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A Comparison of the Chechen and
Algerian Wars**

by

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Abstract

This paper explores the prospects for Russian President Vladimir Putin to resolve the Chechen conflict by following the methods attempted by Charles de Gaulle, one of the leaders whom he most admires. De Gaulle came to power vowing to resolve the crisis in France's colony of Algeria, first settled in 1830, at about the same time the Russian Empire was expanding into the Caucasus. In both countries, the indigenous populations resisted occupation, first by peaceful means, and then with violence, including terrorism. Beyond such similarities the experience of France and Russia differ in crucial respects. Algeria attained its independence in the wave of decolonization of the 1950s and 1960s. Chechnya experienced an integration with Russia beyond anything the French had achieved in Algeria. Despite the difficulty of reintegrating war-torn Chechnya into the Russian Federation, the alternative of granting it independence, as de Gaulle did in Algeria, is unlikely.

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1. Introduction

In the weeks leading up to his election as president of Russia in March 2000, Vladimir Putin was asked by journalists which political leaders he found “most interesting.” His first answer, Napoleon Bonaparte, they took as a joke, so he offered as his second choice Charles de Gaulle.¹ One can easily see the appeal of the French general who came to power in the wake of the failed Fourth Republic, determined to revive France’s *grandeur*, to “restore state authority,” as he put it, and to create a strong, centralized, presidential republic.² Putin had from the start expressed similar aspirations for Russia.

De Gaulle’s rise to power was also intimately linked to France’s military campaign to maintain control of its North African colony, Algeria. The Fourth Republic’s demise was caused by a protest movement of European *colons* there in May 1958. They were dissatisfied with the inability of the Paris government to win the war it had been waging for four years against Algerian independence fighters. General de Gaulle’s initial support, as he agreed to form a new government with a new constitution and strong presidential powers, depended heavily on his promise to keep Algeria French. Yet four years later, in July 1962, he held a referendum on Algeria’s status and accepted the result – Algeria’s full independence.

Vladimir Putin’s popularity as prime minister, acting president, and then president was closely associated with his approach to the conflict in Chechnya. His strong response to the incursions by Wahhabi forces from Chechnya into Dagestan in August 1999 gave an invaluable boost to his political career. In retrospect, many observers believe that de Gaulle, despite his early popularity with the army putschists, harbored a long-term plan to extricate France from Algeria – ideally after defeating the rebels militarily. Putin’s long-term plan for Chechnya is a mystery, probably even to himself. An exploration of the parallels between Algeria and Chechnya, and between de Gaulle and Putin, might, however, shed some light on why the prospects for a peaceful resolution of the Chechen war have appeared so elusive.

2. Colonial Histories

France first claimed Algeria as a colony in 1830, wresting it from the control of the Ottoman Empire at about the same time the Russian Empire was expanding into the Caucasus. The indigenous Arabic and Berber-speaking populations resisted French occupation, and, like the mountain peoples of Chechnya and Dagestan, heeded a call to holy war. The French, like the Russians, reacted with brutality, destroying entire villages, driving peasants from their land, and “smoking out” rebels in caves. In one instance, known as the “enfumades du Dahra,” the whole tribe of the Ouled Riah, including women and children, hid themselves in the caves. They agreed to the French demands to pay a fine and to submit to French authority, but the French troops nevertheless built fires at the entrance to the caves and killed between 500 and 1000 people by asphyxiation. As one French observer declared,

¹ Vladimir Putin, *First Person: An Astonishingly Frank Self-Portrait by Russia’s President* (New York: Public Affairs, 2000), p. 194.

² Benjamin Stora, *Algeria, 1830-2000: A Short History*, trans. by Jane Marie Todd (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), p. 71; Alistair Horne, *A Savage War of Peace, Algeria 1954-1962* (New York: Viking, 1977); Alexander Werth, *De Gaulle*, 3rd ed. (Baltimore, MD: Penguin Books, 1969).

“We have surpassed in barbarism the barbarians we came to civilize” – a sentiment similar to those expressed by Lev Tolstoi, a contemporary Russian observer of the Caucasus wars.³

Always treated as second-class citizens, Algerians took advantage of France’s humiliating defeat in World War II to press for independence, much as Chechen activists pursued their goal of autonomy from a disintegrating Soviet Union at the end of the Cold War. Powerful psychological barriers prevented the French from crediting the Algerians’ claims. From the French perspective Algeria had been part of France for longer than some of its European territories, such as the province of Savoie and the city of Nice (ceded by Italy in 1860 in return for France’s support for Italian unification). Thus, in November 1954, half a year after the fall of Dien Bien Phu had set in train a process of decolonization, interior minister François Mitterrand was only expressing a widely held view when he asserted that “Algeria is France” and must remain so.⁴ Psychological attachment to the territory was undoubtedly bolstered by the discovery of oil in the Sahara in 1952, some seventy years after Chechnya’s oil industry contributed to the industrialization of the region. The Sahara also became France’s preferred test range as it developed its nuclear arsenal, making Paris all the more reluctant to give up control.

