

OAS – Anatomy of a Terror Organisation

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The Organisation Armée Secrète (Secret Army Organisation, OAS) was a prominent French terrorist organisation that operated during the 1960s. The organisation's establishment is inextricably linked to the Algerian War. A significant proportion of the French military elite and the French population resident in Algeria opposed the country becoming an independent state. Following the protracted nature of the conflict, the newly elected French President, Charles de Gaulle, resolved to conclude the War in Algeria. This, of course, meant that Algeria would no longer be a French colony. Nevertheless, the decision was not universally accepted. In particular, the French settlers in Algeria and members of the army and the Foreign Legion felt that some action was necessary to maintain Algeria's status as a French territory. These forces ultimately gave rise to the Organisation de l'Armée Secrète (OAS).

The objective of this study is to examine the factors, both positive and negative, that contributed to the formation of the OAS. Furthermore, this study aims to identify the reasons behind the organisation's lack of success. Finally, the fate of the OAS leaders following the fall of de Gaulle will be discussed.

The study is mainly based on a review and analysis of the literature. It should be noted that, with the passage of time, an increasing number of sources and documents have become available, including memoirs. At the same time, it is a fact that a considerable amount of information has already been published in the press or news reports.

This study examines the history of the OAS in the context of social change and its impact on politics. The study emphasises the significance of counterintelligence services and the practice of counterintelligence in general.

It demonstrates that in the absence of robust social support for an organisation or an idea, using terror to alter societal opinion is not a viable strategy. The French population disagreed with its stated objectives and did not support the OAS. Additionally, the OAS leadership could not discern that a considerable

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proportion of the French military supported President de Gaulle, with no inclination to depose or assassinate him.

Keywords: French, Algeria, terrorism, far-right movement, anti-communism, counterintelligence, coup d'état

Background

France emerged from the Second World War as a dominant global power. Moreover, France appeared to have regained its former strength, at least in the eyes of many observers. One indication of this was that France was elected to become a permanent United Nations Security Council member. While these accomplishments were largely contingent upon the backing of the United States and the United Kingdom, they were nevertheless significant. Evidently, the world preceding the War would diverge significantly from the post-war global order. It was similarly evident that the United States of America and the Soviet Union, as the two dominant global powers, would significantly influence the course of world events. However, a significant proportion of the French elite believed that France's international influence and status would remain unaltered.

The subsequent Republic IV (1947–1959) was characterised by significant political instability. Without delving into the minutiae of French domestic politics, it is noteworthy that the country experienced 21 prime ministers over this 12-year period. In other words, the average tenure of a prime minister was less than six months.²

Nevertheless, it became evident that the French expectations had not been met. Concurrently, the independence movement in the French colonies was gaining momentum. The political demands in Asia soon led to armed conflict, manifesting as the First Indochina War (French–Indochina War), which commenced in September 1945 and continued until 1954. The protracted and ultimately unsuccessful war exacted a significant financial toll on the French state, in addition to causing considerable damage to its international prestige. It became increasingly evident that France was unable to sustain its colonial empire, not only in Asia but also in Africa. The 1950s witnessed the emergence and consolidation of independence movements in numerous locations. France faced mounting challenges to its authority in Morocco, Tunisia, and Algeria. A review of the historical record reveals that the declining European power relinquished its control over Morocco and Tunisia with relative ease. However, the situation in Algeria was markedly different. What, then, were the reasons for this discrepancy? The answer is straightforward. Algeria was the inaugural colony of the French colonial empire, colloquially referred to as the “second French colonial empire”. Therefore, the discussion is not merely an emotional attachment to Algeria; it also encompasses the millions of French colonists (and their descendants) who resided in Algeria. Such individuals were designated as “pied-noirs”.³

² PICKLES 1976: 151–164; CLAYTON 1994: 28–40.

³ CLAYTON 1994: 147–167; BUISSON 2009.

