

Who's in Charge: Military-Political Conflict Within France During the Franco-Algerian War

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ABSTRACT

It was a war most have forgotten. One of history's first imperialistic powers fell apart in a conflict filled with errors. The Franco-Algerian War demonstrated not only the power of insurgency but the weakness of a nation trying to fight and win a war that was not supported at home. France would eventually fail to suppress the Algerian rebels. Their government would then have to suppress the French military as it sought to bypass and blatantly disregard the leaders of the nation they were sworn to protect.

Keywords: Franco-Algerian War, Charles de Gaulle, National Liberation Front, Evian Agreements, Setif Massacre, Guelma Massacre, Siddi Ferruch

Quién está a cargo: Conflicto político-militar en Francia durante la guerra franco-argelina

RESUMEN

Fue una guerra que la mayoría ha olvidado. Una de las primeras potencias imperialistas de la historia se vino abajo en un conflicto plagado de errores. La guerra franco-argelina demostró no solo el poder de la insurgencia, sino la debilidad de una nación que intentaba luchar y ganar una guerra que no contaba con el apoyo de su país. Francia finalmente no lograría reprimir a los rebeldes argelinos. Su gobierno tendría entonces que reprimir al ejército francés mientras buscaba eludir e ignorar descaradamente a los líderes de la nación que juraron proteger.

Palabras clave: Guerra franco-argelina, Charles de Gaulle, Frente de Liberación Nacional, Acuerdos de Evian, Masacre de Setif, Masacre de Guelma, Siddi Ferruch

谁的地盘—阿尔及利亚战争期间法国境内的军事-政治冲突

摘要

这是一场绝大多数人都遗忘的战争。历史上首批帝国强权之一在一场充满错误的冲突中瓦解。阿尔及利亚战争不仅证明了起义的力量，还证明了一个在不受本国支持的战争中试图取胜的国家的弱点。最终，法国无法镇压阿尔及利亚反叛军。反叛军政府随后将镇压法国军队，同时试图避开并公然忽视他们曾宣誓保护的民族领袖。

关键词：阿尔及利亚战争，夏尔·戴高乐，民族解放阵线，《埃维昂协议》，塞提夫大屠杀，圭马大屠杀，Siddi Ferruch

Clausewitz called war “a violent political action.” He was absolutely right. Within that violent action are two distinct entities, the political leadership within the nation that makes the decision to go to or end the war, and the military, which fights and hopefully wins the war under the broad or specific guidance given to it by that political leadership. Generals should not do politics. Politicians should not fight wars. When these responsibilities cross, disaster is certain. Rarely in history has the government or its leaders been able to assume successfully the dual role of leader and general. Frederick the Great did it successfully. Napoleon tried but failed. Politics requires a certain manner of decision-making, more deliberate, looking at all kinds of different situations and scenarios. Military leaders see one thing, the enemy, and that is all they should see. There

may come a time when the enemy which dominates their thoughts and actions, is no longer their target. They don't make that decision, the politicians do. It may be frustrating, but it is something a military leader realizes from the time they enter the service, they are the tools of their politicians. On rare occasions they will not accept this as *fate accompli*. They will fight not only their perceived enemy, but also their political masters. It usually does not end well, for all involved.

The Cold War saw several wars that highlighted the ongoing struggle between freedom and communism. The Cold War also saw colonial wars, as former imperialist powers sought to retain a modicum of the power and influence they once possessed. Then there were wars that are difficult to categorize. The Franco-Algerian War of 1954-1962 was another example of

a powerful modern nation fighting a weaker, third-world nation. Militarily, the French, came closer to defeating the Algerians than either the United States or Soviet Union did their adversaries in Vietnam and Afghanistan. The Algerian rebels were down to a few thousand men, their morale dangerously low. Yet France lost. How? The Fourth Republic and the French army were at the same time fighting the rebels of Algeria and each other. Years of army autonomy in Algeria was threatened by the French government's desire to ensure its survivability, which to its leaders could only be achieved by ending France's second colonial war in less than a decade (the French were defeated and expelled by the Vietnamese in 1954) and granting Algeria its independence.

