Global

Histories

A Student Journal

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DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.17169/GHSJ.2023.564

Source: Global Histories, Vol. 9, No. 1 (November 2023), pp. 42-60.
ISSN: 2366-780X

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Publisher information:
Global Histories: A Student Journal is an open-access bi-annual journal founded in 2015 by students of the M.A. program Global History at Freie Universität Berlin and Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. *Global Histories* is published by an editorial board of Global History students in association with the Freie Universität Berlin.

Freie Universität Berlin
Global Histories: A Student Journal
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Caring for Algeria(ns): Care work, the EMSI, and colonisation in the Algerian War of Independence as told by woman care workers (1954-1962)

By

Quincy Mackay

Abstract

This essay explores the role of a little-studied institution, the Équipes médico-sociales itinérantes *(Mobile Medico-Social Teams, EMSI), in the Algerian War of Independence (1954-1962). Run by the French army in their programme of* pacification, *the EMSI sent French and France-aligned women into rural villages across the Algerian territory, with the aim of making closer contact with these rural populations through medical aid and social engagement. Their aims were steeped in the colonial, proselytising language of the civilising mission, while the women carrying out the work in the field had their own nuanced and diverse motivations for engaging in this humanitarian work. Drawing on these women's own voices, this study examines the EMSI from the bottom up, giving a new perspective on care work and humanitarian engagement in colonial contexts.*

About the author

Quincy Mackay received his BA from the University of Melbourne in 2018 and is currently completing his MA thesis at the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin on this topic. His research interests are focused on the legacies and traces of colonialism in Europe and their impact on humanitarian work, identity, politics, and culture.

Introduction: Care Work between Compassion and Colonisation

This essay explores the role played by France-aligned female care workers in the Algerian War of Independence. Looking at a small and little-studied care work organisation, the *Équipes médico-sociales itinérantes* (Mobile Medico-Social Teams, EMSI), I use a collection of autobiographies, personal accounts, photographs, and other ego documents to build a bottom-up perspective on these teams. Working in the French army's programme of *pacification*, the teams were sent into rural Algerian villages, referred to with the Arabic term *bled*, where their mission was to make contact with Muslim Algerian women. On the one hand, the EMSI women were motivated by compassion, wanting to build peace and to aid those hardest hit by the war. On the other hand, they were working with a French colonial army that was the source of that very hardship. This seemingly contradictory role, between compassion and colonisation, makes the EMSI a potent institution to build a more nuanced and critical approach to assessing humanitarian work in late-colonial contexts where motivations and allegiances are highly contested. By focusing on the perspectives of the women carrying out the work on the ground as opposed to the well-documented army position, this essay presents a novel interpretation of care work in this colonial context. It highlights the way individuals position their work in a wider narrative, the relationships that can be built with caring power, and how this work can dismantle or reproduce the more abstract, macro concepts of identity, development, and empire on a micro level.

The EMSI consisted of a diverse group of young women. They came from across the French empire, including metropolitan France, Algeria, and the wider Maghreb region. This reflects the wide and complex range of identities present in Algeria, with different degrees of "Frenchness" and "Algerianness" being performed.[1] Dressed in white blouses and wearing blue, white, and red pins, they embodied a host of colonial tropes, including earlier missionary work, narratives of development, hygiene and modernisation, and an essentialist view of care work as a women's activity. In both the propaganda-like promotion of the EMSI's work, and the EMSI women's own accounts, they are separated from other humanitarian work, colonising programmes, and army engagements undertaken during the war. This suggests that women were seen as uniquely able to build bridges between Christians and Muslims. The French army constructed this division as scuppering their vision of an *Algérie française* that they were violently trying to build under the threat of a looming independence.[2] I question to what extent this is true, suggesting that the EMSI's unique factor was rhetorical, and, thanks to the bottom-up perspective I have been able to build, that the teams' personal relationships with the people they were caring for built direct, human relationships that differ from the abstractions and categories used in the top-down perspective. This was key in the way EMSI women presented their work as just, even righteous, despite being part of a larger colonial programme that was in many ways the primary source of the suffering of the people they were caring for. Though they did not have as wide a picture of their work and context that we enjoy as historians, I show that there is a sense of this context throughout the reflections that these women provided on their work.

This article has five main sections. First, I lay out my methodology, including the archival sources I have used. Second, I sketch out the army's programme of *pacification* and the historical background of the EMSI's work. I then analyse the sources I've collected through three lenses. Gender is the main lens, playing a key role in how the EMSI women understood their work, the army's aims with the EMSI, and as a means to critically engage with this history. Development is also a key narrative in the EMSI's work, drawing on many colonial arguments of a civilising mission. Finally, I also focus on the human relationships that the EMSI members built with the people they were caring for, and how this influenced their work and reflections.

Sources and Voices

This study has been enabled by archival visits to the Centre de *documentation historique sur l'Algérie* (CDHA) and *Archives nationales d'outre-mer* (ANOM) in Aix-en-Provence. Here, I was able to collect several personal accounts from former members of the EMSI, augmenting the already published accounts in the form of autobiographies and journal articles to create a new body of primary source material with which to study the EMSI.

As historian Ryme Seferdjeli has noted, very little is known about the women who joined the EMSI, making it difficult to "pin down their true motivations."[3] This stems from several structural and practical barriers to researching the EMSI. The underrepresentation of women in historical archives, the obscuring effect of married and maiden names, and the common practice of only referring to women by their given names all hindered my research. The well-established practice of writing histories "against the grain" helps overcome this, as I remain aware of the "biography of the archive."[4] The CDHA is an archive founded to preserve the history and memory of *Algérie française*, and their extensive and unique holdings include the private papers of several EMSI members. While not entirely unproblematic in its overt political mission, this collection in many ways enabled the bottom-up perspective I take here. Diaries, letters, official documentation, journals, and photographs from half a dozen former EMSI members give a vivid insight into the minds of the women who made up the EMSI.