The War commenced on 1 November 1954, when the National Liberation Front (FLN) initiated an attack on civilian and military targets throughout Algeria. Of the approximately 70 targets attacked, 10 individuals were killed by Algerian guerrillas/freedom fighters. The day has become a significant date in Franco–Algerian history, known as “Toussaint Rouge” or “Red All Saints’ Day”. On the same day, Mohamed Aïchaoui made a public appeal from Cairo for Algerian Muslims to join the struggle against the French. The French government responded with alacrity to this development. François Mitterrand, Minister of the Interior deployed two companies of the *Compagnies Républicaines de Sécurité* to Algeria. Subsequently, a further paratrooper unit was deployed to Algeria. On 12 November 1954, the French Prime Minister, Pierre Mendes France delivered a speech to the National Assembly, declaring that the attacks would not be tolerated and that the Algerian departments were part of the French Republic. “They have long been part of the French nation and are irrevocably French.”⁴ However, the conflict commenced in 1954 and resulted in several casualties. French troops were unrelenting in their efforts to subdue the Algerian Resistance, at times resorting to tactics that were perceived as terroristic. The memory of these methods continued to have a detrimental impact on relations between the two countries in the 1980s and 1990s.

By 1954–55, it was evident that this war would be characterised by significant bloodshed and results in considerable financial expenditure. Furthermore, the conflict was indirectly linked to the Algerian War.

The year 1956 presented a novel challenge to French policy. On 26 July 1956, Egyptian President Nasser nationalised the Suez Canal. Although the canal belonged to the interests of the British, Nasser’s growing popularity in the Arab world was already a cause for concern among French leaders. It seems plausible to suggest that he may have directly supported the Algerian FLN, although it is more likely that he did so indirectly. The aim of this article is not to provide a detailed account of the historical and contextual background of the 1956 Suez Crisis. However, the event was related to the Franco–Algerian War insofar as the U.S. supported it for various reasons.

Nevertheless, it was not in support of the Franco–British–Israeli alliance. Indeed, Saudi Arabia’s announcement of an oil embargo against the United Kingdom and France placed significant pressure on the two countries. It represented a further challenge to the British and French superpower status. Following the events of 1956, relations between Paris and Washington, which had previously been characterised by a degree of contention, underwent a prolonged period of deterioration.⁵

On 24 May 1958, French paratroopers landed in Corsica from Algeria and proceeded to capture the French island in a bloodless operation codenamed “Operation Corse”. Subsequently, preparations were made in Algeria for an operation codenamed “The Resurrection”. This operation aimed to capture Paris and overthrow the French government with the assistance of paratroopers and armoured units. Operation Rising was to be carried out in the event of one of three contingencies:

⁴ GULLEY 2018: 28.

⁵ CLAYTON 1994: 125–133.

if the parliament did not approve General de Gaulle as leader of France if General de Gaulle requested military assistance to seize power, or if it appeared that the French Communist Party was trying to seize power in France⁶

Nevertheless, General de Gaulle was reinstated to power on 29 May, rendering the deployment of military forces unnecessary. He established the fundamental principles of the Fifth Republic, which was subsequently approved by referendum. De Gaulle became the inaugural President of the Fifth Republic. Due to the new constitution, his powers were considerably more extensive than those of his predecessors. However, the most significant challenge for the nascent government was the Algerian conflict, which had implications for both domestic and foreign policy.⁷

Concurrently, the Suez War had a profound effect on French domestic politics. However, the majority of French army officers perceived that they had once again been “betrayed” by the politicians and diplomats in Paris. They believed they were on the verge of victory once more, as had been in Vietnam in 1954, where they had also been betrayed. Consequently, it was determined that the Algerian conflict must be pursued with even greater resolve. Concurrently, the general staff of the French army had been finally depoliticised, and it was now deemed necessary and practical to assume control of the political leadership. In conclusion, the Suez Crisis fostered military disillusionment with the Fourth Republic, ultimately leading to its collapse.⁸

A series of events began to unfold in the Spring and Summer of 1958. On 13 May, elements of the right-wing assumed control of the government in Algiers and called for the formation of a government of public security under the leadership of General de Gaulle. Massu assumed the role of President of the Public Security Committee and emerged as a prominent figure in the rebellion. General Salan assumed control of the Committee of Public Security, which had been established to overthrow civilian rule. He proceeded to advance the junta’s demands that French President René Coty appoint de Gaulle as head of a government of national union, thereby conferring upon him exceptional powers to “prevent desertion”. The situation in Algeria was as follows: Salan declared on the radio that the army had “temporarily assumed responsibility for the fate of French Algeria”.

However, General de Gaulle could return to power on 29 May without the necessity for military intervention. He established the fundamental tenets of the Fifth Republic, which was subsequently ratified by popular referendum. Consequently, De Gaulle became the inaugural President of the Fifth Republic. Moreover, the new constitution bestowed upon him a degree of authority considerably more extensive than that held by his predecessors. However, the most significant challenge for the newly formed government was the ongoing conflict in Algeria, which had domestic and foreign policy implications.

