the democratic revolution.

However, these two views are not clearly demarcated and tend to cohabit. They reveal divided individuals, and a divided society in which there is no real national unity around the cultural memory of the war. This is a personal, social and political scar. It is not comfortable to deal with Portugal’s dictatorial past and the collapse of its empire. In this context, the men who fought for it are a source of embarrassment. Quoting the words of M. Evans on the French Algerian war veterans, the ex-combatants “quickly became untidy reminders of outdated colonial values” (Evans et al. 1997: 75). They remind civilian society of that particular past.

The fact that my research aims at an evaluation of the colonial wars in terms of its social memory places me, as a researcher, before an inescapable reality: this memory has been, for nearly three decades, either rejected or ignored in Portugal, both officially and individually. The representations of the conflict have been, especially in the immediate postwar period, very scarce, if not at all nonexistent. The country has been perhaps too committed to its democratic and European integration to reflect on its recent past. Indeed, the colonial wars have been a subject avoided by Portuguese contemporary history, something Portugal seems to

---

24 P. António interviewed in Paço de Arcos, Portugal, August 2007.
26 Ibid.
be ashamed of and willing to forget. Quoting P. de Medeiros, one can even speak of a state of “collective amnesia”, an “inability to address the effects of the colonial war on the nation” (2000: 202).

The relative absence of historical reflection on the Portuguese colonial wars “from below” stresses the importance of its lived memories. In this case, the potential for oral history to combat national silence and make these silent stories heard is manifestly evident. Although there are a few possible exceptions to this situation (Antunes 1995), the prominence given to certain narratives within cultural memory is related to the power of those who recount the events, normally important public figures and high rank military officers. The experiences of these individuals are seen as more important than those of thousands of fighting men that do not have a direct access to political and cultural power. A remarkable exception, however, is the piece written by C. Matos Gomes for *Nova História Militar de Portugal* (*New Military History of Portugal*, 2004), entitled “Quotidianos da Guerra Colonial” (“Everyday Life of the Colonial War”), which traces the soldiers’ complete path from inspection to their return – when applicable. Nonetheless, according to authors like A. Afonso and C. Gomes (2001), who published an encyclopaedic study about the conflict, the colonial war is still too recent an event in Portuguese history to be properly evaluated.

Similarly, the exploration of the realm of fiction, as remarked by P. de Medeiros (2000), was one of the first and most important means of access to war memories and its psychic traumas. This is evident in the proliferation of novels alluding to the wars or about them that occurred after 1974, with a special emphasis on those published by António Lobo Antunes and Lídia Jorge27. In fact, although confined to the aesthetic arena and limited to a restricted group which had access to publication, these novels had their impact in the sense that they confronted the official silence. Furthermore, in this field the subsequent studies of R. Azevedo Teixeira on the colonial war and Portuguese literary fiction have to be emphasized (1998, 2001, 2002, 2004).

In spite of this decades-long silence, one cannot refer to the public memory of the Portuguese colonial wars without introducing the concept of a certain “revival” of the conflict particularly visible in the last few years. The fact that, in the last thirty years, this subject has been addressed mainly by novelists, and, more recently, by psychiatrists, psychologists and journalists, but not by professional historians, is in itself quite revealing28. They represent recent efforts to break the silence. The reality of the war has also been directly approached by war veterans’ associations through their diversified activities, but this is a somewhat recent phenomenon. APVG (*Associação Portuguesa de Veteranos de Guerra*, Portuguese Association of War Veterans), the most important and combative of them all, having around 40,000 associates, was only founded in 1999, for instance.

27 *Os Cus de Judas* (1979) and *A Costa dos Murmúrios* (1988), respectively.

