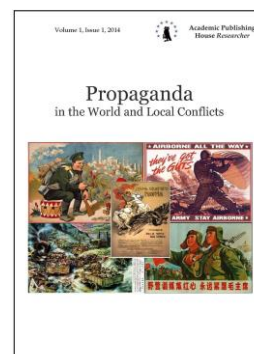


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Published in the Slovak Republic  
 Propaganda in the World and Local Conflicts  
 Has been issued since 2014.  
 E-ISSN 2500-3712  
 2021. 8(1): 32-41

DOI: 10.13187/pwlc.2021.1.32  
[www.ejournal47.com](http://www.ejournal47.com)



## Charles de Gaulle and the Coverage of the Algerian Crisis of 1958–1962 in the Soviet Periodical Press

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### Abstract

This paper looks into the coverage of the Algerian crisis of 1958–1962 in the Soviet periodical press. It analyzes various newspaper and magazine articles to assess the actions of the French government during the Algerian War. The author examines the key stages in the conflict and the reaction of the USSR's major periodicals to the events, i.e. the way the events were actually being presented to the reader by the Soviet press. The work's scholarly novelty lies in that it ventures into a previously unexplored topic – the analysis of the judgment and coverage of events associated with France's foreign policy in the Soviet periodical press during the presidency of Charles de Gaulle.

The author's conclusion is that the Soviet periodical press was functioning at the time as a critical medium for shaping public opinion and a mechanism for manipulating political consciousness, with virtually all events presented in the media interpreted through the prism of Soviet ideology. The Algerian War, one of France's last colonial wars, was judged in major Soviet newspaper publications in a negative manner, with a primary emphasis on wrongful acts by the French government and the desire of Charles de Gaulle to keep the territories in a state of dependency.

**Keywords:** Algeria, Soviet periodical press, Charles de Gaulle, France, Fifth French Republic, war, Évian Accords.

### 1. Introduction

Present-day France is, in large part, living the political legacy left by the founder of the Fifth Republic, Charles de Gaulle. Worthy of special consideration is the president's foreign policy, which was characterized by an aspiration for independence and harmonious relations with France's eastern neighbors. In fact, it is under de Gaulle that a détente was achieved in Soviet-French relations, with the two nations witnessing the development of closer political, economic, and cultural ties between each other. As a consequence, the positive image of the French president, formed in large part by the Soviet periodical press, has stayed in people's consciousness to this day. Yet the origins of the Fifth Republic in France appear to be linked with the Algerian crisis. This long conflict had been a major concern for the entire international community. To this day, the memory of it continues to create difficulties for political dialogue between the People's Democratic Republic of Algeria and the French Republic.

### 2. Materials and methods

In putting this work together, the author drew upon materials from the Soviet newspapers Pravda, Izvestia, and Literaturnaya Gazeta and the Soviet weekly magazine Za Rubezhom

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published between 1958 and 1962. The work's methodological basis was grounded in comparative analysis, a set of general historical principles (historicism, scholarly rigor, objectivism, and systemicity), and content analysis. The use of content analysis helped analyze publication trends and determine the numbers of neutral, positive, and negative articles in the Soviet periodical press across the period under review.

### 3. Discussion and results

The collapse of the French colonial empire is discussed in detail in a book by P.P. Cherkasov, 'The Fate of an Empire: An Essay on France's Colonial Expansion in the Period from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries' (Cherkasov, 1983). A valuable insight into the events of the war in Algeria is provided by a number of scholars, including M.Ts. Arzakanyan (Arzakanyan, 2012), N.N. Molchanov (Molchanov, 1988), and A. Landau (Landau, 2016). Yet, up to now, no study has explored the way the subject was actually covered in the Soviet periodical press at the time.

The postwar period witnessed the collapse of the colonial system around the world. This process had an effect on France as well. To Charles de Gaulle, keeping France's colonial possessions was crucial to reinforcing its status as an international superpower. However, the increasing momentum of the liberation movement was signaling the inevitability of the collapse of colonialism. There, accordingly, was a need to shift away from exploitation and military-administrative methods and toward a more modern concept – the concept of neocolonialism, i.e. switch to the use of sophisticated methods for influencing the territories. Thus, while granting independence to France's overseas territories was an unavoidable measure, it was also a progressive one (Koloskov, 1976: 73).