From these records I compiled a list of known EMSI members, including when and where they were active. This enabled more targeted research in the larger ANOM. The EMSI's ad-hoc development story meant that documents relevant to the EMSI and their personnel were spread between different departmental dossiers, making searching for members by name a manual but fruitful process that uncovered the official records of several of these women. I also gained a top-down perspective, with the army's handbooks and directives on the EMSI's goals and missions clearly stating their intentions for the organisation, as well as letters showing debates between officials. Through this double-sided work between the two archives, I was able to put together a series of snapshots of the EMSI women. It is made up of vignettes, stories, and photographs that present a view of the day-to-day work of the EMSI, each a unique perspective located in a personal context, yet

still useful in a wider and comparative way. It also gave a picture of the professional environment in which the EMSI were working.[5]

This quotidian perspective on the EMSI, bottom-up in the sense that it is built out of the voices of "small" actors, is a useful point of comparison to the top-down history of how the army deployed care work in the Algerian War of Independence. It is of course not representative of the EMSI as a whole. It is a patchwork of different accounts that made it into these records by chance as much as anything else. Themes and common ground can be drawn out of this patchwork, but so can discrepancies. Similarly, these accounts cannot be removed from their context, as the narratives told by small actors are just as couched in constructed understandings of the world as those told by the big ones.[6] Therefore, it does not make sense to try and build an "EMSI perspective" to be placed in equal opposition to the army's top-down position. Any attempt to present such a comparison as balanced would be disingenuous, as the patchwork of EMSI voices lacks the homogeneity of the more coordinated official positions.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, in this colonial context archives are skewed towards white men and France-aligned people. This is a product of the archival practices of the era, but also of my own position as a historian working in European institutions. My linguistic, cultural, and spatial limits mean that source material in Arabic or in Algerian archives are not easily accessible to me, which excludes those voices from my research. This is particularly important to remember when trying to assess the effectiveness of the EMSI's work in terms of their reception, which is only visible to me through the obviously biased lens of the EMSI members' own reflections on this, and not the voices of the women they were caring for.

"Pacifying" Algerians

Algeria has long held a potent place in the French imagination of its position in the world. Something of a borderlands between north and south, occident and orient, self and other, Algeria was at once the jewel in France's imperial crown, and an insurmountable expanse that hypnotised with its just-out-of-reach otherness. Occupying the other coast of the Mediterranean, Algeria was oriental in the very sense meant by Edward Said. It was the other side of a dichotomy that simultaneously helps differentiate France from the Maghreb and the orient, but in doing so relies on Algeria for part of its own identity. "The two geographical entities thus support and to an extent reflect each other."[7] Not disregarding or setting aside the authentic country and people that make up Algeria, Said's study of orientalism seeks to understand how places like Algeria were imagined in Europe by Europeans and the essential role that played in domestic European politics. For example, Algeria's influence on French politics was so outsized that the events triggered the Fourth French Republic's collapse and the Fifth's founding. In this light, Said's orientalism is a valuable lens to understand the work of the EMSI.

Indeed, this imagination of Algeria used by the EMSI and Europeans in general is best described as a French construction. The borders of Africa's second largest country were drawn by French conquerors, encircling Mediterranean orchards, snow-capped mountains, rocky gorges and valleys, marshy planes, and the "empty" expanse of the Sahara desert.[8] The term "Algerian" itself does not neatly define a single identity, with Muslim, Berber, Arab, Ottoman, Jewish, Christian, Roman, Maghrebi, Pan-African, Spanish, Italian, French and indeed many other identities playing substantial roles across the Algerian territory and across time.[9] This fact is particularly important when describing the group of people the EMSI were trying to reach. Described in the sources simply as *femmes musulmanes* [Muslim women], this reduces a vast diversity of women from the Maghreb into one identity group, constructing all non-French Algerians as Muslims. I therefore use this original French label to indicate that it is a historical term used to describe a group that only comes together by virtue of having been "targeted" by the EMSI, and not a categorisation I seek to recreate myself.

Officially made a part of France proper in 1848, Algeria was the only French colony ruled as a *département*, in theory like any other in metropolitan France, but in practice with stark differences. Administratively, Algerian territory was divided between three major types of region. The "full-function" communes [*communes de plein exercise*] were areas where European settlers were dominant and were governed by a European mayor and council, elected by Europeans, mirroring metropolitan districts quite closely. Mixed communes [*communes mixtes*] where the population was predominantly Muslim were governed by an appointed European administrator who would work with the Muslim structures of governance.[10] The southern territories [*territoires du sud*] of the Sahara were administered by the military.[11] This produced a contradictory style of governance across Algeria, where the French government was at once carrying out a programme of assimilation, "transforming Algerians into equal citizens," and a colonising mission of subjugation, "keeping them down as disempowered subjects."[12] This contradiction remained at the heart of the French government's challenges in Algeria, with a small, racist, yet powerful elite made up of settlers known as *colons* or *pieds-noirs* pushing back against any attempts to grant Muslim Algerians more power; and a majority Muslim population with ever-growing international sympathy demanding the same rights as their metropolitan compatriots. Typical of these kinds of colonial contexts, the French authorities felt themselves stuck between granting Muslim Algerians rights as part of justifying their presence there and retaining some kind of hierarchy of citizens.[13]

It was in this constellation that the EMSI were active. They began as a trial in the army's programme of *pacification*.[14] Over at least a century, French colonial administrators developed *pacification* techniques to manage, control, and win over populations. It comprised counterinsurgency, resettlement, surveillance, education, and humanitarian engagement, amongst other techniques, all carried out to "make contact" with the colonised population, transforming a militarily conquered territory into a sustainably administered one.[15] In the words of Gallieni, one of the original architects of *pacification* in

Vietnam, "After destruction, one must construct."[16] During the Algerian War of Independence, *pacification* aimed at undermining the strongholds of the FLN, and swaying the Algerian population towards France. It therefore was a two-sided challenge. On the one hand, the French army wanted to engage the FLN's forces, particularly targeting guerrilla fighters in rural areas and their networks in local communities, and was prepared to use the necessary force and violence. On the other hand, they did not want to entirely alienate those communities from the French side, extending a supposedly superior French way of life in the form of education, security, housing, and care to these populations once they had been "liberated" from the "rebels."[17] *Pacification* was the carrot to the army's stick, and both were to be engaged to neutralise the FLN.

