

Putin: A New de Gaulle?

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In the weeks leading up to his election as president of Russia in March 2000, journalists asked Vladimir Putin which political leaders he found “most interesting.” They took his first answer, Napoleon Bonaparte, as a joke, so he offered Charles de Gaulle as his second choice. 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. From the start, Putin had 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 revolt there, led by French paratroopers in May 1958. They were dissatisfied with the Paris government’s inability 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, most 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 the prospects for a peaceful resolution of the Chechen war.

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 population 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 from caves. In one instance, over a thousand fighters were killed by asphyxiation, leading one French observer to declare, “We have surpassed in

barbarism the barbarians we came to civilize,” a sentiment similar to those expressed by Lev Tolstoy, a contemporary Russian observer of the Caucasus wars.

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 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 expressing a widely held view when he asserted that “Algeria is France” and must remain so. Psychological attachment to the territory was undoubtedly bolstered by the discovery of oil in the Sahara in 1952. 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.

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 May 8, 1945, the day the armistice ended 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).

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 killed and buried in secret graves. The parallels to the Russian war in Chechnya are evident: indiscriminate bombing, sweep campaigns (*zachistki*), torture, and extrajudicial murder. A key difference is that the French media, despite heavy government censorship, raised moral concerns about the use of torture, while prominent intellectuals such as Raymond Aron criticized French involvement in Algeria on simple cost-benefit grounds. In today’s Russia, neither the rationalist nor the ethical critique of the war in Chechnya garners much attention. In any case, both in Algeria and in Chechnya, the central governments’ brutal policies alienated potential supporters of compromise solutions and drove them into the arms of the rebels.

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 following months, Charles de Gaulle did not again play a major role in French politics until a crisis in Algeria created an opportunity and a demand. 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.

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, but usually in private conversations rather than in public broadcasts. His first words to the army mutineers when he met them in Algiers in June 1958 were more dignified and sympathetic: "Je vous ai compris!" (I have understood you).

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 nevertheless, de Gaulle was able to achieve an exchange of prisoners in late 1958. In September 1959, the general proposed negotiations with the FLN that could lead to self-determination for Algeria. Putin's government, by contrast, seems permanently stuck on an 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.

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 letting 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 to build schools and medical facilities. The Russian government never took the option of “buying Chechnya,” by providing extensive economic concessions, seriously, although the idea was discussed among Boris Yeltsin’s advisers in the early 1990s. 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. 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—a complete monstrosity—a quasi-state riven by internal conflict, lawlessness, corruption, and kidnapping as well as a danger to its neighbors.

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 information, the writer André Malraux, when the latter forthrightly criticized the widespread use of torture by French paratroopers—criticism that nevertheless failed to halt such use. By comparison, Putin and his government treat any journalists who call attention to similar Russian atrocities, such as Andrei Babitskii or Anna Politkovskaia, as traitors and deny that they occur. He seems reluctant to stand up to his military commanders and insist that their troops adhere to the laws of war. Ultimately, de Gaulle drew on 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, also undoubtedly a strong personality, has significantly fewer reputational resources to draw on, having spent the Cold War as a minor spy in a provincial backwater in East Germany. At the same time, however, he faces nothing like the opposition de Gaulle encountered—no *pieds noirs* “ultras” undermining efforts at negotiation with terrorist attacks, no paratrooper or Foreign Legion generals with armies of fascist thugs at their command. And even if some Russians are concerned that U.S. interference in Georgia will 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 should be able to handle them.

Putin is fortunate not to face the kind of opposition that de Gaulle had to confront, if he should ever seriously seek to negotiate the kind of peaceful end to the Chechen war that might allow some autonomy for the republic. As can be inferred from the Algerian case, such opposition could have come from the Russian community in Chechnya. Two individuals, in particular, deserve credit for eliminating that potential source of opposition. The first is Dzhokhar Dudaev, whose 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 each 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. Anticipating reprisals for such outrages, the European residents of Algeria fled to France, leaving Algeria to its unhappy fate.

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. Although the Chechens traditionally unite when faced with Russian aggression, the years of independence between 1996 and 1999 were fraught with internecine conflict, and the present situation under Russian military occupation has not lead to any coherent Chechen government either. When France granted Algeria independence in September 1962, two factions claimed the right to govern the country, allowing Paris to renege 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 similar justification, Putin has cited Aslan Maskhadov's inability to control his rivals as a reason not to negotiate with the legally elected president of Chechnya. But if Russia cannot stop the violence in Chechnya by unilateral military means, it must find someone with whom to negotiate.

A final comparison between the Algerian War and the present situation in Chechnya points to perhaps the most important barrier to a peaceful resolution of the conflict. The Algerian struggle held the attention of the international community from its earliest stages. At the Bandung Conference nonaligned countries recognized the FLN as early as April 1955. That September, the United Nations (UN) added the Algerian question to 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. By contrast, Chechnya has no international supporters, which is not surprising in the current climate, given Russia's efforts to frame the case solely in terms of terrorism and extremism. Nor does it consistently sustain the attention of the nongovernmental organizations and countries concerned about violations of international humanitarian law and human rights. If Vladimir Putin perceives Russia's international standing or prestige to be at risk from pursuing the war in Chechnya, as Charles de Gaulle did in the case of France and Algeria, he is more likely to try to end it through peaceful compromise. Evidence so far provides little hope. Alternatively, opposition might rise within Russia, based on a moral critique of the army's behavior or a rational analysis of the war's costs. Both factors seem to have played a role in ending France's war in Algeria, but there is not much evidence of their presence in Russia today.