28 In this respect, the work of A. de Albuquerque, a psychiatrist, should be highlighted. Albuquerque is the author of several studies concerning PTSD (*Posttraumatic Stress Disorder*) among the Portuguese war veterans, and in the last years has been calling civil society’s attention to the ex-combatants’ psychic suffering. PTSD is a term which first appeared in the American 1980s’ psychiatric literature in the aftermath of the Vietnam war, referring to the disturbances experienced by the US military veterans after the conflict. See, for instance, *Albuquerque* 2003.
J. Ribeiro, a journalist, in his book *Marcas da Guerra Colonial* (*Marks of the Colonial War*) states that “the shame reached such an extent that after 1974 the colonial war was cautiously swept away from the collective memory” (1999: 8). In terms of official indifference, the author stresses the absence of this topic from the history curricula of state schools. He urges the colonial conflict to be studied and revealed, in order to overcome this “open wound of Portuguese society”. Most interviewees agree with this view, stating that “through school textbooks” people should “remember what happened”29, because:

> “History exists so that Humanity can see it, study it, rethink it so that later one can do better, differently, or even to do justice; not here […] here people try to forget, bury everything that happened in the colonial war, everything.”30

Nonetheless, a greater mobilisation of war veterans’ associations, a growing number of ex-combatants who have now retired and have initiated in many cases a life review process, and even some signs of governmental attention concerning these matters have recently contributed to a visible shift in terms of how the colonial conflict and its former combatants are perceived. Indeed, in a case like this, where a society has consistently refused to remember, many war veterans have been trying to bring their memories into the public domain and are creating a “listening space” (Dawson *et al.* 1999: 10) where the topic can be talked about more openly. For instance, 2004, the 30th anniversary of the 1974 revolution, was a prolific year in terms of bringing the colonial war and the ex-combatants into the open. There was substantial news coverage of war veterans’ meetings and other activities, and the press manifested an interest in their stories. This supports the idea that, even if – quoting T. Ashplant *et al.* (2004: 19) – a community’s sense of shame can block “the transformation of individual into shared/common memories”, it can also spur a remembering that is sectional or oppositional to silence. This is particularly true of the Portuguese case now that the activity of smaller groups and publics made it possible to reach a wider audience and gain some cultural and political visibility. Indeed, if some resent their absence from public remembrance but remain silent, others strive to find alternative forms of remembrance, just like in the case of French veterans described by M. Evans (1997: 75–76).

More recent examples of this visibility can be found in the Portuguese media. In fact, between the 4th and 11th June 2007, *Correio da Manhã*, one of the best-selling Portuguese newspapers, published a series of articles entitled “Memórias de Guerra” (“War Memories”), which highlighted first-person war experiences. Another example was the media attention received by the study of Ângela Maia, a researcher from Universidade do Minho (Braga, Portugal), on the news and press, about the “forgotten men” with PTSD, in “a world of suffering that Portugal insists to ignore three decades after the end of the *Ultramar* war”31. In addition,

---

29 C. Félix interviewed in Cuba, Portugal, in August 2007.
30 S. Abílio interviewed in Pontinha, Portugal, in March 2006.
31 In *Notícias Magazine*, 17 July 2007, the most widely read Portuguese magazine. The author advances a number of 300,000 PTSD sufferers in Portugal, a figure much higher than that mentioned in earlier studies. This aspect was focused by the 1pm *Telejornal* (Television news) of the Portuguese channel TVI on 23 September 2007.
on 15 October 2007, a three-hour groundbreaking debate on the colonial war was broadcasted by RTP1, the main public Portuguese channel. This initiative was followed the day after by the first episode of a prime-time 18-episode documentary on the conflict by the journalist Joaquim Furtado. Advertised as “the most awaited series of the last years”, this documentary series provoked some agitation in the Portuguese media – including the Internet, with reader comments on the on-line versions of some Portuguese newspapers, on blogs, and personal and war veterans’ army companies websites32.