This motivated the army's interest in "making contact" with women, seen to be one of the biggest blind spots of this male-dominated institution. Women were also increasingly an asset to the FLN, who were able to exploit the army's macho culture, using women as both effective agents and markers of a perceived level of civilisation to the French.[18] In March 1957, Raoul Salan, commander-in-chief of the French forces in Algeria, launched a pilot mission under the direction of Madame Maugé, a well-connected figure in French military circles.[19] Operating in Orléansville district, the pilot mission took Maugé, Jacqueline Defretiere and Yvette Estel, into the *douars* of the district, working with existing military medical programmes.[20] Finding that despite ongoing challenges, the military was better able to build trust and carry out its work with the assistance of these women, Salan decided to expand this model across Algeria, thus creating the EMSI.

Women Working in a Man's World

Having a semi-military, semi-civil status, the women in the EMSI sat precisely at the crux of the army's idea of *pacification*. From the army's perspective, they were a unique instrument, touted to be a solution to their difficulties with *pacification*. They were drawn from different milieus including metropolitan France, *pied-noir* communities, and other Algerian population groups, the remainder summarily labelled as "Muslim" in the French records.[21] The women that made up the EMSI all had their own motivations for engaging in this humanitarian mission, and their own perspectives on the work they were doing and the EMSI's goals. Many saw their work as an effort to change the situation in Algeria for the better, and often had critical views of the army as an institution. Their perspectives and histories are therefore indispensable in understanding not only the EMSI, but also the humanitarian aspects of *pacification* and other care work undertaken in Algeria. Their work is deeply ambiguous, at once part of a colonial fight aimed at maintaining French power in Algeria, and yet driven by compassion for Algeria's population. The women desired a better future for them and peace between French and Algerian societies.

At first, several existing programmes were used by the army to set up the EMSI. The Specialised Administrative Sections (*Sections administratives spécialisées*, SAS) were created in 1955 to administer rural communities classified as having a majority Muslim population. They provided basic government services, as well as social, medical, and

educational services.[22] They were comprised of a European leadership and several employees from both European and Muslim origins, the latter known as *Moghaznis*. Most relevant here are the *attachées féminines*. Each SAS would generally employ one of these "female assistants" to work in the social departments. Besides secretaries, these would often be the only women employed by the SAS, and the only personnel formally employed in the "social" or "educational" sector, with most posts being in administration.[23] The SAS also ran the Free Medical Aid (*Aide médicale gratuite*, AMG), a programme that saw each SAS either have its own doctor or receive regular visits from one.[24] The EMSI pilot mission was formed out of these SAS *attachées* and worked closely with several SASs and their AMGs in the district of Orléansville.[25]

Having delivered positive results, Salan quickly expanded the EMSIs across all of Algeria. He made use of two other existing organisations: the Female Army Personnel (*Personnel féminine de l'armée de terre*, PFAT), and the Auxiliary Rural Medico-Social Assistants (*Adjointes sanitaires et sociales rurales auxiliaires*, ASSRA). The PFAT was an existing designation for women engaged across the French army who were sent by and who reported to the Ministry of Defence in Paris. The ASSRAs were formally created around the same time as the EMSI's expansion in October 1957, and were initially intended to work throughout the SAS, the AMG, and the education department. However, they eventually ended up working almost exclusively in the EMSI.[26] The personnel of the EMSI were therefore drawn from several different pools, leaving the organisation in a middle ground between civil and military institutions.

The reception to the EMSI amongst French military departments was mixed. The army's Fifth Bureau, charged with psychological action and responsible for the coordination of *pacification*, viewed the EMSI positively, eventually seeing it as the centrepiece of its contact strategy with women. Other more traditional figures in the army were wary about the Fifth Bureau's growing scope and power and were sceptical of these teams of women and their work.[27] The initial creation and expansion of the EMSI was therefore an ad-hoc process, with authorities drawing on the existing tools and programmes available to them to realise their orders.

This led to a lack of leadership in the EMSI, particularly in its administration. The Fifth Bureau would assign a team of two to three women to the regional army units, leaving their deployment to particular locations, their transport, and their direct command to the respective local army commanders.[28] These commanders were often negligent in this aspect, failing to give the EMSI the orders, supervision, and even transport they needed.[29] Moreover, this led to substantial delays and complications with their pay, with responsibility being handed from department to department as ASSRAs went unpaid and were left unsure of their exact position in the chain of command.[30] The *Assemblée nationale*'s finance commission's war budget rapporteur, Jean-Paul Palewski, spoke with several ASSRAs during his inspections in Algeria in April 1958, and forwarded several letters from them complaining about the administrative chaos to his superiors. In these letters, ASSRAs write

of lacking resources, of having to pay out of their own pocket for the material they need to do their work, and of major delays in payment of their salaries. Underlining their enthusiasm behind the goals of the EMSI, there is a tone of exasperation in these letters that their work is not receiving the support it needs and that their complaints are not heard. Palewski argued firmly for the importance of the EMSI's work and that they should be afforded more funds to keep their work running well. He maintained that it was essential to keep relations between EMSI members and their superiors amicable to avoid further such letters being written or ASSRAs resigning.[31] This intervention enabled the expansion of the budget assigned for the EMSI.[32]

It is telling that these letters from ASSRAs went unanswered until they were taken up by a male member of parliament on an inspection trip from Paris. This shows one of the difficulties faced by the EMSI women. They were expected to form a major part of the programme of *pacification*, being hailed by the Fifth Bureau as a centrepiece of its contact strategy, and at times the only part directly addressed at women.[33] Yet they were not given the level of administrative infrastructure or organisational tools needed to properly manage and execute their mission. In short, they were not taken as seriously as comparable missions undertaken by men, reflecting once again the gendered environment that the EMSI members were working in. The army leadership, looking down on it as "unimportant women's work," was more than happy to leave caring work to women but was not willing to give it the support, leadership, and coordination needed to succeed.