3. The Escalation of Violence

The Algerians’ attempt to gain independence, like that of the Chechens, consisted initially of mass demonstrations. When these were met with force the independence movement eventually turned to a campaign of guerrilla warfare, combined with acts of terrorism. On 8 May 1945, the day of the armistice ending the war in Europe, thousands of Algerians paraded in the streets with banners proclaiming “Down with fascism and colonialism.” The police fired on the demonstrators, provoking a spontaneous uprising during which over a hundred European residents of Algeria were killed. In response, the French air force attacked villages, the navy bombarded the coast, and the army rounded up and shot people. The death toll of the civilian population ranged from 15,000 (official French estimates) to 45,000 (Algerian claims).⁵

The Algerian war began in earnest with a rebellion launched by the newly formed Front de Libération Nationale (FLN) in November 1954. The army reacted by carrying out sweep operations and establishing settlement camps for “contaminated” populations. Led by French paratroopers and the Foreign Legion – including many veterans of the German SS – the armed forces increasingly relied on torture and summary execution. In a recent memoir, the French general who organized the system of torture in Algeria acknowledged that thousands of those who were imprisoned never returned: after being tortured, they were simply killed and buried in secret graves.⁶ The parallels are evident to the Russian war in Chechnya, with its indiscriminate bombing, sweep campaigns (*zachistiki*), torture, and extrajudicial murders.⁷ A key difference is that the French media, despite heavy government

³ Stora, *Algeria*, p. 5; Horne, *Savage War of Peace*, p. 30.

⁴ Yves Marc Ajchenbaum, ed., *La guerre d’Algérie, 1954-1962* (Paris: Librio, 2003), p. 94.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 16-20.

⁶ Paul Aussaresses, *Services spéciaux Algérie 1955-1957* (Paris: Perrin, 2001), pp. 34-35.

⁷ Human Rights Watch, “Human Rights Situation in Chechnya: Human Rights Watch Briefing Paper to the 59th Session of the UN Commission on Human Rights,” April 2003, <http://www.hrw.org/backgrounder/eca/chechnya/unchr-chechnya-04.html>.

ensorship, raised moral concerns about the use of torture, while prominent intellectuals such as Raymond Aron criticized the French involvement in Algeria on simple cost-benefit grounds.⁸ In today's Russia, neither the rationalist nor the ethical critique of the war in Chechnya garners much attention.⁹ In any case, both in Algeria and in Chechnya, the brutal policies of the central governments alienated potential supporters of compromise solutions and drove them into the arms of the rebels.

4. The New Leader Takes Charge

After leading the Free French forces during World War II, and serving as president of the provisional government in the months following, Charles de Gaulle influenced French politics mainly from behind the scenes until a crisis in Algeria created an opportunity and a demand for a more public role. The event that triggered the crisis was a French air attack against the Tunisian village of Sakiet-Sidi-Youssef in February 1958. The Algerian rebels had been staging raids into Algeria from neighboring Tunisia and during the previous month had kidnapped four French soldiers and killed several others. The French military leadership retaliated by sending U.S.-made aircraft to bomb Sakiet on market day, killing 69 people, including 30 children whose school was destroyed, and wounding about 130 others. As in similar Russian incidents in Chechnya, the French commander insisted, against all evidence and reports from journalists on the scene, that only military objectives were hit and only Algerian fighters were killed. The incident caused an international uproar, as the Tunisians demanded that France withdraw from its military bases in the country, and the United States offered to intercede.¹⁰

The European residents of Algeria, the so-called *pieds noirs* who made up roughly one-tenth of Algeria's nearly nine million inhabitants, were alarmed at the prospect of international intervention. They staged riots and promoted the formation of a Committee of Public Safety, led by General Jacques Massu, commander of the Tenth Paratroopers' Division. Only when General de Gaulle expressed his readiness "to assume the powers of the Republic" were the putschists temporarily pacified. Like Putin, de Gaulle was prone to the use of "barracks" language (his favorite expression was apparently "Bordel de Dieu!"), but normally in private conversations rather than public broadcasts (unlike Putin). His first words to the army mutineers when he met them in Algiers in June 1958 were rather more dignified and sympathetic: "Je vous ai compris!" (I have understood you.)¹¹

5. Negotiation and War

But the army did not understand the general, if they really expected him to lead an all-out assault on the rebels, regardless of the impact on France's international prestige. In fact one of de Gaulle's first acts was to offer the secessionists a "peace of the brave," with no conditions other than to "leave the knife in the cloakroom." The FLN rejected what it understood correctly to be a call for its surrender, but de Gaulle nevertheless was able to achieve an exchange of prisoners in late 1958. In September 1959, the general proposed

⁸ Raymond Aron, *L'Algérie et la République*, discussed in Horne, *A Savage War of Peace*, p. 242.