One must also stress that apart from the traumatic nature that, in the first place, and due to the nature of this conflict, characterised the war experiences of thousands of ex-combatants33, this prevalent public amnesia affects the memories and identities of war veterans in several ways, both on a personal and social level. In effect, the ex-combatants have to face the issues and difficulties inherent to the fact of having an experience that is not recognised, and this also includes the practical benefits of recognition such as pensions and health care. When interviewed, the great majority of the war veterans allude to that situation in similar terms to those of these two examples:

“They want to see us all dead to get rid of this [...] so that they get rid of these burdens, we are the burdens for this country, this community [...] within ten, fifteen, twenty years everything will be over.”34

“ [...] there was nothing, neither on the part of the State nor the military or social assistance, no one cared, no one called to ask how I was reacting, no one paid attention to the wives, nothing, nothing, it was over; it was over, we were used, the shirt is worn, throw it away [...] I feel like a used part.”35

There seems to be a dual concept of “recognition”: a public acceptance of the ex-combatants’ war experiences and the claim for material compensation. Although the two realities are strongly interrelated, this latter aspect of social justice is fundamental within the Portuguese context. These ex-combatants demand:

“that they should look at us through different eyes [...] with humanity; they used us and threw us away as if we were something one throws in a rubbish bin [...] the politicians should have the good judgement of looking at us with other dignity, with other insight that’s been lacking so far. For thirty long years I have been listening to very beautiful speeches [...] was it worthwhile? [...] is that the compensation I receive?”36

Despite some legal diplomas of the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s that reinforced their rights, war veterans in general, and especially war disabled, remain largely

32 Jornal de Notícias, on 16 October 2007, stated that this documentary showed “the war as it had never been seen”, is a “thorough view of the war”. Joaquim Furtado argued that “[The colonial war] is a sensitive issue in Portuguese history and, although nearly 40 years have passed, it has never been addressed and clarified as it should”, in Correio da Manhã, 16 October 2007. This was the most watched documentary on Portuguese television since 2000 (Diário de Notícias, 18 October 2007).

33 In 1999, it was estimated that about 30% of all ex-combatants suffer from PTSD (Ribeiro 1999: 58). Recent studies point out a higher percentage. Please see footnote n° 33.

34 S. Carlos interviewed in Abrantes, Portugal, August 2007.


In this context, and mainly on the part of war veterans’ associations, there has been an unrelenting fight for war pensions and allowances for the wounded, psychological support for ex-combatants and their families and dependants. These late 1990s and early 2000s campaigns led to political recognition and were a remarkable stimulus to public debate, in a long and complex legal and political battle.

In Portugal, there are about 100,000 retired war veterans; 270,000 are still working; and an estimated 57,000 are suffering from PTSD. The Portuguese ex-combatants are a very heterogeneous group, as they belong to very disparate backgrounds. The veterans have in common the fact that they are men mostly born in the 1940s and 1950s, and represent a generation whose shared identity was brought into existence by the war experience. For the most part, they were conscripts doing their military service – which after the legal changes of 1968 included, besides the training period in Portugal, at least two years in the African theatre of operations – and fighting was a “national mission attributed to them by the political power” (Antunes 1995: 7). Believing or not in what they were fighting for, the choice was obedience, insubordination (for instance, by leaving the country before conscription) or desertion.

For some, now there is another difficult choice to make: to remain silent or share their memories. Many memories they choose to tell were until then “deeply buried inside” and some war veterans go as far as to admit they “still live in the colonial war”. In general, the group of the Portuguese ex-combatants is increasingly demanding public recognition. Many veterans want the country to know about “their war”, as they say – they reject the collective silence, pointing out the importance of their first-hand experience. They feel that they “are still forgotten, unsupported, undervalued”. Indeed, at present, coming into the foreground there is a sense of chronological distance – both personal and generational – that facilitates the telling of war memories.

37 The Association for the Disabled of the Armed Forces (ADFA, Associação dos Deficientes das Forças Armadas) was founded shortly after the end of the conflict, in May 1974, and is a war veterans’ association specifically directed to the war disabled. In 1976, regulation n° 43/76 recognised the disabled of the armed forces the right to moral and material compensation. Regulation n° 46/99 (1999) created Rede Nacional de Apoio, a government funded national psychological support network for those ex-combatants suffering from PTSD. Regulation n° 9/2002 (or Lei dos Antigos Combatentes, meaning Law of the Former Combatants) was passed in 2002. Recently, on 21 November 2007, the Portuguese Government signed a protocol agreement with war veterans’ associations to treat war stress cases more quickly.