This discrepancy must have been particularly frustrating for many of the EMSI members, as both the leadership of the Fifth Bureau and others engaged in pacification strategies hailed the EMSI almost universally as highly effective in reaching and "pacifying" the female Muslim population of Algeria. Arlette Ocamica, one of Maugé successors as head of the EMSI, remembered what her commanding officer told her and her teammates as they departed their posting in Jumelles, Djurdjura: "Mesdemoiselles, you must return quickly, your work is more effective than that of three battalions. Since your arrival, women have been greeting us with a smile."[34] Indeed, many EMSI members recognised these relationships they were able to build with the *femmes musulmanes*, seeing their caring "feminine" touch as a distinctive approach that they were bringing to the army's missions. They viewed this approach as a valuable contribution to ending the war and building peace. Here, we can turn to a longer history of gender in care work, which has long been presented as a woman's job.

Women's Roles as Carers

The figure of the carer takes the form of many female roles: mother, wife, nanny, teacher, nurse. Yet no human being can go without care. Feminist historians Bernice Fisher and Joan Tronto call it a "species activity that includes everything we do to maintain, continue and repair our 'world' so that we can live in it as well as possible."[35] Why is this essential activity so closely associated with only one gender?

Often defined in opposition to the rational and detached male, the female side of the gender dichotomy is categorised as emotional and compassionate. This association is "by nature", presented as something inherent to women *a priori*; a born skill, not an acquired one. This argument developed in bourgeois circles in Europe in around the mid-nineteenth century, holding that women are naturally suited to compassionate roles like rearing children, education, household activities, and caring for the ill and the aged. This posited "natural connection" was used to confine women to the household as the primary location of these activities.[36] Compassion is a domestic emotion that, in this view, should be kept in the safety of the home.

As bourgeois women's agency grew, the public roles they were able to take on still mirrored those in the home: nurses, teachers, carers, and so on. In this so-called "cult of domesticity," the normative ideal woman was an extension of the traditional gendered division of labour and domestic roles out of the home and into the public sphere.[37] Often, even much of the political activism that women participated in as agents was in movements associated with compassion, such as the nineteenth-century abolitionist movements against slavery or prostitution.[38] Here, as Clare Midgley has argued, women were able to deploy their association with emotions and compassion to make sentimental arguments with greater authenticity than a supposedly rational male, drawing on it rather than seeking to change it.[39] Moreover, their perceived secondary position in the gender dichotomy and subjugated role in the Western household made empathising with other marginalised groups a "natural" step. These effects combined to "justify women's presence in the philanthropic world."[40]

This phenomenon gains another layer in conflict spaces. Organisations like the Red Cross promoted the engagement of women in caring roles in military contexts from at least the late nineteenth century, often recommending the division of personnel along gender lines with men tackling jobs like transport and managing buildings, and women being responsible for caring, nursing, housekeeping, and catering.[41] Moreover, these women were never quite brought up to proper military ranks like their male counterparts, retaining an amateur status and receiving at best cursory nursing training if they had not already had similar experience or training. They never progressed beyond "trained amateurs", despite almost universally being praised for their intrepid, dynamic, and thinking-on-their-feet work attitude. This image of the effective female carer was also deployed to promote female engagement in humanitarian work, and to soften or temper the "real" work of the military, becoming a "feminine counterpart to battle-scarred masculinity. Intuitive, compassionate and selfless, the … nurse appeared to operate in a neutral realm that was the reverse of the political or military exigency."[42]

This field of engagement for women and the associated influence that they gain through that engagement in civil society is what Annemieke van Drenth and Francisca de Haan call "caring power".[43] They outline the history of the archetypical compassionate woman worker: a strong, principled carer who can put their compassion and domestic skills to good use in caring for the less fortunate. Van Drenth and de Haan tell these histories not

to confine women to these kinds of roles, but to underline the way women were able to find a niche of power in a male-dominated society, an aim I share in this essay. This rise of caring power is intrinsically linked with the rise of the women's movement in the late nineteenth century. By finding an extra-domestic role in care work, they formed a collective sense of gender identity.

This collective identity may have also galvanised the constructed connection between compassion and femininity, as these women carved out a place in a masculine society by leveraging the restrictive roles that patriarchal structures ascribed to them. However, feminist scholars of care work underline that this ascription is not *natural*, but merely *historical*: a longstanding gendering of care work as a female practice that presents itself as a given, but which in fact needs disentangling.[44]

This becomes clearer when we look at more EMSI members' reflections on how they were able to use their "femininity" to reach the *femmes musulmanes*. Reflecting on the opening of a women's circle in her first village of engagement, Ginette Thévenin-Copin, an ASSRA originally from northern France, was pleased with the way the women took up the programme and participated in the festivities:

> As for me, I am satisfied and happy, I have proved that by helping and supporting all these women, it is possible to enable them to take a step forward, in their own interest, so that their lives are less difficult, more bearable. I have shown that they are ready and willing to do this. It is their future that they hold in their hands. I am just passing through, to show them the way.[45]

Christiane Métras, a second-generation European settler, presents a similar point of view in a report on her work in 1961-62 in the EMSI. She lists the villages she had been visiting on her rounds and how the work there had been progressing. Throughout the report, her yardstick is the rapport she built with the local women, writing positively of cases where "the women welcome us kindly," or "they are happy, enterprising and interested in everything which is new." However, for the most part, she expresses regret that in many places "there remains a lot of work to be done." Generally, the *femmes musulmanes* are presented as having taken the first steps towards a better relationship with the EMSI, and "the future" that the EMSI is to bring to them. Still, Métras identifies a lingering hesitancy, observing that "the women … hardly leave their homes."[46] Despite or indeed because of these difficulties, Métras reaffirms the importance of building these relationships between women in the EMSI's work:

> It is up to us to understand and direct their aspirations. It is now more than ever that we must guide them, assist them. It is partly upon what we have achieved that the Algeria of tomorrow will be built. It is up to us to build well.[47]

There is a certain pride in these reflections. These women see their work in breaking down the gender divides of a perceived traditional Algerian society, and so making opportunities for *femmes musulmanes*. They see their identity as women as the key with which they can build these relationships, extending a warm "feminine" hand. The EMSI women believe that the *femmes musulmanes* find this hand easier to trust than the army's.

For many of the Muslim women they worked with, the EMSI were the only European women they encountered, with most of the *douars* only seeing a masculine military presence. There is also an implicit judgement of Muslim Algerian society as being too restrictive on the rights of women.

