

THE FRENCH MILITARY'S TRAGIC MISSION TO PROTECT MANKIND: HOW THE *GUERRE RÉVOLUTIONNAIRE* DOCTRINE FUELLED THE POLITICISATION OF FRENCH OFFICERS IN THE ALGERIAN WAR OF INDEPENDENCE

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ABSTRACT

Democratic governance rests on a precarious relationship between the civilian and military branches of government. This relationship is threatened whenever civil-military relations become polarised. This theme is explored through a case study of the French Army during the Algerian War, in which tensions with the de Gaulle government grew as the Army politicised. This culminated in an attempted coup d'état in 1961 and the rise of the terrorist OAS group. The thesis conducts its analysis through the prism of the *guerre révolutionnaire* doctrine, which it considers an essential, yet too often overlooked, catalysing factor in the Army's politicisation.

Keywords

Algerian War of Independence (1954-1962), civil-military relations, military doctrines, total war, counterinsurgency, OAS, terrorism, Charles de Gaulle.

INTRODUCTION

The years after World War II saw a rapid rise of independence movements, of which those in the French Empire were among the most prominent. France, which had been devastated by the early-war defeat by Germany, and subsequently divided over its collaborationist Vichy Government, first sent its Army to Indochina to stop Ho Chi Minh's nationalist movement, which resulted in an eight-year war and ended with the traumatic loss at the Battle of Dien Bien Phu in May, 1954. Inspired by the Viet-Minh's victory, insurrections reinvigorated in Algeria. Believing that the Army and France itself could not survive another military defeat, especially not if this would lead to the loss of not just some faraway protectorate, but an integral part of France, the military saw it as its duty to defend "l'Algérie française" at any cost.¹

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However, the French had learnt from their defeat in Indochina. The war had shown the importance of civilian support, the strength of unified politico-military command, and the utility of psychological measures.²

In an effort to codify "a new set of operational and strategic 'fixed values'" in a post-war (and post-holocaust) era where norms seemed to be "rare", the doctrine of *la guerre révolutionnaire* was developed. It held that "the conflicts in Indochina and Algeria [were] part of a global Communist strategy to win the Cold War without using vast conventional forces. This would be a new type of war in which accepted norms of conventional military strategy, organisation, and tactics were obsolete."³ Therefore, the French military was to "reorganise and redocctrinize" to fight it and conquer the "hearts and minds" of the local population.⁴

Although controversial throughout the war, the doctrine seems to have been highly influential. According to several historians, "there is little doubt that the development of the theory of *guerre révolutionnaire* and the debates that accompanied it had a considerable influence on many within the French Army" and several "key figures" within the civil administration.⁵ One straightforward reason for this is that many adherents of the doctrine, in their "greater crusade for the spiritual and national future of France", played a significant role in at least three large threats to French domestic stability and democracy that occurred during the war.⁶ The first was the May 1958 military coup d'état that led to the fall of the Fourth Republic and the appointment of Charles de Gaulle. The second was the failed coup of 1961, which took place after de Gaulle had expressed his willingness to grant the Algerians self-determination. It occurred in Algiers from 21 to 26 April, and a total of 14,000 officers was implicated.⁷ The third was the *Organisation Armée Secrète* (OAS), a terrorist organisation that would arise after the failed coup and shock French society by conducting a great number of operations in both Algeria and the metropole, including assassinations and bomb attacks, which resulted in more than a thousand deaths.⁸

This episode of human tragedy raises many questions, but this thesis focuses on the relationship between the *guerre révolutionnaire* doctrine and the

military's resistance to the French Government. The research question is: *How did the French guerre révolutionnaire doctrine influence the military coup d'état attempt against Charles de Gaulle in 1961, and the subsequent rise of the OAS?*

Throughout the thesis, it is argued that the doctrine helped politicise the French military and challenge the Government. Not only did the doctrine provide a clear justification for the attempted coup of 1961, and for subsequent terrorism under the OAS, it also had a significant influence in the operationalisation of these revolutionary efforts.⁹

To make this argument, the thesis is primarily focussed on the new, total, form of warfare that the doctrine identified and the implications this would have for civil-military relations. Moreover, some of the psychological effects that the doctrine as a set of ideas may have had are considered.