38 Lusa (news agency), 18 March 2004. For an explanation on PTSD see footnote n° 30. See also footnotes n° 33 and 35.

39 The legal diploma n° 2135 (Lei do Serviço Militar, Law of Military Service), passed on 11 July 1968, determined a legal increase in the duration of the military service and military obligations. In practice, this meant that the two-year period of incorporation was effectively extended to four years, of which two had to be served in Africa. See CANN 2001, 2005 and Matos 2004: 184. The war effort implied the mobilisation of increasingly large numbers of conscripts. N. TEIXEIRA (2004: 68-92) notes that in thirteen years of war the contingent of troops in the Portuguese Armed Forces increased about five and a half times.

40 D. José interviewed in Matosinhos, Portugal, in August 2007.


Relatives, comrades and veterans’ associations provide some kind of social support. Currently, there are over ten war veterans’ associations in Portugal, some of them operating locally. They organise meetings and other periodic activities. These gatherings are becoming more popular and better advertised since the last decade. In this particular public, the veterans are able to find recognition and affirmation.

Nowadays, the war in itself is not the strict taboo it used to be, and the subject is mentioned much more often. Indeed, in the last five years there have been an increasing number of publications on the colonial war (including novels, war memories, autobiographies, magazines); the same applies to exhibitions, colloquiums, documentaries, TV programs, films, and other similar cultural forms, as stressed earlier. Likewise, the last few years witnessed the nationwide emergence of a profusion of monuments, memorials, plaques, and other commemorative events related to the colonial wars and their ex-combatants.

Nonetheless, it must be borne in mind that this revival of the war revolves around many complex factors concerning the nature of its remembrance and even the perpetuation of silence. For example, the fact that many ex-combatants have to live with their memories of the massacres of local populations and other violent war episodes is deeply problematic. In that respect, some characterise their war experience as “an authentic disaster”, admitting that “today I feel guilty for all that”. Some uneasingly confess:

“The fact is that I killed people, do you understand? I killed […] but I killed to avoid being killed and feel anguished about that, do you understand? I feel anguished […] I don’t feel at ease with myself.”

However, and to cite one of my interviewees: “I have to be a normal being in society, and that cannot be accomplished on my own.” Seeking their identity, these ex-combatants do not recognise themselves as murderers in their present role of common citizens. In fact, the more brutal aspects of war (such as the violent deaths, the massacres of the locals, the extreme combat situations, and so on) are not easily mentioned. For instance, a quick analysis of some newspaper and magazine articles published in the last couple of years will provide the reader with a very descriptive and organic view of the war and its consequences, a view which, striving for impartiality and political correctness seems to avoid any kind of historical reflection at all costs. This is the most common way the subject is treated by the media. Few exceptions attempt at evaluating the past.

Oral history, being a method that creates its own documents, in the present, highlights the fact that the voices of those who are willing to speak about the past are vital to history (and to the community in general). In this context, the

44 R. Bento interviewed in Lisbon, Portugal, March 2006.
45 A. Alberto interviewed in Porto, Portugal, August 2007.
46 For instance, Os Soldados Também Choram (Soldiers Cry Too, documentary, SIC, 2001) and Atrocidades da Guerra Colonial (Atrocities of the Colonial War, magazine article, Notícias Magazine, 17 March 1996). Another example is the news article A Casa da Vergonha (The House of Shame), on the war disabled who live in Lar Militar da Cruz Vermelha (Red Cross Military Home), in Lisbon, in Correio da Manhã, 23 April 2006.
selective process of representation of the facts (at the same time individual and collective), and not the facts in themselves, is what really matters.