Looking at the ways the women of the EMSI were deployed, and their reflections on where they were able to be effective, the caring power of the EMSI becomes clear. Women had become a "category of sociological importance" in the army's perception of Algerian society.[48] Not only were Muslim women perceived as the key to bringing Algerian society onto the French side, but French and French-Algerian women were seen as indispensable in grasping that key. Their compassionate nature, it was assumed, disposed women with unique capacities to connect with Muslim Algerian women in a way men were unable to. Compared to the rough approach of a military battalion, a single EMSI of two or three women could "win over" entire villages.[49] Moreover, just as van Drenth and de Haan showed for Fry and Butler around a century beforehand, the EMSI women were able to carve out a niche of power for themselves in this caring work, by building a collective gender identity based on a transformative femininity that might be able to bridge the divisions and conflicts forged by war by replacing it with care.[50]

Yet it is important not to simply see the EMSI's perceived "feminine touch" as a silver bullet, able to bridge the rhetorical divide between the army's groupings of Algerians. Their work was also successful because they did not only see the work as a means to an end, viewing *femmes musulmanes* as a homogenous category, as the Fifth Bureau would have them do. On the contrary, the EMSI women found success in "reaching" these women precisely because of their position "on the ground", building relationships between individuals rather than seeing Algeria in reductive groupings.

A French Future

There is also a narrative of development in these reflections, and here it is useful to compare these EMSI members' views with those of the army. In the directives setting out the aims and missions foreseen for the EMSI, Colonel Jean Gardes, head of the Fifth Bureau, sees this developmental project of opening a modern future to *femmes musulmanes* as the key mission of the EMSI.

> In time, the EMSI must establish contact with the feminine milieu it works with by demonstrating to them in concrete terms the modern future offered to them by France. To do this, it plays a medico-social role within the framework of the AMG. The medico-social aspect of EMSI should be seen as a means to an end, that is, basic education for women. The principal pit-fall to be avoided is to allow the EMSI to become absorbed by its medico-social work without moving on to its true task.[51]

Gardes was typical of many military leaders in this period, taking broad, ideologically driven views of the conflict they were in and designing their strategies in very expansive terms that did not shy away from transformative projects like the EMSI. This is typical of the self-image that the French army cultivated in this period, seeing itself as a semi-

autonomous force separated from the constraints of politics, run by rugged *colonels* who amounted to the "sole revolutionary force [in France] capable of menacing the established order."[52] Gardes alludes to being able to modernise all women in Algeria, held back only by a lack of resources. This kind of developmental mission is part of a longer tradition of colonising missions that sought to transform the colonised society into a more modern, more civilised one, often termed the *mission civilatrice* in the francophone context.

The EMSI members themselves received their most direct exposure to these goals during their month-long internship. Exactly when this was undertaken varied, but generally it was after they had settled in at their post, returning to Algiers or another urban centre to complete their month-long crash-course at one of the larger, often overrun hospitals. Thévenin-Copin, for example, went to the infamous Mustapha Hospital in Algiers. Several ASSRAs came together for this month of training, and most write of a convivial atmosphere between the women, grateful to be amongst peers after having spent some time in the quieter but harsher rural deployment zones.[53]

There is a rich collection of photos of these internships taken by several EMSI members that show the group dynamic in this period of training. Francine Bernard, an ASSRA stemming from the metropole, shows the amicable, festive atmosphere amongst the EMSI trainees in her photographic album, with ASSRAs in EMSI-branded tracksuits preparing meals together, eating as a group at long tables, and taking their lessons together in large classrooms.[54] There were also more ceremonial occasions, such as the raising of the French flag, the giving out of uniforms, and posing for group portraits.[55] They also organised a performance, where the "folklore" of France and Algeria was presented through traditional dances, all under the banner of *Algérie française*, underlining the mission of bringing the two posited cultures of Algeria together.[56]

Instead of the Fifth Bureau's directives being handed out to EMSI members (there were fears these might end up in the hands of the FLN), ASSRAs received theoretical training in their internship. This went through the goals of *pacification* and the aim of modernising *femmes musulmanes*, as well as teachings on French perceptions of Muslim customs, sociology, and laws, a history of (French) Algeria, of the War of Independence, and of "rebellion" in Algeria (read: the FLN).[57]

Alongside this theoretical training, ASSRAs also received more hands-on training in the hospitals. They would assist in several different departments, generally focusing on emergency, surgery, and the maternity ward. Thévenin-Copin spent a record-breaking night in maternity, with twelve births in one night, and wrote of gaining a great appreciation for the "wonder of birth" in that busy period.[58] But most striking to her was her time in the emergency ward, where the consequences of the war came rolling in with relentless brutality, dramatically showing the indiscriminate way that the conflict could shatter someone's life without rhyme or reason. Shocked by the way that one could become accustomed to even these horrors in this environment, she expresses her discontent with the war again.

> There are times when you feel a sense of revolt at all these atrocities, these innocent victims blindly struck down by fate, who would like to understand why good fortune has abandoned them today. But the most dramatic thing about this unbearable present is that we get used to everything, even the horror.[59]

Once trained up, the ASSRAs went their separate ways. They were generally sad to be separated from their peers, and apprehensive of the tougher working environment that awaited them. Once they returned to their post, often a long journey by train or car, often with a military convoy, their "real work" began.

Making Contact

Generally working with a military doctor, the EMSI's initial work in the field would be as assistants. Coming essentially into a war zone in the immediate aftermath of sometimes serious fighting, the EMSI would initially have their work cut out for them, finding communities in disarray, resembling ghost-towns or having seen substantial destruction. Their work would at first be commanded quite directly by the military, addressing the wounded. Only with time would they widen their work, through the connections they were to build in this initial stage, into more general healthcare provision and education, and then further out into other social areas. In these early stages, soldiers were working closely with the EMSI in villages not considered completely "pacified' and therefore being judged as still susceptible to attacks. Having arrived in a new *douar*, contact would be made with the men of the village, a ritual that Thévenin-Copin describes as "essential … a sign of respect to their elders."[60] After these formalities, they explained that the team was there to provide medical aid, which was, so Thévenin-Copin, generally gratefully received as a welcome measure, with children sent off to fetch the women who needed and wanted aid.