⁹ Theodore P. Gerber and Sarah E. Mendelson. "Russian Public Opinion on Human Rights and the War in Chechnya." *Post-Soviet Affairs*. vol. 18, no. 4, October-December 2002, pp.271-305.

¹⁰ Horne, *A Savage War of Peace*, pp. 249-250.

¹¹ Horne, *A Savage War of Peace*, chap. 14.

negotiations with the FLN that could lead to self-determination for Algeria.¹² This was a big step beyond the initial reaction of François Mitterrand, the minister of the interior when the war broke out in 1954: “The only possible negotiation is war.”¹³

Putin’s government, by contrast, seemed permanently stuck at the offer of unilateral surrender by the Chechen rebels. More consistent with the Russian approach, de Gaulle intensified the military effort in Algeria at the same time as he offered negotiations. The French counterinsurgency campaign in Algeria displaced some two million peasants, herding them into resettlement camps in an effort to isolate them from the guerrillas, much as the conflict in Chechnya created hundreds of thousands of internal and external refugees (in neighboring Dagestan and Ingushetia and as asylum-seekers in Western Europe).

By early 1960 de Gaulle was promoting a plan that would end Algeria’s colonial status, much to the dismay of the *pieds noirs*, but he still rejected outright independence. “It will mean utter pauperization, a complete monstrosity,” he argued. “What I think the Algerians will choose in the end will be an Algerian Algeria linked to France.” He ultimately proposed to let the Algerians themselves decide their fate, but he sought to coax them into maintaining links to France by offering economic aid. The so-called Constantine Plan, for example, aimed to create 400,000 new jobs for Algerians over the course of five years and build schools and medical facilities.¹⁴ The Russian government never took seriously the option of “buying Chechnya” by providing extensive economic concessions, although the idea was discussed among Boris Yeltsin’s advisers in the early 1990s.¹⁵ By choosing war, the Yeltsin government foreclosed the possibility of a peaceful, negotiated confederal arrangement with Chechnya, along the lines of what Moscow had pursued with Tatarstan.¹⁶ In losing that war in 1996, the Yeltsin regime left Chechnya with the kind of independence that de Gaulle had anticipated for Algeria, one characterized by “utter pauperization,” and a “complete monstrosity” -- a quasi-state riven by internal conflict, lawlessness, corruption, and kidnapping, and a danger to its neighbors.

6. The Gendering of Nationalist Violence

The conflicts in both Algeria and Chechnya wrought devastation on the civilian populations of both countries. As with the 2003 war in Iraq and the last couple of wars in Afghanistan, the governments did not bother to count how many civilians their soldiers were killing. Thus the estimates for both wars cover a wide range, with several hundreds of thousands of deaths in the Algerian case likely (1954-1962) and at least 100,000 in ten years’ of war in Chechnya (with many times that many refugees and internally displaced persons).¹⁷ In both countries, contrary to generalizations about gender roles in warfare, women played an active part in the violence.

¹² Horne, *A Savage War of Peace*, pp. 342-346.

¹³ Quoted in Horne, *A Savage War of Peace*, p. 99.

¹⁴ Horne, *A Savage War of Peace*, pp. 305-308.

¹⁵ Iu.M. Baturin, et al. *Epokha El'tsina: Ocherki politicheskoi istorii* (Moscow: Vagrius, 2001).

¹⁶ Matthew Evangelista, *The Chechen Wars: Will Russia Go the Way of the Soviet Union?* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2002).

¹⁷ Guy Pervillé, “La guerre d’Algérie: combien de morts?” in Mohammed Harbi and Benjamin Stora, eds., *La Guerre d’Algérie, 1954-2004: la fin de l’amnésie* (Paris : Editions Robert Laffont, 2004) ; see *Novaia gazeta*, 10-16 September 2003 for a summary of statistics from official sources and human-rights groups for Chechnya.