RESEARCH

The research for this thesis has followed a process tracing approach, which is understood to concern the following:

[T]he systematic examination of diagnostic evidence selected and analysed in light of research questions and hypotheses posed by the investigator. [...] Process tracing [...] is an analytic tool for drawing descriptive and causal inferences from diagnostic pieces of evidence – often understood as part of a temporal sequence of events or phenomena.¹⁰

The evidence collected to address this thesis' research question came from three main efforts:

- A literature review of the existing (Anglophone and Francophone) literature on the Algerian war and the role the doctrine played herein;
- The reading of the biographies of two key actors in the counter-governmental efforts of the Army, Generals Raoul Salan and Maurice Challe.¹¹ Both were dismissed as Commander-in-Chief of the French Army by de Gaulle and retired shortly thereafter. Salan and Challe were the leading figures of the 1961 *putsch*, and the former would later become the head of the OAS;
- Archival research in the French Military Archives in Chateau de Vincennes. During a week of research, more than one thousand files were examined.

Altogether, this research considers and links factors and facets across different levels of analysis: from the micro level (individual personalities and career trajectories) to the meso level (French society and culture and its complicated links to Algeria) and the macro level (the intersections between decolonisation and the Cold War).

After an introduction, literature review and

methodology section, the thesis addresses its research question through three analytical chapters: the first focussing on the *guerre révolutionnaire* doctrine, addressing its origins, the imminent threat it identified, and the implications this was to have for civil-military relations; the second analysing the integration of the doctrine in the French armed forces and tracing the role the doctrine played in the 1961 coup attempt; and the third, addressing the rise of the OAS and the doctrinal elements that are identifiable in its plan of action, as well as its organizational structure.

RESULTS

Following its research and analysis, this thesis concludes that the *guerre révolutionnaire* doctrine played an important role in the process of politicisation of the French Army by unifying officers and civilians of different backgrounds and personalities in an alliance against de Gaulle, and by justifying the contra-governmental efforts that would develop into terrorism under the OAS.

The doctrine did so by its identification of an imminent and total communist threat, which it combined with an inherent contempt for democratic institutions. It was believed that the open character of democracies made it easy to be penetrated by communist influences, which meant it had to be militarised. Moreover, liberal democracies were supposed to lack the coercive powers to influence the people's minds effectively – an issue that could be overcome through an integrated politico-military structure. This meant that the Army was to take an active ideological and political role in defending its country against (psychological) attacks.¹²

Furthermore, the archival research has substantiated the claim that the connection between the doctrine and the 1961 *putsch* is not one that could be retrospectively read into the events: several records were found to indicate that many segments of the Government explicitly linked the rebellious efforts to the doctrine at the time.¹³ The same goes for the relationship with the OAS, whose plan of psychological action was found to be “toute de logique ‘Guerre révolutionnaire’”.¹⁴

While making this argument, the thesis finds that the doctrine is too often overlooked in interpretations of these efforts against President de Gaulle. For instance, Alistair Horne does not discuss the role of the doctrine in his prominent work *A Savage War of Peace*, nor does Alexander Harrison make an explicit link with the doctrine in his important work on the OAS.¹⁵

DISCUSSION

In his 1965 work *Lost Soldiers*, Kelly already wrote that “[t]he doctrine of *la guerre révolutionnaire* was a result both of the analysis of combat experience and of institutional self-justification. And being a ‘global theory’ that excluded nothing, it could not help but lead the Army in a political direction.”¹⁶ A year earlier, Paret had similarly pointed at the doctrine's “high potential of

political explosiveness” and concluded that the doctrine was a significant driving force behind the Army’s politicisation, and resentment of de Gaulle.¹⁷

However, while both works have remained highly influential in the literature on the Algerian war and the doctrine, their age makes that they were inherently limited by the restrictions imposed by French State (on e.g. archival materials and the possibility of interviewing those involved), as well as time (the short time after events gave less space for reflection). Benefitting from the large number of publications and declassified archival documents that appeared in the last fifty-three years, this research project confirms the conclusions of Paret and Kelly. By the same token, this project adds to the more recent literature, as several of the archival documents have never been presented in academia before.