This situation arose because two entirely different governments existed within the same country: the Fourth Republic, in mainland France, and the French army and civilians that governed Algeria. Rather than acquiesce to the legitimate government of their country (the duty of any officer and soldier), the army decided to attempt to replace it. The Fifth Republic and a new President, Charles de Gaulle, replaced the Fourth Republic. De Gaulle, France's preeminent World War II hero, appeared to be everything the army wanted. He was one of their own—a man who had fought for France and understood the price the military pays for defending their nation. He would allow the army to finally end the Algerian War on terms that would make even the most ardent skeptics salute their efforts. They must have thought they'd

won it all. The opposite happened. De Gaulle announced the end of France's involvement and his support for Algerian independence. The army, shocked and dismayed, now saw it involved in two simultaneous battles, one against the Algerians, and the other against their country.

To understand this war, one must understand the volatile nature of French politics after World War II. The Fourth Republic was humiliated by their defeat in Indochina in 1954 and the images of America rescuing the remnants of their besieged army. Algeria was different. Unlike France's other North African colonies, Morocco and Tunisia (both granted independence in 1956), the French wanted to retain significant power and influence in Algeria. The army and the significant numbers of French citizens still living and prospering in Algeria supported this policy. It seemed like the typical post World War II mismatch of established power versus insurgent, and as with all these supposed mismatches, the insurgent would not go away. The longer the war lasted the more pressure the Fourth Republic was under to end it, even if it meant granting Algeria its independence. The Republic's goal was political survival; they announced the war would come to an end.

Within France, the government and the war had a myriad of enemies. Communists and their propaganda blamed the government for military setbacks, stoked class warfare, and incited the population over conscription. All were effective, but only so long as the war lasted. The military could nei-

ther see nor appreciate this stark reality, but that should not have mattered. A nation's army carries out policy, it does not formulate it. Further exacerbating the Fourth Republic's fragile government was the Algerian Liberation Movement. Terror became a primary weapon and in Paris, and other major French cities bombings became a common occurrence. The escalation to terrorism was the result of the brutal tactics employed by the French army in Algeria. Torture, murder, and deprivation were employed to break resistance yet as history so often demonstrates only emboldened it. The French army's brutality became public knowledge, further embarrassing the government since they had no knowledge of the military's measures. Orders to cease were ignored. France's partners in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), for other reasons, also did not support the Algerian War.

The Cold War did not end because the French were drowning in Algeria. Several years later the United States recognized this and after them, the Soviet Union. Next to the United States, France had the largest contingent of forces defending Western Europe, theoretically. The French contribution of 8 infantry divisions, along with significant armor and air assets, comprised one quarter of the NATO alliance.¹ Any lessening of those numbers was seen as very dangerous given the Soviet's massive numerical advantages in conventional military forces. France also had obligations in the Middle East and in 1956, along with Great Britain and Israel, had seized the Suez Canal

from an unfriendly Egyptian government. U.S. pressure forced their withdrawal from this questionable venture, adding further humiliation to their defeat in Vietnam. The Fourth Republic could not afford another defeat.

Whatever the system of government the military is its primary tool of defending the nation and projecting power. In a democracy/republic the military is completely subordinated to the civilian political authority. It has no part in determining and formulating policy. France's military's role, in theory, did not deviate from this norm. Yet facts often deviate from theory. For decades the French army in Algeria exercised autonomous control over Algerian affairs. The Fourth Republic, encumbered by continuous domestic problems both before and after World War II, allowed the army's political power to grow. The Algerian War was not fought for France but for the army's power and prestige. The French army surrendered to the Germans in the early months of World War II, the Vietnamese drove them out of Southeast Asia. An ally, the U.S., had humiliated them by forcing its withdrawal from the Suez Canal. Algeria was their chance to redeem themselves. No compromises, with the rebels or the government, could happen.

Philip M. Williams, in *Wars, Plots and Scandals in Postwar France* writes:

The French army charged the Fourth Republic with vacillation and weakness and its society with decadence and corruption. The real accusation, however, was that both French society and

French political institutions had other goals, other desires than winning colonial wars. It was the nature of postwar statecraft, not just an inability to formulate a policy, which crystallized the army's hostility.²

Fault can be found on two sides: the French government for allowing the army to become so independent, and the army for disregarding its duty to the French nation in favor of its own position. To leave Algeria would mean to forfeit generations of power and prestige. The potential for disillusion did not rest solely with the army's senior officers. Junior officers hoped for something better and didn't see that in their government, and thus had no problem supporting their army rather than the nation they swore to protect.