Interviewing war veterans of the Portuguese colonial war

My sample of about seventy ex-combatants comprises veterans of different age and class groups, location, educational backgrounds, military rank, different areas of fighting and periods of conflict, and other situations. My research seeks a greater understanding of the ways in which the colonial war is remembered and understood by the ones who fought it, beyond any negative connotations attributed to the conflict. In cases like this, the importance of oral history resides in recovering hidden histories within a national history; and, in this context, creating new ways in which the colonial conflict is remembered and viewed, paving the way for historical reflection. Many of my respondents are aware of this situation, and express themselves in very clear terms, as can be seen from this example:

“[…] as long as there is a shame of facing things straightforwardly – it’s almost as if we have committed a crime in having been in the Ultramar; then in that case, how is it like that 800,000 […] were so criminal to the point […] of being forgotten? […] the fact that we have been there, one can’t do anything about it; we were there, like it or not, want it or not; we were there […] fulfilling duty […] in truth, it would be a question […] of facing things, […] they exist and we can’t go on – denying them, isn’t it?”47

It must be stressed that this specific topic is particularly challenging for the researcher. Although the colonial war is not perceived as a traumatic episode by every ex-combatant, for a large number of veterans this is still an extremely delicate issue, and one that is not socially desirable to talk about. In the words of one of my interviewees: “we try not to remember most of the things […] we try to forget. I think it was a wasted time […] I lost the best years of my life in the colonial war.”48 In this context, although not a therapy, oral history in some instances represents a route to the integration of memories concerning traumatic experiences. However, I am fully conscious of the fact that this aspect is by no means the primary aim of my research.

Methodologically, this option poses the researcher a question related to interviewing individuals suffering from trauma. Often, rather difficult recollections come to the surface and, as an interviewer, I have to be prepared to deal with this kind of situation in an effective way. I must also be prepared to listen to – and respect – controversial opinions which do not coincide with my personal views (e.g. racist comments, defence of fascism, and so on). Above all, I believe that it is fundamental to maintain an impartial approach that will ensure the well-being and integrity of both interviewee and interviewer, and no research agenda is more important than that. This principle applies to the interview situation and to its future consequences for both participants, and psychological support must be sought whenever necessary. In effect, I already know how emphatic the relation-

48 S. José interviewed in Gaia, Portugal, August 2007.
ship interviewer-interviewee may become, for instance in that I have recurrent nightmares of battlefields and violent war episodes profusely described to me by the interviewees.

Another issue to be considered is the fact that in Portugal this topic is met with reticence by many ex-combatants, mainly due to its strong political implications. Thus, I have already encountered some reserve and cautiousness in the way my questions are answered – or not. Discontent and anger at the lack of public recognition, material claims and even personal issues are often expressed too. Of course, these aspects affect the testimonies collected. A great number of these ex-combatants are trying to come to terms with their past and prefer to remain silent about certain topics. Also, some respondents are not very familiar with the oral history approach to historical research and think they have nothing “important” to say. I have even been spoken to in insulting terms, learning that oral history is “useless talk” and I should be doing “real history” through reading “good” books and then listening to the advice of the “right” people.

Most of my respondents are puzzled by the fact that I am a female researcher (actually, when they write to me they invariably assume that I am a man, and on the telephone I have been asked more than twice to pass the telephone to… Dr Campos, my “boss”). Indeed, for a great number of my respondents (if not the majority) it is quite hard to understand how a female in her late twenties can possibly have an interest in researching the Portuguese colonial wars. Some have even asked if I have family reasons for studying this subject – which is not the case. Indeed, my main motivation, as a member of the new generations born after the colonial conflict, is to increase my knowledge on the subject and aim at a better understanding of its complexities. Nonetheless, and specifically in terms of the interview relationship, my experience so far indicates that being a female to a great extent works in my favour since the male respondents often feel emotionally more comfortable to address topics they would not normally refer to a male interviewer. As one respondent remarked: “I don’t even tell this to my children, it’s the first time I’m talking about this”49. Also, the age group to which I belong puts me somehow in the role of an element of a younger generation to whom the veterans pass on their experience. In addition, I am an outsider, i.e., I am not a war veteran, and thus am viewed as someone more objective and dispassionate about the war. A sense of neutrality and safety is also added by the fact that I am doing academic research for a foreign University. This combination of factors is not exactly common as far as interviewing war veterans is concerned, and I believe this research benefits from it. In any case, I am fully aware that the existing basic social attributes always influence the interview relationship in several ways.