At the same time, admitting that the coup and rise of the OAS are likely to have been the product of a number of factors, and that the relationship between ideas and action is hard to consolidate, this thesis does not aim to ‘prove’ the causal role of the *guerre révolutionnaire* doctrine.¹⁸

Instead, it is argued that the doctrine is too often overlooked in interpretations of these efforts against President de Gaulle, and new evidence is presented that strongly suggests that the doctrine has been a core catalysing factor. In line with Pahlavi, who posited that the May 1958 crisis that led to the return of de Gaulle should be approached from the perspective of *la guerre révolutionnaire*, this thesis argues that the doctrine holds great significance in attempts to understand the 1961 coup and the rise of the OAS.¹⁹

RELEVANCE

This research is relevant for several reasons. First of all, it holds academic significance for two strands of research on the study of the Algerian war, which endured from 1954 to 1962 and took about 25,000 French and 300,000 Muslim lives, and led to severe French domestic instability.²⁰

The first is the strategic studies-related field of the *guerre révolutionnaire* doctrine, which has received inadequate scholarly attention, resulting in calls for more research that are as recent as 2017; the second is the terrorism studies-related analysis of the OAS and the coup attempt that preceded it, which seems to have incorporated the doctrine’s influence only to a limited extent in recent years.²¹

What is more, some of the claims made about the doctrine appear to be based on little evidence or lack analytical nuance. Illustrative of the latter is Porch’s chapter on the doctrine, in which he refers to its adherents as “the French army’s counterinsurgency mafia”.²²

Moreover, this project holds significance for wider society. The memory of the Algerian war has

“profoundly divided and agitated” the French people, and, as was shown by the debate following President Macron’s recent acknowledgement of “systematic” French use of torture during the war, continues to do so.²³ Furthermore, the *guerre révolutionnaire* doctrine is not just an obscure ideology driven by Cold War fears: its concepts have widely influenced counterinsurgency theory and practice.²⁴

Although Algeria’s prominent position within the French colonial empire, and the French precedent of de Gaulle opposing the Vichy Government may make the particular case studied in this thesis a unique one, the dynamics and patterns traced here are also relevant to other Western states during the Cold War. As the *New York Times* wrote in 1947, “How can we prepare for total war without becoming a ‘garrison state’ and destroying the very qualities and virtues and principles we originally set about to save? This [...] is the grand dilemma [...] of our age”.²⁵

Considering the relevance of this thesis to contemporary world politics, one can find several resonances. Although the end of both Cold War and decolonisation significantly limits the doctrine’s applicability to the past few decades, the current ‘war on terror’, and the following debate on the trade-off between civil rights and extensive security provision, shows how “the grand dilemma” of 1947 can easily be argued to have persisted up to today. Likewise, the recently attempted coups in Turkey and Venezuela demonstrate that civil-military relations can still grow tense in the face of great security threats.²⁶

ROLE OF THE STUDENT

Gijs Weijenberg was an undergraduate student who was supervised by Dr. Kai Hebel during his research. Throughout the project, he has shown a very high level of independence by selecting his own topic and conducting his (archival) research by himself, as well as processing its results. Following a discussion of his findings and their implications with his supervisor, Gijs formulated his conclusions and was responsible for the writing.

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2. *Ibid.*, 7.
3. Christopher Cradock and M.L.R. Smith, “‘No Fixed Values’: A Reinterpretation of the Influence of the Theory of Guerre Révolutionnaire and the Battle of Algiers, 1956-1957,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 9, no.4 (2007): 74-76.