The French military had essentially become local caretakers in their village posts. Once the insurrection began, in addition to their usual activities, which included building roads and schools, bringing doctors to primitive areas and teaching the Algerians to run their own local affairs, the army protected villagers from the Algerian nationalists who sought vengeance against them for cooperating with the French. As long as the French remained the average Algerian could believe themselves safe, unafraid of their more radical countrymen. As the war progressed and the rhetoric of the French government moved increasingly toward withdrawal, the loyalties of the people naturally shifted. Rebel numbers began swelling in 1956, the

year the Fourth Republic's resolve began to falter. All the army had done socially and militarily seemed in jeopardy. 1958 was the key year. Temporarily, it seemed as if both the government and the army found their savior. Charles de Gaulle, France's iconic hero of World War II (he had continued to fight even after his nation surrendered) was mentioned as the leader of a new government. To the Fourth Republic this meant political stability, a man of De Gaulle's stature and prestige could quiet calls for change and restore functionality. To the army a universal smile must have graced the faces of all involved. Surely a general, France's greatest war hero, would stand with his fellow soldiers. He would never cast aside decades of work. He would never dishonor the army by withdrawing from a war they believed they were winning. De Gaulle was a general, and generals hate politicians. No one saw that this general was a politician.³

Another Algerian group also had a stake in this internal battle—French nationals. France entered Algeria in 1830. French businessmen and civil servants were right behind the first troops, ready to exploit the new colony. The Algeria of 1830 was a typical pre-industrial society. It consisted of numerous small towns, whose primary economic activity revolved around each town's small marketplace. Its natural resources, which included iron ore, phosphates, and vast forests, had not been developed beyond the needs of local use. As did most imperialist powers, France developed Algeria's infrastructure for their own use

rather than for the good of the country or its people. David Prochaska's *Making Algeria French: Colonialism in Bone: 1870-1920*, gives an excellent portrayal of France's economic exploitation of Algeria. Iron ore was exported to France, where it was smelted and marketed. The first railroad was built to haul iron ore, not passengers and the ports were expanded to accommodate shipping traffic and to handle the expanding output of Algeria's natural resources. Bone, the subject of Prochaska's narrative, was typical of this manner of exploitation. It was also typical of the manner in which the French supplanted the native population by continuing to arrive in greater numbers. All important political, economic, and administrative posts were either occupied or controlled by the French, including the infant petroleum industry, which would surely be nationalized by an independent Algerian government. Years of profit and prosperity would be lost without compensation. Further, the French of Algeria were no longer true Frenchmen. They did possess the basic rights of all French citizens, but enjoyed powers and privileges in Algeria they could not hope to equal in France. It is not surprising that French nationals in Algeria were as vehement and determined in their criticism of any attempt at conciliation by the Fourth Republic as the military.⁴

The diverging goals and viewpoints of the Fourth Republic and the French military's hierarchy were apparent the moment Algeria initiated its insurrection. Both the government and the military fought their own type of

war. The results were predictable. Neither the government nor the army accomplished anything. A nation cannot win a war when the military employs terrorism, subversion, and deceit to bring its enemy to its knees while at the same time the government offers peace, conciliation, and hope. Such was the enigma of French politics.

The French government attempted to end the war almost immediately. The hopeless military situation of the rebels compelled them to resort to guerrilla warfare after several foolhardy attempts at facing the French in open battle. Guerrilla wars tend to have a negative effect on the aggressor nation's civilian population because they seemingly last forever. Democracies tend to have problems with protracted wars and increasing casualties (the World Wars being the exception). The Fourth Republic realized this and as criticism from the public concerning new draft quotas and the recall of reservists and from the communists and other political enemies increased, so did the efforts to end the war. The French government's willingness to negotiate soothed the nerves of the French people, the Algerians, and the international community. The new philosophy of the Fourth Republic should have ensured its longevity. The communists would be neutralized since they would be deprived of their primary target of criticism, the war, and the support of the populace reestablished. It could have happened if France's military leaders supported rather than destroyed the policy of its government.