In the Algerian war, women engaged directly in violence as accomplices to male assassins, by joining guerrilla forces (although usually not bearing arms) in the countryside known as the *maquis*, and, ultimately, as *poseuses de bombes*, staging terrorist attacks against civilians.¹⁸ The role of Algerian women in terrorist violence is probably best known from Gillo Pontecorvo's 1966 film, *Battle of Algiers*. Although not a documentary, Pontecorvo's movie provides a rather faithful depiction of the activities of FLN women in carrying out bombings of civilian targets in the European quarter of Algiers. Throughout the film we see them take advantage of their status as somehow exotic in the eyes of the French army and police, especially when in traditional costume, but also when dressed in European style, to smuggle weapons and bombs through the checkpoints that separate the European city from the Muslim Casbah.¹⁹

What motivated Algerian women to join in violent struggle against the French occupation? One factor was undoubtedly revenge for the killing of innocents. As he recalled in his memoirs, Saadi Yacef, the commander of the FLN forces in Algiers, sought to overcome any reluctance on the part of his female bombers by telling them that they would be avenging the deaths of Muslim children killed in the notorious attack at Rue de Thèbes, arranged by French police officials in collaboration with *pieds noirs* extremists. At least one of bombers, however, claims not to have needed the additional persuasion. Zohra Drif, a first-year law student in 1954-55, was already then determined to fight. "I wanted to join a terrorist group," she recalls. The FLN had offered her the task of sheltering fighters in town, or even serving with the guerrilla forces in the *maquis*. "But this is not what I wanted to do. I wanted to participate in armed action. I thought in the *maquis* I would only be used as a nurse or secretary, so I wanted to join a terrorist group, here in town."²⁰

Other women embraced terrorism in response to the violence they personally experienced at the hands of the French. Pontecorvo's *Battle of Algiers* is well known for the verisimilitude of its torture scenes. But the movie shows only men being arrested and tortured. In fact women were also subject to such violence. Algerian female militants regularly suffered torture, in which rape played a significant part, and were often driven to violence in response.²¹ In a vicious circle their actions in turn prompted the French authorities to abandon any qualms about rounding up and torturing Algerian women.

¹⁸ Khaoula Taleb Ibrahim, «Les Algériennes et la guerre de libération nationale. L'émergence des femmes dans l'espace public et politique au cours de la guerre et l'après-guerre, » in Mohammed Harbi and Benjamin Stora, eds., *La Guerre d'Algérie, 1954-2004: la fin de l'amnésie* (Paris : Editions Robert Laffont, 2004), pp. 197-226

¹⁹ Pontecorvo and his scenarist Franco Solinas were apparently inspired by the essays of Frantz Fanon, such as "Algeria Unveiled," in *A Dying Colonialism* (New York: Grove Press, 1965) originally published in Paris in 1959 as *L'An Cinq de la Révolution Algérienne*. See also the discussion in Anne McClintock, "'No Longer in a Future Heaven': Nationalism, Gender, and Race," in Geoff Eley and Ronald Grigor Suny, eds., *Becoming National: A Reader* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 259-284.

²⁰ From her interview with Danièle Djamila Amrane-Minne, *Des femmes dans la guerre d'Algérie* (Paris : Editions Karthala, 1994), pp. 137-38. In her interview in the film, « Remembering History, » (2004), included with the US DVD of *Battle of Algiers*, Zohra Drif expresses no remorse over the civilians killed in her bombing of the Milk Bar.

²¹ For evidence of rape and sexual torture, by both sides in the conflict, see Mouloud Feraoun, *Journal, 1955-1962: Reflections on the French-Algerian War* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000), pp. 104, 242, 261-262; Amrane-Minne, *Des femmes dans la guerre d'Algérie*.

A similar dynamic unfolded in Chechnya. Traditionally Chechen women did not participate directly in anti-Russian violence, although they often were in a position to make decisions about whether their sons would fight.²² During the first war they sometimes worked with mothers of Russian soldiers who sought to rescue their sons from the army and bring them home.²³ Women were particularly critical of the Chechen warlord Shamil Basaev for his responsibility in shattering the fragile peace that attended the withdrawal of Russian forces in 1996. In an interview with a BBC reporter, Basaev acknowledged that in Chechnya “some women curse me” because his military activities in Dagestan in autumn 1999 had provoked a renewal of Russian bombing and ultimately a full-scale invasion and occupation of the country.²⁴

In the widespread violence carried out by the undisciplined Russian troops, women were not usually the targets. The sweep operations typically focused on males of plausible fighting age. But as more women saw their men kidnapped, tortured, and killed, many of them chose to seek revenge. As in Algeria, once some women became engaged in armed struggle no woman was even nominally immune from searches, arrests, and torture. Since the advent of the “black widows,” the desperate women who kill themselves to avenge family members “disappeared” by the Russian *zachistki*, women have become a target of choice for the Russian soldiers and their pro-Moscow Chechen allies.²⁵ One Chechen policeman named Ali told the French journalist Anne Nivat about “Operation Fatima,” which sought to find out which women had particularly suffered during the war, how many relatives they had lost, and so forth. “We then detain those individuals before they have even committed the least crime! We check all the women with a sad demeanor, who are both young and all dressed in black.”²⁶ Now that women are equally suspect, the key technique that made Nivat one of the rare Western journalists with access to Chechnya – that she could disguise herself as a Chechen woman – no longer provides her adequate protection.²⁷ Thus, as the vulnerability and insecurity of Chechen civilians remained high, there were fewer sources of information about their desperate situation and little understanding when they reacted with violence against Russian civilian and military targets.