Charles de Gaulle initiated the transformation of the French Union into the French Community. The fundamentals of the new form of interaction with France's former colonies were detailed in the Constitution of 1958. A territory that approved the Constitution was to be empowered to retain its former status, assume the status of an overseas department, or join the Community as an autonomous state (Goll', 1957: 174). That being said, the metropole was to retain exclusive prerogatives in crucial areas such as foreign policy, defense, finance, and economics. In addition, all top leadership posts in the Community, like its president and top ministers, were to be held by the French.

Despite the fact that the Constitution of the French Community was approved by referendum in most of the Community's member states, there remained a few territories that were demanding full political independence. As there arose a danger of France losing all of its influence in the region, in May 1960 an amendment was made to the Community's Constitution that made it possible for politically independent countries to be part of the Community (Arzakanyan, 2012: 126). In August 1960, independence was gained by virtually all French colonies in tropical Africa via the signing of bilateral "friendship and cooperation" agreements. In addition, France entered with several nations into inequitable "mutual defense support" treaties, whereby France was empowered to keep its troops and interfere militarily in the area – this would make it possible for France to maintain its military-strategic position in tropical Africa (Koloskov, 1976: 75).

However, the Algerian situation remained complicated. In this colony, since as early as November 1954 war had been waged with the local forces of the national-liberation movement, although many territories, including Tunisia and Morocco, had already gained independence. Algeria was highly important to France for a number of reasons. Firstly, over the 130 years of French colonial rule in Algeria, French individuals had come to account for a tenth of its population, with the French having held all the key positions in its socio-political and economic life. Secondly, Algeria was a large colonial market, accounting for over half of France's exports to the Franc Zone. Thirdly, in the mid-1950s they discovered oil and gas deposits in the Sahara. Fourthly, this was a strategic territory in a military sense, as it housed a large number of French military and naval bases, and its good geographical location made Algeria a key base of operations in the Mediterranean (Cherkasov, 1983: 192). In the consciousness of the majority of French people, Algeria was regarded as an indissoluble part of France – in fact, formally the territory was part of the French Republic in the form of three "départements" (Oran, Alger, and Constantine).

The Algerian War was one of the key causes behind the collapse of the Fourth Republic, and it paved the way for Charles de Gaulle's coming to power. The war required enormous expenditure, in terms of both material and human resources, amplified political instability in society, and led to

the isolation of France at the international level. By the time the Fifth Republic was established in France, it had become clear that this was an issue of cardinal importance. Despite the fact that it was France's far-right forces that facilitated Charles de Gaulle's coming to power, he assumed office with a clear-cut objective in view – freeing France from the burdens of a dead-end war, while retaining its influence in the region (Landau, 2016: 352). On October 3, 1958, Charles de Gaulle gave a speech in the Algerian city of Constantine, unveiling plans for sweeping reforms to Algeria's socio-economic sphere aimed at improving the wellbeing of the local population, a measure undertaken to keep Algeria under French control (Podgornova, 2015: 104).

The French government did not confine itself to verbal communication solely, and between February 1959 and the spring of 1960 it undertook a large-scale military operation aimed at destroying the major forces of the National Liberation Front (FLN). Thanks to their effective mop-up tactics, based on the box method, the French managed to inflict considerable damage on members of Algeria's nationalist movement. With France's position reinforced, Charles de Gaulle was now prepared to commence negotiations with representatives of the FLN (Landau, 2016: 488).

On September 16, 1959, de Gaulle gave a speech on Algeria, in which he recognized the Algerian people's right to self-determination (Koloskov, 1976: 66). The president offered the people of Algeria three choices for the future: secession, complete integration, and self-government (Cherkasov, 1983: 205). However, Algeria could enjoy this right only in the event of the success of the policy of peaceful pacification, which envisaged the continuation of hostilities for another several years. This position resulted in a clear-cut divide in public opinion. On the one hand, it was met favorably by the absolute majority of the metropole's population, and, on the other, it brought about a negative attitude toward the president on the part of his former supporters from among the Pieds-Noirs and France's far-right forces, the camp including the country's top brass and certain members of its top leadership.