General Charles de Gaulle speaking to a Paris politician, June 1, 1958. <https://www.history101.com/june-1-1958-charles-de-gaulle-leadership-france/>



Principle leaders of the FLN (left to right: Mohamed Khider, Mostefa Lacheraf, Hocine Aït Ahmed, Mohamed Boudiaf, and Ahmed Ben Bella). Taken after their 22 October 1956 arrest by the French Army following the interception of their (Moroccan civilian) flight between Rabat and Tunis headed for Cairo. The military wing of the FLN, the ALM, created most of the chaos and actual physical destruction against the French and any suspected collaborators. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Khider_-_Lacheraf_-_A%C3%Aft_Ahmed_-_Boudiaf_-_Ben_Bella.jpg



Collage made by me using screenshots from two Public Domain videos. Collage description: (first row) Muslim rebels army ALN (Algerian National Liberation Army); French Army M8 Greyhound patrol; French settlers take up arms after the August 1955 Constantinois massacres. (second row) Charles de Gaulle's famous speech of June 4 1958 "je vous ai compris"; French settlers with banners saying "De Gaulle to power" in Algiers May 13 1958; Muslim veterans gathered in Algiers' Government Building in 1958. (third row) Barricades week French settlers uprising in January 1960; French settler FAF (French Algerian Front, anti-French government) rioters throw stones to French Army M8 Greyhound armored cars; French Army soldier use metal detector to check if Muslim women wearing niqab are bomb-couriers. (fourth row) FLN Muslim rebels riot in Algiers's European quarter in December 10 1960; French Army national guard Gardes Mobiles use tear gaz riot gun; FLN Muslim supporters face to face with French paratroopers during the December 10 1960 protest.

First video (all screenshots except one) is "French President Charles De Gaulle and the Six-Year War" (1960) <https://archive.org/details/gov.archives.arc.649319>. Public Domain

Algerian War documentary. National Archives and Records Administration. National Security Council. Central Intelligence Agency. (09/18/1947 - 12/04/1981). ARC Identifier 649319 / Local Identifier 263.1923. This movie is part of the collection FedFlix <https://archive.org/details/FedFlix>

Second video (up-right corner screenshot only) is "Rebellion Spreads in North Africa" (1955) https://archive.org/details/1955-08-25_Flood_Relief. Universal Newsreels. In 1976, the films' owner, MCA, made the unusual decision to turn over ownership of all of the newsreels to the National Archives. Public Domain educative material presented as a public service and freely available in www.archive.net.

The moment rumors that the Fourth Republic planned to negotiate with the Algerians began to circulate, the military began to question its own loyalty to the government they were pledged to protect. The military saw its already stained reputation, tarnished by a half century of repeated failures, sinking even lower. Winning was everything, no matter how it affected the government. The French navy, without political authorization, stopped ships in international waters it suspected of carrying contraband to the rebels on the open ocean.⁵ The government had to then rectify the diplomatic problems caused by such idiotic actions while at the same time assuring allies it was not adding to simmering Cold War tensions. Troop movements from mainland Europe to Africa, including two infantry divisions (approximately 35,000 men) after Russia's suppression of the 1956 Hungarian revolt, continued to occur without government approval.⁶ The military was oblivious to France's military and political obligations to NATO. Algeria consumed them.

Negotiations with the rebels accomplished little while the Fourth

Republic remained in power. Any guarantees or gestures made by the government's negotiators carried little appeal when the army initiated a subversive war of immense brutality against the Algerian rebels and their civilian population. Furthermore, the government guarantees for the personal safety of the Algerian leaders should they enter France to negotiate were accompanied by army statements that indicated any Algerian rebels would be arrested the moment they arrived. When deciding to fight a subversive war, the military mistakenly believed it was fighting a similar enemy to the Vietnamese and to win it had to break the will of the Algerian people.⁷ To win meant brutality that shocked France's allies and its people. Of note, it was the French army, not Algerian nationalists that exploded the first bomb in a civilian area.⁸ A border village between Algeria and Tunisia was bombed in the middle of a market day when the crowds were at their largest. The military leadership informed the government, after the fact, that such brutality was necessary as the town served as a "suspected" transit point for Algerians training in Tunisia to reenter their

country.⁹ The military of course didn't consider it had ordered the bombing of a sovereign nation's territory, in this case Tunisia, and that such actions might convince neutral countries to the rebel cause. The U.S. faced a similar situation during the Vietnam War when North Vietnamese regulars and Viet Cong guerrillas would escape to Cambodia to avoid the hammer of the U.S. military. The U.S. government ordered enemy forces not to be pursued, even though that decision infuriated the top military commanders. However, they accepted it because it was a decision over their heads. Tunisia, along with Morocco, allowed the rebels to train and receive supplies in their respective countries and provided a haven for rebels attempting to escape the French army and air force.¹⁰ French brutality did not end with such blatant acts of terrorism.