4. Douglas Porch, "From small wars to la guerre subversive: the radicalization and collapse of French counterinsurgency," *Counterinsurgency: Exposing the Myths of the New Way of War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 179.
5. See, for instance, Cradock & Smith, "'No Fixed Values'," 72, and François Dieu, "La doctrine de la guerre révolutionnaire: Un épisode méconnu de la pensée militaire française," *Res Militaris* 6, no.2 (2016): 18-19.
6. Paret, *French Revolutionary Warfare*, 28.
7. Alistair Horne, *The French Army and Politics, 1870-1970* (London: MacMillan Press, 1984), 82.
8. Alistair Horne, *A Savage War of Peace: Algeria 1954-62* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2006), 496-497.
9. Thus, this thesis largely excludes the 1958 coup. This has been done for a number of reasons, including analytical and practical ones: the coup occurred at a different stage of the war and under the old state structure of the Fourth Republic, and a greater attention to this coup would have limited the capacity to research the 1961 coup and OAS in depth. Moreover, the doctrine's influence on the 1958 coup has been studied extensively by Pierre Pahlavi in *La Guerre Révolutionnaire de l'Armée Française en Algérie 1954-1961: Entre esprit de conquête et conquête des esprits* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2004).
10. David Collier, "Understanding Process Tracing," *PS: Political Science & Politics* 44, no.4 (2011): 823-824.
11. Raoul Salan, *Fin d'un Empire: L'Algérie, de Gaulle et moi* (Paris: Presses de la Cité, 1974), and Maurice Challe, *Notre Révolte* (Paris: Presses de la Cité, 1968).
12. In a 1957 Army report on the Psychological aspects of the Algerian war, it was written that the civil authorities were insufficient in both number and quality to pacify the country and wage a psychological war. Hence, it was proposed that the Army should adopt a more prominent position in civil affairs. Service Historique de l'Armée de Terre (SHAT), 1H 2409 – *Extrait d'un compte-rendu de stage en A.P.N. établi par des officiers de la 70^e Promotion de l'École Supérieure de Guerre : 1^o Partie – Aspects Psychologiques du Conflit*. Secrétariat d'État aux Forces Armées (Terre), 3 April 1957.
13. See, for instance, SHAT, 1H 2703 – *Rapport sur les événements des journées des 22 au 26 avril 1961, examinés sous l'aspect personnel*, written by Lieutenant Colonel Barthelmy de l'État-major de la région territoriale et du corps d'Armée d'Alger, or, from the same archival section, *Synthèse Personnelle*, written by Général du Corps d'Armée Vezinet du Général Commande de la région territoriale et du corps d'Armée d'Alger.
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15. Horne, *A Savage War of Peace*, and Alexander Harrison, *Challenging De Gaulle: The O.A.S. and the Counterrevolution in Algeria, 1954-1962* (New York: Praeger, 1989).
16. George A. Kelly, *Lost Soldiers: The French Army and Empire in Crisis, 1947-1962* (Cambridge (MA): M.I.T. Press, 1965), 10. Emphasis added.
17. Paret, *French Revolutionary Warfare*, 120.
18. The difficulty of studying the impact of ideas has also been acknowledged by Gary King, Robert O. Keohane and Sidney Verba on pages 191-193 of *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).
19. Pahlavi, *La Guerre Révolutionnaire*, 99.
20. Irwin M. Wall, *France, The United States and The Algerian War* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001), 2-3.
21. Michael P.M. Finch, "A Total War of the Mind: The French Theory of *la guerre révolutionnaire*, 1954-1958," *War in History* (2017): 4. Finch writes that the doctrine "has not been subject to exhaustive scrutiny".
22. Porch, "From small wars to la guerre subversive," 180.
23. Dieu, "La doctrine de la guerre révolutionnaire," 1, and James McAuley, "France's Macron admits to military's systematic use of torture in Algeria War," *The Washington Post*, 13 September 2018.
24. For instance, the doctrine is discussed on page 9-10 of *The Routledge Handbook of Insurgency and Counterinsurgency*, edited by Paul B. Rich and Isabelle Duyvesteyn, 1st Edition (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), and mentioned in several chapters thereafter. The doctrine also attracted the attention of the RAND Corporation in 1964, which led to Constantin Melnik's report named "Insurgency and Counterinsurgency in Algeria."
25. Cited in Aaron L. Friedberg, "Why Didn't the United States become a Garrison State?," *International Security* 16, no.4 (1992):111-112.
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