Over the course of 1960, the French government and the provisional government of the Algerian Republic made a number of attempts to reach an agreement, but to no avail, as the Algerian leadership would make no concessions in the negotiations. At that juncture, Charles de Gaulle resorted to a well-loved medium: a French nationwide referendum on ways to resolve the Algerian issues was slated for early 1961 (Molchanov, 1988: 352). Based on the referendum results, 75.2 % of the French voted for granting Algeria full independence. Consequently, contact between the French government and the provisional government of the Algerian Republic resumed. On April 7, 1961, the two sides started Algeria ceasefire talks at Évian-les-Bains (Podgornova, 2015: 117).

Around the same time, four generals – M. Challe, A. Zeller, R. Salan, and E. Jouhaud – organized a coup in an attempt to depose de Gaulle. The coup ended in failure, subjecting the colonialists to moral isolation. The suppression of the April putsch accelerated the progress of the negotiations, while, on the other hand, France witnessed a rise in the activity of the Secret Army Organization (OAS), a right-wing French dissident paramilitary organization created in the spring of 1961 (Cherkasov, 1983: 203). There were terrorist attempts on the lives of the president, Communist Party activists, and other proponents of ending the war in Algeria.

The final, fourth, round of the talks began in March 1962. Charles de Gaulle wrote the following in this respect: "The object of the negotiations, as far as we were concerned, was to persuade the FLN to accept the provisions which were essential, on the one hand for a satisfactory procedure for Algeria's accession to independence, and on the other hand for an effective association between the new State and France. Failing this, we should be driven to a total breach" (Goll', 1957: 108). The Algerian representatives seeking full independence for their country and striving to prevent the possibility of interference in its affairs on the part of France stretched the negotiations to nine months. Nevertheless, On March 18, 1962, the two sides signed the Évian Accords, which covered the following: cease-fire arrangements; recognition of Algeria's full sovereignty; creation of a close association between the two states in the economic and financial spheres; privileged status for citizens of one side in the territory of the other side; benefits for the French in oil extraction in the Sahara; right to maintain the French army in Algeria for three years; right to maintain the naval base at Mers El Kébir for 15 years and maintain other military bases and airfields in Algeria over a five-year period. The Accords were approved in a referendum held in France on April 8, 1962. In the second referendum, held on July 1, 1962, in Algeria, 99.72 % voted in favor of Algeria becoming an independent state (Cherkasov, 1983: 206).

Thus, by 1962 the huge French colonial empire had virtually disintegrated. The cessation of the war in Algeria facilitated the reorientation of the government's policy to focus on bolstering France's international position and driving its economic development.

An analysis of the Soviet press indicates that the war in Algeria was covered in numerous Soviet publications at the time. The topic owed its popularity in the periodical press to the USSR's wide support for the struggle for independence in colonial countries, so the activity of Charles de Gaulle in this area was, for the most part, covered in a negative light.

Specifically, in May 1958 the Soviet press was all over the Algerian military putsch. It condemned the intentions of General Charles de Gaulle to assume the reins to the Republic as a threat of a military dictatorship being established (Figure 1). The Soviet newspaper Pravda wrote the following on May 16: "As soon as the mutineers in Algeria seized power in the major cities, and they were openly joined by members of the Supreme Command of the French army there, Charles de Gaulle stepped forward as a candidate for the military dictator. The general idea of the collusion plan became clear to everybody" (Bor'ba v zashchitu..., 1958: 3). The ideas of the dangers of a military dictatorship being established and of the active resistance by the French people were disseminated in the Soviet press at the time by way of caricature drawings as well (Figure 2).