To keep civilians away from rebel influence and to pacify large areas of Algeria, entire villages and regions were relocated, often forcibly. No government approval was ever sought or given. New enemies in Algeria appeared everywhere. No segment of the population escaped French brutality. The viciousness of the rebels against their own people could be forgotten far more quickly than similar acts committed by the French.¹¹

As the war entered 1957, no end appeared in sight. The military began to seriously consider an attempt to supplant or even overthrow the government, blaming its own failures on their political leadership. Plans for an airborne descent on Paris were formulated, but

thankfully discarded as more intelligent minds prevailed.¹² The Fourth Republic in closed circles talked of stepping down rather than see their nation plunge into civil war or martial law and turned to their best option: Charles de Gaulle. He was popular with both the government and the military, thus he seemed like the best and most obvious choice. De Gaulle seemingly provided political stability, a clear and concise military mind, and a national hero. Both the government and the military would be immensely disappointed with what followed; they both misjudged the person they believed would help them all.

Perhaps it is only poetic justice that the bright future the French military thought it had guaranteed itself through its support of Charles de Gaulle dissolved almost immediately. They failed to investigate the man they placed in power. Charles de Gaulle was not a man to be controlled by anyone. Almost immediately upon taking control of France's fifth attempt at democratic republicanism he set to work at distancing itself from its latest colonial war, reducing the power of the military, and inserting native Algerians into important posts in their country. De Gaulle's agenda was to make France continental Europe's premiere power and he could not do that so long as France's primary military commitment was in Africa and not in Europe. He made public his commitment to granting Algeria its independence and his distaste for the methods and loyalties of the French military. Therefore, rather

than having its unusual power cemented, the military was reduced to its proper subsidiary role and its leaders retired or demoted. Furthermore, the war they fought so hard to win became an afterthought. The military further disgraced itself when it staged a fruitless coup attempt against President De Gaulle for desiring an end to the Franco-Algerian War. All remaining old leaders were either imprisoned or retired. They paid the price, a price their actions justified.

How did this happen? A lack of accountability. The French military had not earned the right to determine policy in the twentieth century, as defeat after defeat had burdened it with an aura of defeatism that they hoped Algeria would extinguish. They forgot their role, their duty as a nation's military. They owed their allegiance to

the people of France and the people of France had elected the leaders of the Fourth Republic. However, the ultimate responsibility for this disaster rests with the Fourth Republic. They did not rein in the military. Perhaps they received poor reports of what was going on in Algeria; perhaps they were incompetent, at least to a degree. Once realizing what was going on they should have relieved the top commanders, even arrested some of them, and then if need be cut off the financial support the military required to operate. Any of the above required strength within the government and the loyalty of the majority of France. Neither could be counted on. This war demonstrated a military should do what all militaries do, fight and win wars. However, they are still beholden to their political masters.



Viet Minh troops waving Vietnamese flag after defeating the French army at Dien Bien Phu in 1954. This defeat signified the weakness of French colonialism in the post-World War II world and added vigor to their determination to retain Algeria. Source: Vietnam People's Army Museum, first publish in 1954 https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/a/ae/Victory_in_Battle_of_Dien_Bien_Phu.jpg.

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Notes

- 1 https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/declassified_160672.htm?selectedLocale=en, Accessed 6/15/2020
- 2 Philip M. Williams, *Wars, Plots and Scandals in Postwar France*, 3. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970.
- 3 Edgar O'Ballance, *The Algerian Insurrection, 1954-1962*, 44-50. Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1967.
- 4 David Prochaska, *Making Algeria French, Colonialism in Bone, 1870-1920*, 64-72. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.
- 5 O'Ballance, *The Algerian Insurrection*, 83.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 52.
- 7 This was the strategy employed by General William Tecumseh Sherman, a Union general, during the American Civil War. The Civil War in some ways is similar to this war, Algeria was considered a part of France by the French, though not by the Algerians. The South saw itself as its own nation and Sherman set out to break that spirit, though never with the degree of brutality employed by the French army against Algeria. Further, Sherman had the full support of the Union government and the President. The

French army acted on its own.

- 8 Germaine Tillion, *France and Algeria*, 146. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1961.
- 9 O'Ballance, *The Algerian Insurrection*, 91.
- 10 Ibid., 85.
- 11 Russia faced a similar situation in World War II. Having lived for over 15 years under Stalin and his oppression the Germans, when invading, were just as if not more brutal. An opportunity to secure a friendly Russian population was lost.
- 12 Sten Rynning, *Changing Military Doctrine: Presidents and Military Power in Fifth Republic, 1958-2000*, 29. Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2002.