7. Barriers to a Peaceful Resolution

De Gaulle, in his efforts to end the Algerian War, faced stiff opposition from powerful elements of the army, withstood two coup attempts, and survived several near assassinations. He supported his minister of cultural affairs, the writer André Malraux, when the latter forthrightly criticized the widespread use of torture by French paratroopers –

²² For a discussion of traditional Chechen family life, see Valery Tishkov, *Chechnya: Life in a War-Torn Society* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003), chap. 10.

²³ Amy B. Caiazza, *Mothers and Soldiers: Gender, Citizenship, and Civil Society in Contemporary Russia* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

²⁴ Transcript of BBC Russian Service’s telephone interview with Basaev, posted by Tom de Waal to Johnson’s Russia List, 4 October 1999 (originally online at http://www.bbc.co.russian/2909_4.html.)

²⁵ John Reuter, *Chechnya’s Suicide Bombers: Desperate, Devout, or Deceived?* (Washington, DC: American Committee for Peace in Chechnya, 2004).

²⁶ Anne Nivat, *La guerre qui n’aura pas eu lieu* (Paris: Fayard, 2004), pp. 128-129. See also Delphine Thouvenot, “Abductions now target housewives, teenagers in war-torn Chechnya,” Agence France-Presse, 5 February 2005, <http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/RWB.NSF/db900SID/SODA-69D84W?OpenDocument>

²⁷ Anne Nivat, *Chienne de Guerre: A Woman Reporter Behind the Lines of the War in Chechnya*, trans. by Susan Darnton (New York: Public Affairs, 2001).

criticism that, nevertheless, failed to halt the practice. By comparison, Putin and his government treat as traitors any journalists, such as Andrei Babitskii or Anna Politkovskaia, who call attention to similar Russian atrocities, and deny that they occur.²⁸ Under very suspicious circumstances, both were prevented from traveling to Beslan to report on the hostage crisis there that resulted in the deaths of hundreds of school children and their relatives.²⁹ Putin seemed reluctant to stand up to his military commanders and insist that their troops adhere to the laws of war. Ultimately, de Gaulle drew upon his unassailable reputation as a war hero and his force of personality to overcome challenges from the army and the extreme Right to secure French acceptance of Algeria's independence by 1962 – a virtually unthinkable achievement only four years earlier. Putin, evidently also a strong personality, has significantly fewer reputational resources to draw upon, compared to de Gaulle -- having spent the Cold War as a minor spy in a provincial backwater in East Germany. At the same time, however, he faced nothing like the opposition de Gaulle encountered – no *pieds noirs* “ultras” undermining efforts at negotiation by resorting to terrorism, no paratrooper or Foreign Legion generals with armies of fascist thugs at their command. And even if some Russians expressed concern that U.S. influence in neighboring Georgia would prevent Russia's efforts to halt the infiltration of guerrillas into Chechnya – much as the French Algerians balked at the U.S. role in Tunisia – Putin was able to handle them.

Putin was fortunate not to face the kind of opposition that de Gaulle had to confront, if he ever sought seriously to negotiate a peaceful end to the Chechen war, one that might allow some autonomy for the republic. Opposition to such an effort, as we infer from the Algerian case, could have come from the Russian community in Chechnya. Two people in particular deserve credit for eliminating that potential source of opposition. The first is Dzhokhar Dudaev, the former Soviet general who led the independence movement and served as Chechnya's first president. His erratic behavior and anti-Russian pronouncements convinced many ethnic Russians to leave Chechnya in the early 1990s. The second is Boris Yeltsin, who launched the war that drove the rest of the Russians out of the country with the relentless bombardment of Grozny, the city where most of them lived. It was the presence of resentful Europeans in Algeria after de Gaulle negotiated the country's independence that wrecked any possibility of a mutually beneficial relationship between post-colonial Algeria and France. Paris had promised to continue to provide economic aid in an attempt to fulfill the promise of the Constantine Plan, but the *pieds noirs* extremists did not want an independent Algeria to succeed. They embarked on a “scorched earth” policy and campaign of terror that reached into metropolitan France as well. In May 1962, in one Algerian city, the paramilitary forces of the *pieds noirs* were killing between 10 and 50 Algerians every day. They blew up forty schools in the last four days of that month. In June the “Delta commandos” burned down the library of Algiers, destroying some sixty thousand books – echoes of Stalin's genocidal policies in Chechnya during the 1940s. Anticipating reprisals for such outrages, the European residents of Algeria fled to France, leaving Algeria to its unhappy fate.³⁰

²⁸ Anna Politkovskaia, *A Small Corner of Hell: Dispatches from Chechnya* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

²⁹ “Two Reporters Unable to Travel to Beslan,” *Moscow Times*, 6 September 2004, p. 3.