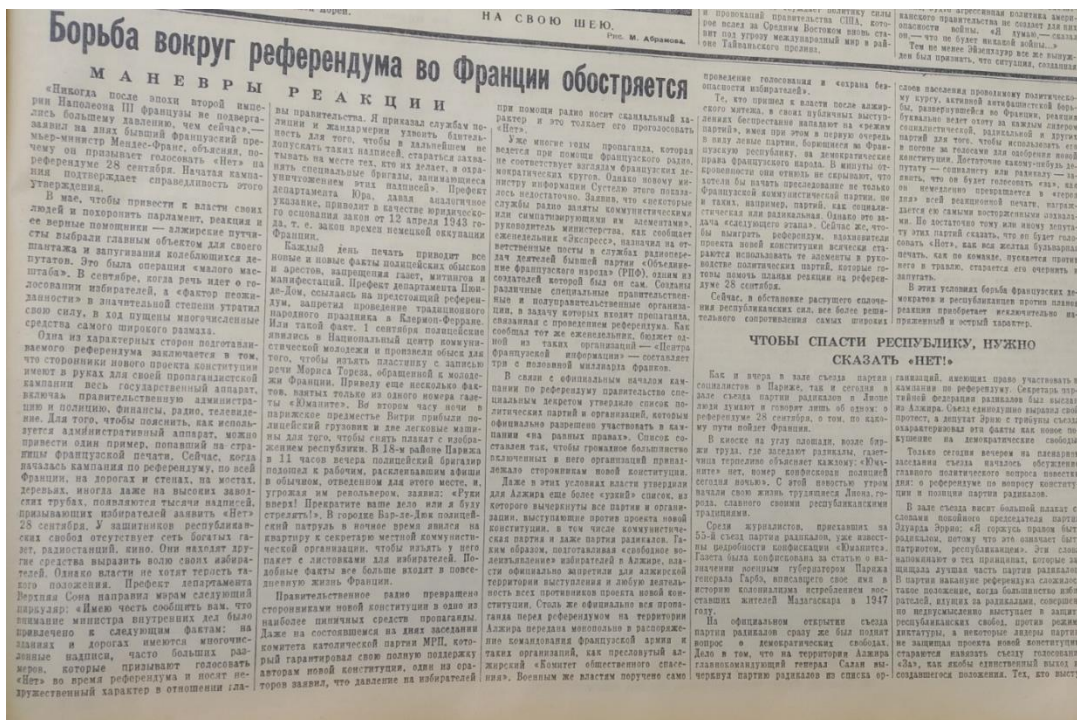


Fig. 1. Pravda. 1958. May 16



Fig. 2. Pravda. 1958. May 18

The condemnation in the press over Charles de Gaulle's policy in Algeria continued throughout 1958. It had to do with the creation of the "public safety committees", which, as suggested by Jacques Duclos, Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of France, were intended to "create a mass deGaullist movement" and, "similar to Mussolini's fascist organizations, would seek to deploy Charles de Gaulle's agents in localities and in enterprises" (K novomu pod"emu..., 1958: 3).

A subject of particular interest in the Soviet press was the referendum slated for September 28, 1958. In his article 'Thoughts of France', I.G. Ehrenburg describes the events as follows: "The Algerian referendum was being arranged as a military operation rather than a voting activity. While Le Monde staff member Pierre-Henri Simon is supportive of General Charles de Gaulle, he is pretty outspoken about what he really thinks: "When I learn from a General Staff report that agitating for the 'yes' vote has been ordered to be done by the brass band of the 20<sup>th</sup> Division, dismay takes over me". Among those engaged in the agitation activities are not only trumpet-players but executioners as well" (Erenburg, 1958: 2).

In September 1959, Charles de Gaulle made a public statement about the need to grant Algeria independence. This was met in the Soviet press with positive feedback. However, since Charles de Gaulle's words had virtually no effect on the situation in Algeria, all press material on the subject remained negative.

In that climate, the mutiny of French ultra-colonists on January 24, 1960 was regarded in the press as an attempt to bring direct pressure to bear on the government to urge it to undertake more resolute action in the Algerian War and retract the statement of September 16, 1959 (Efimov, 1960: 4). The Soviet periodical press accentuated that the mutiny was perpetrated by the same forces that

did it on May 13, 1958, when Charles de Gaulle came to power. The January articles on the event provide numerous testimonies to inaction on the part of the supreme military leadership in Algeria, which let the far-right forces get stronger (Prigozhin, 1960: 4). Pravda stated the following on this on January 28, 1960: “With overt and tacit approval by many generals and regular officers, hundreds of fascists have been arming themselves unhindered”, strengthening their organization, and growing increasingly impudent. Nothing has been done to stop them. In fact, far-right extremist de Sérigny stated yesterday that Delouvrier had assured him the army would not shoot...” (Pokonchit' s fashistskim..., 1960: 3).

