In 1958 the French Army did something which might have seemed unthinkable in a modern Western democracy: It rose up and changed the government in Paris. A similar mutiny followed three years later, but this time it was crushed—and this failure led to the rise of a new, secret army.

Insurgency in Algeria

An insurgency began in Algeria on 1 November 1954 with a series of attacks against French and pied noir ("black foot," a term for Algerian-born persons of European ancestry) colonial targets. These attacks were carried out by guerrilla groups belonging to the National Liberation Front (Front de Libération Nationale, FLN).

The FLN had been created by Muslim nationalists who wanted independence for the colony. It followed a similar pattern of insurgent organization and strategy for the Cold War. The FLN consisted of a political organization which operated both an underground infrastructure and parallel regular and irregular units for military operations. The FLN employed a full range of tactics—propaganda, economic strikes, terrorism, guerrilla warfare, and attempts at conventional warfare. The goal was to attrit French strength and morale, forcing Paris to grant independence.

In 1954, the French Army was recovering from the catastrophic defeat in the colonial war in Indochina. It entered this new conflict in Algeria determined to win. This reflected a new type of military leadership. Officers who had served time in Viet Minh prison camps learned lessons from the Viet Minh fighting tactics and the need for a more flexible approach to counterinsurgency.
France ruled Algeria from 1830, when its troops landed at Sidi Ferruch, until 1962, when the FLN swept in from the south. The war was a colonial conflict but the latest in a long line of radical revolutions that were sweeping the world since Mao Tse-tung and Ho Chi Minh—and bore little relation to the situation in Algeria. The FLN was an umbrella organization that brought under control various nationalist movements whose goal was to end French rule in Algeria. While gaining support from the communist world, the FLN was not planning to build a communist state. From the standpoint of French military theorists, the war in Algeria was not just a colonial conflict but the latest in a long line of radical revolutions that were sweeping the world since Mao's victory in the Chinese Civil War. They viewed the new war as Algeria (French Algeria) as a last-ditch stand against communism. Consequently, any negotiations with the FLN were understood as a sign of weakness. Total victory was the only option.

Since the military was believed to be a bastion of Western civilization in France, it took on the role of political watchdog. It wanted to maintain the status quo, buying time until the native Algerian population would be re-educated to Western standards.

The French Army became a highly politicized force, standing firm against Algerian insurgents even if that entailed opposing civil-ian authorities in Paris. As the war progressed, those attitudes would harden—and turn into a military rebellion against what was considered to be a sellout on the home front.

Military Victory and Political Disaster

The first wave of FLN attacks drew a ruthless military response from the French. By February 1955, many nationalist leaders were dead or in prison and their organization in tatters. The FLN survived as recruits flocked to join the movement. When Paris tried to integrate the native and European population at the local level, insurgents deliberately massacred 123 pied noirs around the town of Philippeville (now Skikda) on 20 August 1955. This prompted the French to abandon political reforms. The army ruthlessly restored order in Philippeville, where vigilante groups of pied noirs retaliated with a shocking ferocity.

French military victories continued to grow in the following years, but they alone could not restore the political situation. The FLN reformed their organization and replaced moderate leaders with a new generation of extremists. Morocco and Tunisia were granted independence by France in March 1956, who promptly opened up sanctuary areas for the FLN. This move forced the French military to divert troops away from internal security toward frontier protection.

In November 1956, the French military, including units based in Algeria, participated in Operation Musketeer, a joint airborne-amphibious operation alongside the British and Israelis. Musketeer's objective was to seize the Suez Canal, recently nationalized by Egyptian President Gamel Abdul Nasser. Nasser was a major supporter of the FLN, and Paris saw the invasion as a way to overthrow his government and undercut the insurgents in Algeria. Musketeer started out well. Allied air raids destroyed much of the Egyptian Air Force, while the Israeli Army swept across the Sinai. On 5 November, Anglo-French forces captured Port Said and seemed to be securing the canal. The invasion led to an international uproar which pitted Moscow, Washington, and the United Nations against Britain, France, and Israel. London and Paris were pressured into withdrawing their expeditionary forces. To many in the French military, this was another betrayal by the home government.
The French Military in Algeria

In the 1950s, Algeria was officially France’s 10th Military Region and a base for 75,000 troops. It was organized into three corps commands—Algeria, Constantine, and Oran—each that maintained three divisions on average. Ground forces consisted of two types of units: mobile (airborne and motorized) and static (sector). The mobile units were built around the 5th Armored, 10th and 25th Airborne Divisions. These units had the best men and equipment. In comparison, sector units tended to be lower quality. Only 15 percent of French forces in Algeria were professional soldiers: The rest were recruited through the military draft and recall of reservists. There were also 20,000 Muslim career soldiers in the French army, with 20,000 conscripts serving in Tirailleur (light infantry) battalions and Spahis (indigenous light cavalry/mechanized cavalry regiments. In 1958, a new policy of mixing races within units was introduced, and by 1959, most Tirailleur units were composed of 50 percent Muslim and 50 percent colon (settler) troops. Similarly, the Foreign Legion had some of the most professional as well as ruthless troops—and in Algeria, some of the most politicized. The 1st REP (Legion Parachute Regiment) led the April 1961 coup attempt in Algiers and was later disbanded for its efforts. Other Legion regiments continue to soldier on into the 21st century.

The exchange of attacks—often involving terrorism—between the ALN and pied noir threw the city into anarchy. The civilian administration took the unprecedented step of handing over complete authority to the French Army. Under the command of Gen. Jacques Massu, the Paras launched a series of raids into the Casbah (the city’s older district, a FLN stronghold), rounding up suspects and breaking up an attempted general strike. Exploiting intelligence collected through the torture of arrested insurgents, the French destroyed the ALN’s underground network. Over 3,000 insurgents died or disappeared under army interrogation in what became known as the Battle of Algiers.

This was followed by further French victories along the Tunisian border. The French Army built an elaborate barrier called the Morice Line, cutting off the ALN from its external bases. By the spring of 1958, the French Army was winning the war against the FLN/ALN. However, this military success provoked a major political backlash. When substantiated reports of torture were published in France, public opinion recoiled in horror, while native support for French attempts at integration collapsed. The government began wavering, and senior officers suspected Paris was going to throw out their victory. The stage was being set for the army to move.

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1958: The Army Moves

The loss of political support from Paris after the victory in the Battle of Algiers produced deep dissatisfaction for the army in Algeria, particularly...