³⁰ Horne, *A Savage War of Peace*, chaps. 23-24 ; Stora, *Algeria*, chap. 8.

A further point of similarity between Algeria and Chechnya suggests a potential barrier to peaceful negotiation of the Chechen war. Both conflicts were simultaneously national liberation struggles and civil wars. Various Algerian factions fought among themselves throughout the war against France, with tens of thousands of victims.³¹ Although the Chechens are traditionally understood to unite when faced with Russian aggression, the years of independence between 1996 and 1999 were fraught with internecine conflict.³² The situation under Russian military occupation did not lead to any coherent Chechen government either, despite the dubious elections staged by the Kremlin. When France granted Algeria its independence in September 1962, two factions competed as claimants to the right to govern the country – a circumstance that allowed Paris to renege on its offer of economic aid, claiming it could do nothing until it knew who was in charge. Boris Yeltsin’s government employed the same excuse for not fulfilling the terms of the peace agreement that ended the first war in 1996. Using a similar justification, Putin cited Aslan Maskhadov’s inability to control his rivals as a reason not to negotiate with the legally elected president of Chechnya. Later he compared Maskhadov to Osama bin Laden, claiming without evidence that Maskhadov was behind all of the recent terrorist attacks and that Moscow would not negotiate with “child-killers.” Maskhadov, for his part, had denounced attacks against innocent civilians and had vowed to have his troops abide by the Geneva Conventions – a promise that, unfortunately, he was incapable of fulfilling. In any case, failing to stop the violence in Chechnya (and beyond) by unilateral military means, Russia needed a negotiating partner, even if Putin did not acknowledge it. Although Maskhadov no longer enjoyed the level of popular support that elected him to the Chechen presidency in 1997, he remained for a long time the figure most often identified by members of the international community as necessary to involve in the search for a peaceful resolution of the conflict. Putin never accepted that position and instead arranged Maskhadov’s assassination in March 2005.

The international context of the two conflicts differed in one important respect that suggests a further hindrance to peaceful resolution of the Chechen war. The Algerian struggle held the attention of the international community from early on. The Bandung Conference of nonaligned countries recognized the FLN already in April 1955. That September the United Nations put the Algerian question on its agenda. The Arab League advocated for Algeria within the Security Council whenever one of its members held a seat. The International Committee of the Red Cross followed developments in the war.³³ By contrast, Chechnya enjoyed little international support -- not surprising in the post-9/11 climate, given Russia’s efforts to frame the case solely in terms of terrorism and extremism. Nor did it consistently sustain the attention of the nongovernmental organizations and countries concerned about violations of international humanitarian law and human rights. Perhaps if Putin had perceived Russia’s international standing or prestige to be at risk from pursuing the war in Chechnya, as de Gaulle evidently did in the case of France in Algeria, he would have been more likely to try to end it through peaceful compromise. Instead, the

³¹ Guy Pervillé, “La guerre d’Algérie: combien de morts?” in Mohammed Harbi and Benjamin Stora, eds., *La Guerre d’Algérie, 1954-2004: la fin de l’amnésie* (Paris : Editions Robert Laffont, 2004), esp. p. 491 ; Stora, *Algeria*, chap. 9.

³² Evangelista, *Chechen Wars*, chap. 3.

³³ Michel Veuthey, *Guérilla et Droit Humanitaire*, 2nd ed. (Geneva : Institut Henry-Dunant, 1983).

United States and its allies embraced Putin and endorsed his portrayal of the Chechen conflict as part of the war against global terrorism. Alternatively one might look for opposition from within Russia, based on a moral critique of the army's behavior or a rational analysis of the war's costs. Both factors played a role in ending France's war in Algeria but seemed notably absent in Russia.

8. Missed Opportunities

A final difference between the Algerian and Chechen cases is so apparent that it could well have been the starting point for this analysis. France and Russia both sought control of their respective colonies beginning in the first decades of the 19th century, when colonialism was the norm for major powers. In the wake of World War II, decolonization gradually became the new norm, as most major colonial powers gave up most of their possessions, particularly in Africa and Southeast Asia.³⁴ The Soviet Union, unlike France, Britain, and Portugal, was never the object of decolonization efforts. It managed to maintain control of the territories in Central Asia and the Caucasus that Tsarist Russia had colonized, and it did so not only with the brutal methods common to colonial powers, but also through a process of modernization and economic integration. That effort was sufficiently successful to allow the Soviet Union to emerge as a champion rather than a target of national liberation movements in the postwar period.