Photographs also give a glimpse into the day-to-day work in the EMSI and the kind of contact they made with Muslim Algerian women. Amongst Christiane Métras' archives are several images of the people she worked with, which she annotated with detailed descriptions. Throughout, these images show a friendly atmosphere between the EMSI women and the *femmes musulmanes*: they are aiding, teaching, and spending time with.[61] Other ASSRAs' photos of their time in the field with the EMSI show similar scenes of fraternisation between EMSI women and Algerian women. They are seen working together in sewing classes, dressed in European style clothes; seen posing in groups in front of *mechtas* and other rural buildings; giving out medical care from their jeeps; and learning French in classrooms adorned with images of European housewives going about their domestic duties.[62]

Life in these villages is presented as simple, tough, but honest, and the EMSI women that visit them as being happy to be aiding their lives. It is difficult to glean the true thoughts of the Muslim Algerians presented in these photographs. Captions allude to a friendly welcome and gratitude for the work of the EMSI, but there is a staged quality to many of the pictures, as though they are capturing a stilted moment, hiding much of the nuance that must have existed between the groups here.

Similar scenes are presented in a film produced by the Cinematographic service of the French army in Algeria (SCA), entitled *Reviens vite, Toubiba* [Come back soon, *Toubiba*].[63] The SCA was managed in Algeria during the war by the Fifth Bureau, making this film another example of the propaganda the Fifth Bureau wanted to tell with the EMSI.[64] This piece of propaganda outlines the EMSI's work, showing first how French soldiers move into rural areas to "destroy the rebel bands that haunt the *djebel*," "liberating" the population from the "cruel dictatorship of the FLN," before showing the EMSI preparing their teams, making their way into the newly "secured" villages, and providing medical care to a seemingly gracious population. Having gained the trust of the EMSIs, the villagers are shown gathering as soon as they see the EMSI's vans arriving for their next visit, and bid them adieu with a *reviens vite, Toubiba*. Rich in pathos and highlighting its points with dramatic music accompanying the army, and triumphant music accompanying the EMSI, the film presents them as bringing "beauty and generosity, the true image of France."[66] Again, the film purports to show a new, blossoming relationship between the "two communities" of Algeria, but excludes the voices of the people receiving the EMSI's care, with the narration only alluding to their gratitude, and the courage and hardworking attitude of the EMSI women.

Throughout, these rich sources give us a feel for the texture of life in these villages. But we must remember that they are, knowingly or not, instruments of propaganda that present an idealised, pro-European view of the field in which the EMSI were working. It is important to separate these accounts, deaf to the thoughts of the *femmes musulmanes*, from the substantial evidence that suggests that the EMSI struggled in many of their goals that go beyond medical assistance and the provision of care. Seferdjeli has shown that army reports identified a myriad of shortcomings in the EMSI that prevented them achieving the developmental goals set for them by the Fifth Bureau. They were underfunded, lacked personnel, and struggled to coordinate their work with the local military authorities, who often overlooked their work or even showed disdain for the work of women. Military figures often blamed the EMSI members themselves for these shortcomings, complaining that they lacked moral fortitude or did not grasp the scale of their mission. Moreover, Seferdjeli finds no evidence of lasting change in the outlook or way of life of the EMSI's targets.[67] The EMSI were as much a tool of propaganda as they were a tool of *pacification*, and it was important that they appeared popular for this to be effective. Films were made, journalists flown in to write reports and books, but even ASSRAs themselves (knowingly or not) participated in this construction of the EMSI's image through things like the EMSI's song and logo.[68]

Conclusion

What have I been able to draw out of the records of EMSI women's perspectives? First, the EMSI were working in a man's world, navigating the patriarchal world of the French army. While the relationships that ASSRAs had with their male co-workers and superiors varied, and many of these were warm and professional, there was an acute gender divide in this workplace simmering below the surface that reared its head at times. It showed itself in the

poor management of the EMSI, the lack of coordination, poor pay, and dismissive attitude of many of those tasked with working with the EMSI. Yet despite this sometimes-chaotic leadership of the EMSI, those who did see it as an effective tool for pacification spoke of it highly and even placed great, sometimes unreasonable expectations on the EMSI. Moreover, this dynamic created the niche where ASSRAs were able to carve out their caring power as something distinct to the masculine operations of the army.

As carers, the EMSI members were to some extent able to build amicable relationships with the women they were working with. While they likely failed to realise the more expansive developmental aims that the Fifth Bureau foresaw for their work, and while their presentations of their work are a limited and lopsided account destined to show their work in a positive light, we can observe a caring power that EMSI members were able to build. Their relationship with the femmes musulmanes was materially different to the army's, built on direct relationships with individuals rather than generalised, top-down categorisations and essentialised identity attributions. It also helped that they did not entirely take on the directives to treat care only as a means to an end. Without suggesting that they were able to do this because of inherent "feminine" traits, ASSRAs caring power stemmed at least in part from their use of their gender as something unique in this masculine space, though it likely also stemmed from the practical reason that they were providing useful services and supplies to these rural communities.

In this light, the EMSI provide us with a rich case study that shows many of the nuances and contradictions in people's motivations to engage in colonial care work, to try and "do good", and how they are entangled in bigger colonial projects. This underlines the ambiguity to care work in colonial contexts more generally and should encourage us to keep some of these structures in mind when studying humanitarian work in colonial contexts.

Notes

[1] Cf. Raphaëlle Branche, "'Au temps de la France': Indentités collectives et situation coloniale en Algérie," *Vingtième siècle. Revue d'histoire* 117, no. 1 (Janvier-mars 2013): 199-213.

[2] *Algérie française*, meaning "French Algeria", was a potent dog whistle that indicated commitment to the French colonial project for many hard-line European settlers. See Branche, "Au temps," 199-200.

[3] Ryme Seferdjeli, "The French army and Muslim women during the Algerian war (1954–62)," *Hawwa* 3, no. 1 (2005): 52.