It was a reasonable assumption that the French military elite would support de Gaulle. He was a prominent figure in the Resistance, a staunch patriot, and a widely

⁶ JACKSON 2018: 70–79; PICKLES 1976.

⁷ GALULA 2006: 233–240; FAIVRE 2006.

⁸ CLAYTON 1994: 138, 206; PICKLES 1976.

revered national icon. Additionally, it appeared logical for the French military elite that de Gaulle would endorse the Algerian conflict, given his espousal of the “*Algérie française*” doctrine. However, de Gaulle was a cautious politician. He attempted to ascertain the actual circumstances prevailing in Algeria before arriving at a decision. In 1959, the President proposed that Algeria should have the right to determine its future. Many met this decision with surprise, yet a similar number of individuals also perceived it as a betrayal. Furthermore, despite the failure of the so-called “pied-noir rebellion” of 1960, it was evident that a significant proportion of the population did not endorse de Gaulle’s Algerian policy.⁹

A path to the establishment of the organisation of OAS

In a referendum on Algerian independence held on 8 January 1961, nearly 75% of mainland France and Algeria voters favoured Algerian independence. Subsequently, clandestine discussions commenced between the French government, led by Michel Debré, and the Provisional Government of the Republic of Algeria (GPRA). However, following seven years of conflict, several high-ranking officers in the French military believed they were on the cusp of military victory. They considered the cessation of hostilities to be a betrayal of their oaths of allegiance. Consequently, if General de Gaulle were to endorse Algerian independence, they would view him as a traitor and seek to oppose him.¹⁰

It is pertinent to mention that the Algerian judicial police and intelligence services have conveyed comprehensive information to the Gaullist authorities indicating that certain military leaders and soldiers are discontented with the President’s policies and, consequently, consider it justifiable to take action against him. In the preceding year, the French secret services had already indicated that Colonel Antoine Argoud had approached Michel Debré to request a policy change, stating that the government would be overthrown if this were not granted. In 1960, tensions continued to mount, with the possibility of a coup d’état being widely discussed among the military. It became evident that there were proponents of a coup not only in Algeria but also on the mainland, as evidenced by the involvement of the Military School, Saint-Cyr.

On the day before the coup, Louis Joxe and Pierre Messmer, the Algerian Ministers of the Interior and the Armed Forces, were again informed of the possibility of a coup d’état. It is also worth noting that certain security measures had already been taken to ensure the safety of General de Gaulle.

The coup d’état finally took place on 21 April 1961 and lasted about five days, until 26 April. The coup was known by several names, including the Putsch d’Alger/Coup d’État d’Alger/Putsch des généraux. Four five-star generals (Général d’Armée) were identified as the main instigators of the coup: Maurice Challe, Edmond Jouhaud, Raoul Salan and André Zeller. On the other hand, General Jacques Massu refused to take part in the coup, although he was offered the role of leader. It should be noted, however, that other

⁹ SHEPARD 2006; JACKSON 2018.

¹⁰ ABRAMOVICI 2011: 77–88; FAIVRE 2006; MICHELETTI 2002.

generals were also involved in the coup, namely Paul Gardy and Jacques Faure. Thus, there were several generals involved. Three of the four leading putschist generals were stationed in Algeria during the Algiers coup of 13 May 1958, which eventually brought General de Gaulle to power.¹¹

The objective of the putschists was straightforward: to maintain Algeria as a French colony at all costs. In order to achieve this, it was necessary to remove the French President. The generals who orchestrated the coup, however, erred in their calculations. The coup was unsuccessful, with neither the entire army nor a significant proportion of the population supporting the plotters. Those involved in the coup were duly tried and convicted.

Nevertheless, it was evident that the OAS and its supporters would not cease their efforts. The OAS could rely on the *pied-noirs*, who in turn could rely on the OAS. By the spring of 1962, it was evident that the prospect of Algeria becoming an independent state within a few months was highly unlikely. From this perspective, the OAS's decision to launch an insurrection on 19 March 1962, despite its relatively limited scope, can be seen as a desperate measure.¹²

The OAS leadership resolved to engage in combat within the Bab El Oued citadel. It is worth mentioning that European workers previously inhabited the area of Bab El Oued.