Charles de Gaulle's address delivered on January 30, 1960, in which he confirmed the commitment to self-determination for the Algerian people and condemned the actions of the mutineers, was generally met with positive reaction in the press, which, however, *did* note that the president had not spoken of any specific measures to be undertaken against the mutineers and those who supported them (Efimov, 1960a: 3).

Each of the publications under analysis covered in an almost entirely similar manner the events associated with France's policy in Algeria. Most of Charles de Gaulle's actions, including those aimed at freeing Algeria from the status of a colony, were judged negatively, as they were viewed as underpinned by covert venal motives. For instance, the articles in Literaturnaya Gazeta (Molchanov, 1960: 4) and Pravda (Ratiani, 1960: 3) discussing Charles de Gaulle's statement about the holding of a referendum on granting Algeria the right to self-determination used similar arguments to explain to the reader the president's real intentions – i.e., to ensure by all means that France retained control of Algeria via a military solution to the problem. To this end, Charles de Gaulle rejected political talks with representatives of the provisional government of the Algerian Republic, insisting on their capitulation, while also doing his best to thwart the discussion of the issue by the UN. “In 1958, to prevent the discussion of France's actions by the UN, an uproar was raised over the so-called “Constantine Plan”, a subject of much demagoguery. In 1959, on the eve of a General Assembly session, to this end they used the recognition of Algeria's right to self-determination... This time... we are talking about an attempt to replicate the famed Bao Dai experiment”, wrote N.N. Molchanov. On a side note, Bao Dai was a puppet emperor whom the French leadership opposed to the government of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam; appointing Bao Dai resulted in the prolongation of the Indo-China War. G.M. Ratiani states the following in his article: “The French government is intending to carry out a “baodaization” in Algeria. Algeria's “reorganized leadership” will be composed of members of the groups of the local Muslim population that collaborate with the French administration”. An article of a similar nature appeared in the weekly magazine Za Rubezhom (Zykov, 1960: 10). S.P. Zykov, likewise, wrote about the “Charles de Gaulle plan”, which envisaged the creation of the Algerian Republic, although only in the distant future. This would require creating “Algerian Algeria” first as a state that would be economically and politically subordinate to the French government. This is what the then-upcoming referendum was aimed at – leaving the voters no leg to stand upon, as there were as many as two proposed referendum questions: whether or not the voters approve the granting to Algeria of the right to self-determination and whether or not they approve the plan for organizing a new system of governance in Algeria.

This kind of sentiment in the Soviet press persisted into the period 1960-1961. Every week there came out articles of a similar nature, like ‘Bloody Sunday in Algeria’ (Ratiani, 1960a: 4), ‘Algeria on Fire’ (Alzhir v ogne, 1960: 4), and ‘Blood of Algeria’ (Stil', 1960: 3), relating the story of how during Charles de Gaulle trip to Algeria fire was opened on a group of Muslim Algerian demonstrators who were demanding talks with the provisional government. Thus, it was argued in the Soviet press that the referendum was not popular among the population, as it did nothing to resolve the issues of the war. In this regard, the results of the referendum, in which the affirmative answer was given by 55.89 % of the voters, were interpreted in Literaturnaya Gazeta from a standpoint of “the French people's great aspiration for peace”, while it was stated that “the 1961 referendum caused very serious damage to Charles de Gaulle's prestige” (Uroki referendum, 1961: 1).

In the spring of 1961, the French government voiced its willingness to hold official talks with the provisional government of the Algerian Republic. The talks were slated for April 7, 1961, to be held at Évian-les-Bains, a spa town in France (Mir i svobodu..., 1961: 3). Having said that, the Soviet periodical press noted that the Algerian War was far from being over, as right on the event's eve the world witnessed another mutiny by the Ultras, the third one overall.

In this regard, the events that took place between April and May 1961 were judged negatively. Many of the articles that covered the new mutiny in Algeria argued that the conspiring generals would not have been able to set objectives such as “marching on France” or altering the existing system of governing the country without the backing of influential political and economic circles (Trudnye dni..., 1961: 5). In addition, many of the sources spoke of a link between the mutineers and the US and argued that NATO was trying to make the Algerian War continue: “... military spending on Algeria is regarded as a part of France’s contribution to “the common defense”. This fact... indicates the seriousness of NATO’s responsibility with regard to the war in Algeria” (Drug kolonizatorov..., 1961: 3).