Thus, Russian colonial involvement in the North Caucasus was not entirely a story of conflict and exploitation, especially compared to the role of the French in Algeria. The Soviet regime pursued policies of education, urbanization, and industrial modernization, creating what one scholar has termed an "affirmative action empire" that benefited many non-Russian nationalities.³⁵ Consider, for example, the sphere of education in the North Caucasus. In 1923 when the Bolsheviks took control, North Ossetia had only 2 high schools with 116 students. By the late 1970s it had 13 high schools, four post-secondary institutions, including a university founded in 1969, with a total of 33,000 students. The people of Kabardino-Balkaria in 1924 were almost entirely illiterate. Under the Soviet regime they got their first written alphabet, plus a university and a dozen secondary schools.³⁶

France's education policies in the colonies, while benefiting to some extent the native populations, tended to favor the European residents to such a degree that resentment by the colonial subjects was inevitable. In 1892, for example, the French government earmarked 2.5 million francs for the education of European settlers' children, but only 450 thousand francs for the vastly more numerous native Algerians. By 1945, the 200,000 European children were educated at 1,400 primary schools, whereas the 1.25 million Algerian children were crowded into fewer than half as many schools (699).³⁷ Such blatant discrimination, even more evident in the economic realm (as the settlers appropriated the best agricultural

³⁴ For a consideration of how the normative climate changed, see Neta Crawford, *Argument and Change in World Politics: Ethics, Decolonization, and Humanitarian Intervention* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

³⁵ Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001).

³⁶ Leonid Zadvornyi, *Motorists' Guide to the Soviet Union* (Moscow: Progress, 1980), p. 263.

³⁷ Horne, *Savage War of Peace*, pp. 60-61.

lands and turned them into vineyards), sowed the seeds of the uprisings that culminated in the war for liberation.

In Chechnya, the Soviet program of modernization was not a tremendous success, especially compared to the other North Caucasus republics, and even more so to the Muslim republics of the Volga region, such as Tatarstan and Bashkortostan. But even looking at the figures gives an impression of a trend, however gradual and halting, towards assimilation and modernization. By the late Soviet period literacy in Chechnya approached 70 percent (compared to the high nineties in much of the rest of the Soviet Union, but roughly equivalent with today's post-colonial Algeria, and far better than, say, current-day Morocco, with barely 51 percent literacy); in Chechnya 42 percent of the people lived in cities, and as late as 1994 more than a quarter of Chechens spoke Russian at home rather than Chechen. There were still significant gaps between the Russian and Chechen populations in many social indicators (compared, for example, to the small difference between Russians and Tatars in Tatarstan), but many Chechens nevertheless benefited from the Soviet Union's "affirmative action" policies.³⁸

Of course, for many Chechens more relevant than those statistics is this one: nearly 100 percent of the population of Chechnya was deported from the territory in 1944 in a brutal operation ordered by Stalin. Ironically, though, the mass deportation meant that many Chechens continued to live outside the region and experienced even higher levels of urbanization, Russification, and education than those who returned in the mid-1950s. The result is that many individuals of the Chechen diaspora attained high-status positions in Soviet society. Among the more famous ones, Ruslan Khasbulatov became an economics professor in Moscow and then speaker of the Russian parliament; Dzhokhar Dudaev became an air force general and commander of a strategic bomber base, and married a Russian woman, before he returned to lead – or hijack – the Chechen independence movement. Many other less prominent figures felt a certain affinity for Russians and Russian culture and an abiding attachment to Russia. Chechens of the Nadterechnyi district, in particular, were considered most loyal to the Russian Federation.³⁹ Despite the depredations of Russian colonialism and Soviet repression, there remained a reservoir of good will among many Chechens that the Moscow leadership squandered when it insisted on a military solution to Chechen aspirations for greater autonomy.

France also missed some opportunities to come to a negotiated solution to its conflict with Algeria. It also turned potential allies among the Algerian intelligentsia, educated in France and enamored of French culture, into sworn enemies.⁴⁰ But the scope for compromise short of independence was probably less in the Algerian than in the Chechen case. Many

³⁸ Adapted from Georgi M. Derluguian, "Ethnofederalism and Ethnonationalism in the Separatist Politics of Chechnya and Tatarstan: Sources or Resources?" *International Journal of Public Administration* 22 (9&10) 1999, pp. 1402-1404. Language information from *Chto nuzhno znat' o narodakh Rossii: Spravochnik dli gosudarstvennykh sluzhashchikh* (Moscow: Skriptorii, Russkii mir, 1999), pp. 561-562.