In this case, oral history acknowledges personal experience as integrated in a historic collective event that involved Portuguese society. As emphasised earlier, the Portuguese colonial conflict has been the focus of an enormous taboo. This silence is not just personal and social, it is also a political one. It has to do with the collapse of the Portuguese Empire and its dictatorial past. The democratic Portugal still associates the war with the former regime in a negative way, chastising

those who took part in it with an upsetting silence, making them wonder – “such a big thing, passing unnoticed, so many years of war”\textsuperscript{50} – and conclude:

“So far there hasn’t been a plausible explanation about what were effectively the motives of that war […] so far history of that period hasn’t been done and I think too much time is going by.”\textsuperscript{51}

My research on this topic has been revealing a group – not just isolated individuals – in search of a space where memories can be told and acknowledged. Many of these men, mostly in their fifties and sixties, feeling that their war memories have not been affirmed by public rituals of remembrance, demand recognition. They want to speak, but, above all, they want society to speak to them, or at least admit their presence within itself. The need to tell the story is urgent – especially because the huge majority of them have never been granted that opportunity –, and gives voice to common concerns:

“[…] what we were told was that we went to defend the motherland. […] why does the motherland today reject me, why does that same motherland that sent me to fight for her, today, thirty years later, say to me: “I don’t even know you, I don’t even want to speak about you […]”\textsuperscript{52}

It also must be added that perspectives can change over time within the same group. If some interviewees admit that “nowadays I think it was a waste of time […] but at the time I thought differently”\textsuperscript{53}, others state that in the past they felt it was a

“horrible and unjust colonial war […] we should feel ashamed of having been in that war; not today […] with a greater distance in years […] I can’t think bad about a soldier who […] says he is proud of having served the motherland”\textsuperscript{54}.

In effect, talking about this topic can be liberating. One of my respondents confessed that being interviewed was worthwhile, if not for anything else, for the “satisfaction of being able to have this conversation with you, that I couldn’t have thirty years ago”\textsuperscript{55}.

When asked about what they were fighting for during the conflict, the answers of the ex-combatants are not homogeneous. Some felt they “had that obligation towards my [their] country”\textsuperscript{56}, they “did it in full conviction that my [their] motherland needed me [them] and I [they] went”\textsuperscript{57}, they “went to defend what was ours”\textsuperscript{58}, they “went there to defend our motherland […] to defend something that, rightly or not – that’s none of my business – belonged to the Portuguese”\textsuperscript{59}.

\textsuperscript{50} L. Orlando interviewed in Baixa da Banheira, Portugal, July 2007.
\textsuperscript{51} F. Manuel interviewed in Caldas da Rainha, Portugal, August 2007.
\textsuperscript{52} M. Alfredo interviewed in Porto, Portugal, December 2004.
\textsuperscript{53} R. Bento interviewed in Lisbon, Portugal, March 2006.
\textsuperscript{54} P. Eduardo interviewed in Seixal, Portugal, July 2007.
\textsuperscript{55} L. José interviewed in Porto, Portugal, July 2007.
\textsuperscript{56} P. Joaquim interviewed in Porto, Portugal, July 2007.
\textsuperscript{57} F. Daniel interviewed in Leça da Palmeira, Portugal, August 2007.
\textsuperscript{58} R. Francisco interviewed in Camarate, Portugal, March 2006.
\textsuperscript{59} L. Mário interviewed in Trofa, Portugal, July 2007.
Many recognise they “have a certain pride of having gone to fight for my [their] country [...] , defend my [their] flag, my [their] motherland”60, and admit they “feel proud of having belonged to the Armed Forces”61.

Many, however, feel differently about their participation in the colonial war and state that they were not there “for my [their] motherland, I was [they were] defending my [their] skin”62, they had “to kill not to die”63. They “were forced to go and defend something that had nothing to do with us [them]”64, “I was another one [...] by imposition [...] we went to attack the Africans in their own land”65. Indeed: “no, no, I didn’t go for the motherland [...] honestly, I didn’t go for the motherland, I went for an obligation [...] because I didn’t feel any patriotism in that respect”66. “Today I am aware that what I was doing there was nothing, strictly nothing [...] my participation was one of being cannon fodder.”67

Like many others, one of my interviewees summarises his position in this way:

“I don’t feel honoured for having participated in a war like that, I don’t feel ashamed for having been there [...] I acknowledge my presence in [...] a war that I consider unfair, but in which I was forced to participate [...] I was there because I was forced to.”68

The vast majority of my respondents regrets the occurrence of this war, which “was an enormous waste of men, meant a huge suffering for women, for families”, and, according to many, “was a war that could have been avoided”69. Very often, they finish their testimonies with a question left unanswered: “seen at this distance, all those men who died... what for, why?”70

My training as a historian enables me to perceive silent gaps within Portuguese contemporary history, a reality I am well acquainted with. To a great extent, I feel identified with the questions affecting the interviewees. Not on a personal level, but as a member of that same society these ex-combatants are talking about.

There certainly is in Portugal an unsolved trauma – contradictory, complex – surrounding the colonial war. The researcher is unable to solve a national trauma. However, this does not mean that the oral historian is doomed to the passive role of the observer. I thoroughly agree with E. Lorenz (in Dawson et al. 1999: 95-112) when he stresses the importance of oral history as a means to study and show the origins of individual and social traumas. In this sense, I consider that oral

---

60 S. Carlos interviewed in Abrantes, Portugal, July 2007.
63 V. João interviewed in Cuba, Portugal, August 2007.
64 B. Joaquim interviewed in Cuba, Portugal, December 2005.
65 C. Félix interviewed in Cuba, Portugal, August 2007.
70 D. José interviewed in Matosinhos, Portugal, August 2007.
history may work as social therapy against forgetting. In fact, studying social myths through the collection and interpretation of personal testimonies is an important step towards awareness and remembrance.

Apart from this aspect, I also believe it is a political statement. I agree with P. Thompson (2000): all history has its social purpose and, thus, a political one. Indeed, I found myself making a political decision by choosing this research topic in the sense that I am acting as a mediator for a largely marginalized group’s history. In Portugal, this choice places me under a subtle political burden. Just like the ex-combatants who are willing to talk, I chose to challenge the official indifference. As an interviewer and researcher, I cannot help feeling somehow engaged in the ex-combatants’ fight for recognition. By listening to each ex-combatant’s story, I am in a way positioning myself on their side, there is almost an implicit complicity. In this process, together, in every interview, we are creating, to cite R. Grele, a “historical narrative” (Grele 1991: 213) with a given meaning. In every interview, a different voice speaks, and with each voice different perceptions arise: they stem from different experiences – both negative and positive –, backgrounds, geographical location, time period, personal sensitivity and such. These different voices create a rich composite portrait of the diversity of war memories – in other words, what that experience really meant for those who took part in it.

Where overcoming silence may prove to be difficult or impossible, oral history can mean an alternative way in which history about the colonial conflict is written and learnt. When giving personal testimony its due importance, oral historians keep memory alive and enable dialogue. This is instrumental in the process of social exorcism: eventually, an integration of experience (individual and, consequently, also collective) occurs.

A national armed conflict that lasted for thirteen years must not be forgotten. When memory is a source of shame, oral history may recover its lived memories, exploring the ex-combatants’ identity as contextualised by their respective society. I strongly believe that assessing the ex-combatants’ memories is fundamental to understanding the impact of the Portuguese colonial war. As a mediator for an affirmation of their memories, I hope I can make an indirect contribution towards overcoming individual and national shame. Hopefully – and in the words of Alfredo M., an ex-combatant – “a time will come when someone will speak openly.”

September 2006, January 2008

Ángela CAMPOS
University of Sussex, UK

Bibliography


INTERVIEWING EX-COMBATANTS OF THE PORTUGUESE COLONIAL WAR

125


LORENZ, F. 1999, “The Unending War: Social Myth, Individual Memory and the Malvinas”, in G. Dawson et al. (eds), Trauma and…, op.cit.: 95-112.


Teixeira, N.S. 2004 “Portugal e as Guerras da Descolonização”, in M.T. Barata & N.S. Teixeira (eds), Nova História Militar de Portugal, vol. 4, Lisbon, Círculo de Leitores.