[4] Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the archival grain: Epistemic anxieties and colonial common sense* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2009), 47; Nicholas Dirks, "Colonial histories and native informants: Biography of an archive," in *Orientalism and the postcolonial predicament: Perspectives on South Asia*, eds. Carol Breckenridge and Peter van der Veer (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993).

[5] Secondary literature on the EMSI includes Neil MacMaster, *Burning the veil: The Algerian war and*

the 'emancipation' of Algerian women (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009); Diane Sambron, *Femmes musulmanes: Guerre d'Algérie 1954-1962* (Paris: Éditions Autrement, 2007); Seferdjeli, "The French army"; Ryme Seferdjeli, "French 'reforms' and Muslim women's emancipation during the Algerian War," *Journal of North African Studies* 9, no. 4 (2004).

[6] Cf. James R. Barrett, *History from the bottom up and inside out: Ethnicity, race, and identity in working-class history* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 35; Joan Scott, "The evidence of experience," Critical Inquiry 17, no. 4 (1991): 777.

[7] Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 5.

[8] Cf. Martin Evans and John Phillips, *Algeria: Anger of the dispossessed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), xiii.

[9] Cf. Isabelle Grangaud and M'hamed Oualdi, "Tout est-il colonial dans le Maghreb? Ce que les travaux des historiens modernistes peuvent apporter," *L'Année du Maghreb* 10, no. 1 (2014): 3.

[10] Alistair Horne, *A savage war of peace: Algeria 1954-1962* (London: Macmillan, 1977), 33.

[11] Jacques Frémeaux, *Intervention et humanisme: Le style des armées françaises en Afrique au XIXème siècle* (Paris: Economica, 2006), 113.

[12] Evans and Phillips, *Algeria*, 27.

[13] Yves Courrière, *La guerre d'Algérie*, vol. 3: L'Heure des colonels (Paris: Fayard, 1970), 24.

[14] I use italics to indicate that this is a French term. Though its meaning is semantically identical to the English "pacification", I continue to use the French term from the sources, as it describes a programme that did anything but pacify.

[15] Cf. Joseph-Simon Gallieni, *Trois colonnes au Tonkin (1894-1895)* (Paris: Librairie Militaire R. Chapelot, 1899).

[16] "*Après avoir détruit, il faut construire*," here translated by Quincy Mackay. Original as cited in Courrière, *La guerre d'Algérie*, 3, 31.

[17] Cf. Jacques Frémeaux, *La France et l'Algérie en guerre: 1830-1870, 1954-1962* (Armées and Paris: Commission Française d'Histoire Militaire, Institut de Stratégie Comparée, and Economia, 2002), 204.

[18] Cf. Sambron, *Femmes musulmanes*, 121. For a discussion on how the rights of women were used as an argument for the French presence in Algeria, see MacMaster, *Burning the veil*, 86-102.

[19] It was not possible to definitively determine Maugé's given name. Referred to variously as "Pat" and "Alice" in different sources, I have decided to use "Madame Maugé," as most of the primary and secondary literature does.

[20] *Douar* is an Arabic term meaning rural village.

[21] MacMaster, *Burning the veil*, 247.

[22] Grégor Mathias, *Les sections administratives spécialisées en Algérie: Entre idéal et réalité* (1955-1962) (Paris: L'Hartmattan, 1998), 10-12.

[23] Cf. "État Nominatif des personnels en fonction au 31 décembre 1959 dans le département d'Orléansville," 31 December 1959, ref. 4 SAS 1, Préfecture d'Orléansville: Affaires algériennes, Archives nationales d'outre-mer (ANOM).

[24] Mathias, *Les sections*.

[25] "Gestion des EMSI," in A*ction sur les milieux féminins*, 10 December 1959, ref. GGA 3R 558, Instruction pour la pacification en Algérie No. 4250/EMI/3/OPE, ANOM, 21-23.

[26] *Action sur les milieux féminins*, ANOM. While most of the ASSRAs worked in the EMSI, and most of the EMSI members were ASSRAs, it is not correct to use the term "ASSRA" interchangeably with "EMSI member", which I use to highlight that the term "EMSI" refers to a team, not an individual.

[27] Cf. MacMaster, *Burning the veil*, 96.

[28] Seferdjeli, "The French army," 47.

[29] Seferdjeli, "The French army," 65.

[30] MacMaster, *Burning the veil*, 97.

[31] "Lettres des ASSRAs polycopiées," 2 May 1959 and 26 April 1959, ref. GGA 3R 558, Dossier PALEWSKI, ANOM.

[32] "Fiche No. 3176/EMI/5/ACT/EMSI," 2 June 1959, ref. GGA 3R 558, Dossier PALEWSKI, ANOM.

[33] While other programmes that employed women to pacify Muslim Algerian women existed, the EMSI were the only one directly coordinated by the army, with others being "public or private initiatives". See *Action sur les milieux féminins*, ANOM, 1; cf. Seferdjeli, "The French army," 46.

[34] "*Mesdemoiselles, il faut revenir très vite, votre travail est plus efficace que celui de trois compagnies, depuis votre arrivée les femmes nous disent bonjour en souriant*," here translated by Quincy Mackay. See Arlette Ocamica, "Témoignage d'Arlette Ocamica, responsable EMSI de Grande Kabylie, puis d'Algérie," *Le Combattant*, no. 249 (2002): 60.

[35] Berenice Fisher and Joan Tronto, "Towards a feminist theory of caring," in *Circles of care: Work and identity in women's lives*, eds. Emily K. Abel and Margaret K. Nelson (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 40.

[36] Cf. Eileen Yeo, "Constructing and contesting motherhood, 1750-1950," *Hecate* 31, no. 2 (2005); Annemieke van Drenth and Francisca de Haan, T*he rise of caring power: Elizabeth Fry and Josephine Butler in Britain and the Netherlands* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1999), 16.

[37] Deborah Simonton, *A history of European women's work: 1700 to the present* (London: Routledge, 1998), 87.

[38] Dolores Martín-Moruno, "A female genealogy of humanitarian action: Compassion as a practice in the work of Josephine Butler, Florence Nightingale and Sarah Monod," *Medicine, Conflict and Survival* 36, no. 1 (2020): 20.