³⁹ In November 1998, the Chechen "ambassador" to Moscow told me that the Nadterechnyi district, his home region, had actually tried to remain "neutral" during the recent war that had gained Chechnya its short-lived, de facto independence.

⁴⁰ An excellent example is the school teacher and educational administrator Mouloud Feraoun, whose steady disillusionment can be traced in his *Journal, 1955-1962: Reflections on the French-Algerian War* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000).

observers believe that Moscow could have negotiated an arrangement that would have left Chechnya within the Russian Federation, or at least closely affiliated, along the lines of the agreement that Yeltsin had worked out with the nationalist leadership of Tatarstan. A year before the first Russian invasion of 1994, for example, Dudaev, who often referred to himself as a “Russian general,” had declared, “we do not see strategically a place for the Chechen Republic outside the single economic, political and legal space which covers the current Commonwealth of Independent States,” the loose alliance of former Soviet republics led by Russia.⁴¹ Days before his assassination by Russian forces, Aslan Maskhadov, the elected successor to Dudaev as Chechen president, issued his minimum terms for peace negotiations. They amounted to “guaranteeing the security of the Chechen people and protecting Russia's regional and defense interests in the North Caucasus.” In effect, if Russian troops would stop brutalizing Chechen civilians, Maskhadov would subordinate Chechnya’s ambitions to Russia’s security concerns.⁴² There is reason to doubt that Maskhadov had sufficient control over Chechen forces to implement such a deal, but the Russian authorities rejected the offer out of hand. They preferred to kill Maskhadov rather than talk to him. In doing so, they lost a chance to negotiate with what one observer has called “the last Chechen soldier of the Soviet empire” – someone who had benefited from the affirmative-action policies of the Soviet era and might have found a common language with the other products of a Soviet upbringing, such as the former KGB agent ruling from the Kremlin.⁴³ The French authorities took a different approach. Although they murdered plenty of FLN leaders, they imprisoned others as early as 1956, kept them alive throughout the war, and eventually invited them to negotiate a settlement. With Maskhadov’s death Moscow has no such *interlocuteurs valables* and no obvious way out of the conflict.

There are limits to the ability of the Algeria comparison to yield any kind of prediction for the future of the Chechen conflict. If the period up to the second half of the 20th century was one when colonialism was considered normal and acceptable (at least by those engaging in it), and the subsequent half-century one when the practice became widely discredited, where do we stand now? In the early 1990s, the vogue for military intervention justified on humanitarian grounds led to long-delayed independence for East Timor and de facto independence for Kosovo, following the first war conducted by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. These developments would seem to signal a reinforcement of the norm of decolonization and self-determination. The United States has welcomed the popular uprisings that overthrew pro-Moscow regimes in Georgia and Ukraine. Under such circumstances, one could imagine that the “international community” would stigmatize Russia for its military occupation and attendant depredations in Chechnya and the United States would welcome an independent “Chechen Republic-Iskeria.” On the other hand, colonialism and empire, and the “small wars” that sustain them, have made something of a comeback among various U.S. and British pundits.⁴⁴ The neoconservative zeal for promoting

⁴¹ Undated telegram from Dudaev to Yeltsin, VCh-PII-37791, probably from early October 1993, quoted in Carlotta Gall and Thomas de Waal, *Chechnya: Calamity in the Caucasus* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), pp. 121-122.

⁴² Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, “Chechen Separatist Leader Outlines Peace Terms in RFE/RL Interview,” 4 March 2005, <http://www.rferl.org/releases/2005/03/309-040305.asp>.

⁴³ Georgii Derlug’ian, “Poslednii Chechenskii soldat Sovetskoi imperii,” *Izvestiia.ru*, 10 March 2005.

⁴⁴ Niall Ferguson, *Empire: How Britain Made the Modern World* (London: Allen Lane, 2003); Max Boot, *The Savage Wars of Peace: Small Wars and the Rise of American Power* (New York: Basic Books, 2003).

democracy by force, combined with a new U.S. doctrinal embrace of preventive war, has rendered Iraq a virtual American trusteeship. Finally, the “war on terror,” declared by the United States, serves as a counterweight to tendencies that promote self-determination. States have returned to their privileged status in the international system, while non-state actors, such as separatist movements, risk the taint of terrorism if they take up arms (and sometimes even if they do not). Vladimir Putin’s insistence that the Chechen conflict be understood solely as an instance of international terrorism, but one that Russia can handle without any external interference from international organizations or other states, seems to correspond reasonably well to such an ambiguous situation.