Primarily, the French gendarmerie and army, in conjunction with the so-called OAS Commando Delta, fought the Battle of Bab El Oued. The battle resulted in the deaths of 15 French soldiers and 20 OAS members, with approximately 150 individuals sustaining injuries. The French authorities were unwavering and took action against local OAS members and commanders. On 25 March 1962, General Edmond Jouhaud (commander of the OAS branch in Oran) was apprehended at the Hôtel Panoramic d'Oran, along with his adjutant, Commander Julien Camelin.¹³

On 3 June 1962, France recognised Algeria's independence, and Algeria itself declared it on 5 July. The Algerian War thus ended *de facto* and *de jure*. The OAS lived on, but now it had to formulate a new strategy and objectives.

However, let us face it: the OAS has achieved almost no tangible success. The general coup d'état associated with the OAS has failed, and the open revolt has produced no results. Nor can we hide the fact that the word 'secret' was used in the name of the organisation, but it was no secret. Nothing shows this better than the fact that the French security services were aware of the conspiracies within the army from the very beginning and kept an eye on them. Perhaps it is safe to say that the Service de Documentation Extérieure et de Contre-espionnage (SDECE) was infiltrated into the OAS from the beginning.¹⁴

¹¹ ABRAMOVICI 2011: 90–92; DURANTON-CRABOL 2012: 19.

¹² DURANTON-CRABOL 2012: 232.

¹³ BUISSON 2009; CLAYTON 1994.

¹⁴ RUSCIO 2015.

OAS – the organisation

The OAS is estimated to have some 1,000–1,500 active members, including soldiers, civilians, women, young and old. In other words, it was a socially heterogeneous organisation.

It could be noted, however, that among the military, it was mainly elite soldiers such as legionnaires or paratroopers who joined the OAS, but very few sailors, for example. The state of mind of the soldiers who joined the movement is illustrated by the testimony of Commander Hélié Denoix de Saint Marc at his trial, who said that it was a question of preserving French sovereignty, the fight against communism and the desire to ensure that the Algerian War was not unnecessary.¹⁵

The civilians were mainly employees, middle managers, merchants and industrialists, with few executives or professionals. Women joined the organisation mainly to deliver mail and money.

Concerning the political sensibilities of OAS members, Guy Pervillé distinguishes three main currents: a neo-fascist current inspired by the Young Nation, a traditionalist current close to the Poujadist movement or the weekly *Rivarol*, but sometimes also to Catholic traditionalism, and finally, a nationalist current. However, it would be simplistic to think of the OAS as simply an extreme right-wing organisation. Many of its members of a certain age were former resistance fighters. In other words, the organisation was politically heterogeneous.

As we have noted, the OAS was a heterogeneous organisation. Perhaps a good example of this is the relationship between the OAS, some of whose members held anti-Semitic views, and local Jewry. The FLN's attacks also targeted synagogues and rabbis: in January 1962, the FLN carried out attacks in the Jewish quarter of Mostaganem. For example, in May, a grenade was thrown at a market in the Jewish quarter of Constantine.¹⁶

Throughout this period, the Jewish community generally remained neutral. The community organisations showed extreme moderation and refused to take a political stand; nevertheless, some of their members participated in the OAS. The Jews who joined organised a Jewish branch of the OAS, the Organisation of the Jewish Secret Army (OASJ), despite the fact that more than one leader or group of the parent organisation was explicitly opposed to it.

The OAS was spearheaded by a group of prominent figures, collectively known as the *Chef principaux*, comprising General Raoul Salan, General Edmond Jouhaud, Colonel Yves Godard, Jean-Jacques Susini and Doctor Jean-Claude Perez. It is evident that the leadership was comprised of a nucleus of seasoned military personnel. As might be expected, the structure of the OAS was based on a military model. It is evident that the OAS was structured on a territorial basis, which was a logical consequence of its formation. Consequently, the following branches were established:

The OAS was structured into three main branches, each comprising several sections. The French Algerian branch, for instance, included the following sections: Organisation

¹⁵ BUISSON 2009.

¹⁶ DURANTON-CRABOL 2012: 94–96.

des Masses (Mass Organization), Action Psychologique Propagande (Psychological Warfare & Propaganda), and Organisation, Intelligence & Planning.

The Metropolitan (French) and Spanish branches were structured similarly.¹⁷

OAS in action

If we look at the OAS in practice, between May 1961 and May 1963, the OAS/CNR was responsible for 12,000 bomb explosions, 2,000 attacks and 1,400 deaths, mainly in Algeria and France. It is clear that the organisation carried out many more operations in Algeria. However, it should also be noted that the French special services also carried out active operations against the OAS. This was the case when, on 25 February 1963, the French services captured and kidnapped Colonel Antoine Argoud in Munich who had already participated in the so-called “coup d’état of the generals”.¹⁸

It was much more difficult for the OAS to gain support in France. It is not only a question of financial support but also of weapons, information or, for example, hiding places.