[39] Clare Midgley, *Women against slavery: The British campaigns, 1780-1870* (London: Routledge, 1992), 94.

[40] Martín-Moruno, "A female genealogy," 21.

[41] Cf. Rebecca D. Gill, *Calculating compassion: Humanity and relief in war, Britain 1870-1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), 186.

[42] Gill, *Calculating compassion*, 188.

[43] Van Drenth and de Haan, *The rise*.

[44] Van Drenth and de Haan, *The rise*; Martín-Moruno, "A female genealogy," 21.

[45] "*Quand à moi, je suis satisfaite et heureuse, j'ai prouvé qu'en aidant et en épaulant toutes ces femmes, il est possible de leur permettre de faire un pas en avant, ceci dans leur intérêt personnel, pour que leurs vies soient moins difficile, plus supportable. J'ai ainsi démontré qu'elles sont prêtes, et qu'elles souhaitent le faire. C'est leur avenir qu'elles tiennent entre leurs mains. Moi je ne suis que de passage, pour leur indiquer la route*," here translated by Quincy Mackay. See Ginette Thévenin-Copin, *Plaidoyer pour la paix* (Montpellier: Mémoire de Notre Temps, 2001), 88.

[46] "*Les femmes nous accueillent gentiment"; "elles sont gaies, entreprenantes et se passionnent pour tout ce qui est nouveau*"; "*il y a là encore un bon travail à faire*"; "*avenir*"; "*Les femmes … ne sortent que difficilement de chez elles*," here translated by Quincy Mackay. See "Rapport d'action EMSI," 1961-1962, ref. 190 ARC 02, 91-92, Fonds Métras, Centre de documentation historique sur l'Algérie (CDHA).

[47] "*À nous de comprendre et de diriger leurs aspirations. C'est maintenant plus que jamais que nous devons les guider, les seconder. C'est en partie dans ce que nous aurons fait que l'Algérie de demain sera construite. À nous de bâtir bien*," here translated by Quincy Mackay. See "Rapport d'action EMSI," CDHA.

[48] Van Drenth and de Haan, *The rise*, 166.

[49] "*Une EMSI vaut un bataillon*" in original. See Georgette Brethes, "Action au profit des femmes," in *L'Action sociale de l'Armée en faveur des Musulmans, 1830-2006*, ed. Maurice Faivre (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2007), 45.

[50] Cf. van Drenth and de Haan, *The rise*, 167.

[51] *Action sur les milieux féminins*, ANOM, 1.

[52] "*…la seule force révolutionnaire capable de menacer l'ordre établi*," here translated by Quincy Mackay. See Raoul Girardet, "Pouvoir civil et militaire dans la France contemporaine," *Revue française de science politique* 10, no. 1 (1960). Quoted in Denis Leroux, "Promouvoir une armée révolutionnaire pendant la guerre d'Algérie: Le centre d'instruction pacification et contre-guérilla d'Arzew (1957-1959)," *Vingtième siècle. Revue d'histoire* 120 (2013).

[53] Thévenin-Copin, *Plaidoyer*, 65.

[54] Two photographs titled "La Convivialité des repas partagés," 1959-1960, ref. 1000 ARC 49, Album photographique, Archives Corne-Bernard, CDHA.

[55] Photographs titled "Levée des colours" and "3 groupes de stagiaires", 1959-1960, ref. 1000 ARC 49, Album photographique, Archives Corne-Bernard, CDHA.

[56] Photographs titled "Toujours disponibles les EMSI sont aussi artistes: Folklore de France," "Folklore d'Algérie" and "Katchatourian à l'honneur: La danse du feu," 1959-1960, ref. 1000 ARC 49, Album photographique, Archives Corne-Bernard, CDHA.

[57] Christiane Fournier, *Les EMSI: Des filles comme ça!* (Paris: Arthème Fayard, 1959), 184-185.

[58] Thévenin-Copin, *Plaidoyer*, 64.

[59] "*…il arrive que l'on éprouve un sentiment de révolte devant toutes ces atrocités, ces victimes innocentes que le destin frappe aveuglément, qui voudraient bien comprendre, pourquoi la chance les a abandonnées aujourd'hui. Mais le plus dramatique face à cet insupportable présent, c'est que l'on s'habitue à tout, même à l'horreur*," here translated by Quincy Mackay. See Thévenin-Copin, *Plaidoyer,* 64.

[60] "*Primordial .. une signe de respect à leur égard d'anciens*," here translated by Quincy Mackay. See Thévenin-Copin, *Plaidoyer*, 79-80.

[61] "Photographies de l'activité de Christiane Métras au sein des EMSI," 1959-1960, ref. 190 ARC 03, Fonds Métras, CDHA.

[62] Photographs titled "Cours de tricot donné par une ASSRA," "Visite dans une famille à qui elles faisaient de l'aide médicale" and "EMSI, Mme Durand et Monique Baudinier dans un véhicule pour faire de l'AMG," 1959-1961, ref. 1000 ARC 51, Photographies d'EMSI, Archives Durand, CDHA. A *mechta* is a small rural building or hamlet.

[63] Service cinematographique de l'armée françiase en (SCA), "Reviens vite, Toubiba," filmed January 1, 1957, ref. SCA 129,: video, https://imagesdefense.gouv.fr/fr/reviens-vite-toubiba.html#. *Toubiba* is Arabic for "female doctor," and was the nickname given to the ASSRAs by the people they cared for.

[64] Irchene Abdelghani, "Service Cinématographique des Armées et la guerre de libération nationale: Idéologie d'une représentation," *Revue EL-BAHITH en des Sciences Humaine et Sciences Sociales* 12, no. 2 (2021): 534.

[65] "*Détruire les bandes qui hantent le djebel … la population est libérée de la commissaire politique du FLN*," here translated by Quincy Mackay. *Djebel* is an Arabic term for the mountainous countryside. See SCA, "Reviens vite, Toubiba," 01:09, 01:30.

[66] "*De la beauté et de la générosité, image réel de la France*," here translated by Quincy Mackay. See SCA, "Reviens vite, Toubiba," 12:10.

[67] Seferdjeli, "The French army," 64-67.

[68] Cf. MacMaster, *Burning the veil*, 248.