Fig. 3. Izvestia. 1961. May 23

In spite of the April events, the French-Algerian talks began on May 20, 1961. The two sides were unable to reach an agreement, with the talks hitting a dead end and getting interrupted. The Soviet periodical press was floating the idea that the French “plan to decolonize Algeria” and

the actions of the very Charles de Gaulle, with his belief of the Sahara being a French territory, were “sabotaging peace” (Stil', 1961: 4). An Izvestia correspondent wrote directly that “... it looks like to Charles de Gaulle the sole purpose behind the meeting at Évian-les-Bains is to prove to public opinion the impossibility of negotiating with the mutineers” (Zykov, 1961: 2). Figure 3 represents a caricature drawing of the maneuvers of the French side focused on the proposition of disadvantageous terms governing Algeria’s self-determination. France’s take-it-or-leave-it approach was condemned by the Pravda newspaper too: “Essentially, both take-it-or-leave-it “choices” meant the continuation of the war, as none of them opened the way to freedom and independence for a united Algeria, which the Algerian people have fought for over a seven-year period” (Ratiani, 1961: 5).



Fig. 4. Pravda. 1962. May 18

The entire following year, the general tone of sentiment in the Soviet press regarding France’s Algerian policy remained negative – up until the final stage of the French-Algerian talks. Starting in March 1962, the Soviet media adopted a more “liberal” attitude toward Charles de Gaulle’s policy in Algeria. Describing the start of the talks at Évian-les-Bains, which opened on March 7,



1962, a staff writer at *Za Rubezhom* argued that “the French side had to assume a more realistic stance” and that peace was “becoming more visible” (Evian..., 1962: 7-8). Nevertheless, most of the articles were still focused on the incessant terrorist activity of the OAS and the devil-may-care policy of the French government (Ratiani, 1962: 3). To reinforce the image of a French government linked with the nationalist organization, wide use was also made of caricature drawings (Figure 4). An article published in *Izvestiya* on February 2, 1962, stated the following on the subject: ““The birthmark” of today’s fascism in France is that it has been fed by the colonial war in Algeria, which is being waged by the French monopolies standing behind the personal power regime” (Sedykh, 1962: 4).

The ceasefire in Algeria and the signing of the Évian Accords on March 19, 1962, between the provisional government of the Algerian Republic and the French were met in the Soviet periodical press with mass publications supporting the Algerian people and approving the cessation of the long colonial war. However, in respect of the French side, the Soviet press remained true to its former position. An article published in *Literaturnaya Gazeta* on March 24, 1962, wrote the following in this respect: “This step by France exemplifies a peace that can be best illustrated using the following words of La Rochefoucauld: “Reconciliation with our enemies is simply a desire to better our condition, a weariness of war, or the fear of some unlucky thing occurring”” (Molchanov, 1962: 4).

It is also worth noting that the Soviet periodical press persistently drew a line between the will of the French people and the actions of France’s ruling circles. For instance, an article in *Za Rubezhom* covering the April 8 referendum on approving the Évian Accords argued that the accords “were the result of a hard struggle of the people for peace”. It stated the following: “The masses of voters rightly regarding the cessation of the war as their victory answered ‘yes’ in the referendum. Yet that does not necessarily mean their overall approval of the policy of the government and President Charles de Gaulle” (Frantsuzy golosuyut..., 1962: 2).

#### 4. Conclusion

The treatment by the Soviet periodical press of France’s policy toward the Algerian Republic in the period 1958–1962 was overall negative. The colonial war, terrorist attacks and insurrections by the far-right OAS, and maneuvers by the French leadership during the talks at Évian-les-Bains are among the key topics covered in the press at the time. Algeria being an important territory for France, the French leadership was seeking to bolster its political, military-strategic, and economic influence in the region after its gaining independence too. However, this kind of policy was never backed by the USSR, with the Soviet periodical press tending to overall criticize the actions of the French government.

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