One of the most notable actions undertaken by the OAS was the attempted assassination of President de Gaulle on 22 August 1962. The operation was codenamed “Charlotte Corday” within the OAS, while it is known colloquially as the Petit Clamart assassination attempt. Lieutenant-Colonel Jean Bastien-Thiry was the organiser of the operation, and he was not the first to organise an assassination attempt against the General. He had previously organised the assassination attempt of 8 September 1961, which was ultimately foiled by the SDECE.¹⁹

In the Petit Clamart endeavour, Bastien-Thiry’s role was not merely that of an organiser; he was also an active participant. He observed the road and signalled the arrival of the President’s vehicle by waving a newspaper. In total, the execution team, comprising more than ten individuals, discharged more than 180 rounds at the presidential vehicle yet failed to strike de Gaulle. Three members of the assassination team were of Hungarian nationality: Lajos Marton, Gyula Sári and László Varga.²⁰ Gyula Sári was a member of the 2nd Parachute Regiment of the Foreign Legion. At the same time, Marton had previously served as a professional officer in the Hungarian People’s Army before emigrating to France in 1956. All those involved in the assassination attempt were apprehended and subsequently convicted. It is noteworthy that the special military tribunal (Cour militaire de justice), which handed down the verdict, was established by decree of President de Gaulle with the judges who presided over each case being appointed by the President. Bastien-Thiry, the principal organiser was sentenced to death. It is noteworthy that Bastien-Thiry’s father, Lieutenant-Colonel Pierre Marie Bastien-Thiry was a staunch supporter of De Gaulle, as was his son. The stern father did not forgive his son for his attempt on de Gaulle’s life and wrote to the President requesting clemency. However, the letter was not received

¹⁷ DÉROULÈDE 1997; PÉREZ 2006; QUIVY 2003.

¹⁸ DEMOUGIN 2005; QUIVY 2003.

¹⁹ DÉROULÈDE 1997; PÉREZ 2006.

²⁰ DELARUE 1981.

until the morning of Monday, 11 March 1963, by which time the sentence had already been carried out. Lajos Marton was also sentenced to death but was not executed and was later pardoned.²¹

Nevertheless, the OAS appeared to have ceased to function effectively. A significant number of its supporters were compelled to leave France, and the OAS itself commenced an internal search for traitors. To illustrate, an OAS member assassinated banker Henri Lafond, who had provided financial support to the organisation but declined to testify in the trial of its organiser, Bastien-Thiry.²²

Afterlife

It is legitimate to ask why the OAS did not survive. Why can't we read about the '60s or '70s? There are, of course, several answers. One is that the long and expensive wars exhausted France. And it is worth noting that the student revolts of '68 foreshadowed a very different kind of France from the one the OAS leaders believed in. The second reason may be that the SDECE worked so effectively against the OAS that it suffered so many losses that it was essentially unable to carry out any operations after 1965. A third reason is that the main target, President de Gaulle failed and finally resigned from the presidency in 1969. However, while de Gaulle was still President, a law was passed whereby de Gaulle pardoned the imprisoned members of the OAS in a law of July 1968.²³

The putschist generals who were still alive in November 1982 were reintegrated into the army by another amnesty law. Consequently, Raoul Salan, Edmond Jouhaud and six other generals were permitted to rejoin the French army. This raises the question of whether the OAS file was then closed or whether the OAS is now regarded as a part of French history. This may be the case, given that the leaders of the OAS are no longer alive, just as President de Gaulle died in 1970. Furthermore, Algeria's independence is no longer questioned.

Nevertheless, on social media, specifically on Facebook, there is a distinct page entitled "OAS Vaincra" (OAS Will Win): <https://www.facebook.com/OASVAINCRA/about/>. The page has been active since 2015, according to the available data. The reasons for its establishment and the functions it performs remain unclear. It may have been created to satisfy various needs, including nostalgia, commemoration, or protest. However, it is challenging to determine the precise motivations behind its creation.

Given these considerations, it is worth questioning whether history has reached a definitive conclusion.

²¹ DELARUE 1981.

²² DURANTON-CRABOL 2012.

²³ JACKSON 2018.

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