

# H-Diplo | Robert Jervis International Security Studies Forum

## Roundtable Review 14-29

Nathaniel K. Powell. *France's Wars in Chad: Military Intervention and Decolonization in Africa*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021.  
<https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108771610>

28 July 2023 | PDF: <https://issforum.org/to/jrt14-29> | Website: [rjissf.org](http://rjissf.org)

Editor: Diane Labrosse  
Commissioning Editor: Frank Gerits

Production Editor: Christopher Ball  
Copy Editor: Bethany Keenan

### Contents

---

Introduction by Rebecca E. Wall, Loyola Marymount University .....	2
Review by Bruno Charbonneau, Royal Military College Saint-Jean.....	5
Review by Armel Dirou, King's College London.....	8
Review by Richard S. Fogarty, University at Albany, SUNY .....	12
Review by Sarah J. Zimmerman, Western Washington University.....	16
Response by Nathaniel K. Powell, Honorary Researcher, Centre for War and Diplomacy, Lancaster University .....	20

---

 Introduction by Rebecca E. Wall, Loyola Marymount University
 

---

On 27 February 2023, French President Emmanuel Macron delivered a speech on the future of Franco-African relations. The proposed changes represented a fundamental reorientation of French activity on the continent, and would represent a major departure from French policy over the past 70 years. Among other changes, Macron pledged to drastically reduce France's military presence, including closing French bases in favor of co-managing them with host countries. "France's role is not to fix all the problems in Africa," Macron said, adding elsewhere that France must demonstrate "profound humility."<sup>1</sup> Stepping back from its assertive involvement in its erstwhile colonies and adopting an attitude of "humility" would indeed represent a shift in French policy: from Central African Republic to Mali and beyond, since each former colony's independence France has been a veritable *policier* throughout its erstwhile empire. One need look no further than Chad for an extreme example of this phenomenon.

Nathaniel K. Powell's *France's Wars in Chad: Military Intervention and Decolonization in Africa*, is a timely and significant contribution to scholarship on the first decades of political independence in Africa.<sup>2</sup> It also fills a major geographic gap, given the rarity of English-language book-length publications on Chad, despite, as Powell convincingly demonstrates, the nation's geopolitical and strategic significance.<sup>3</sup> Focusing on the 1960s to the 1980s, Powell's crucial insight is that French military interventionism—which he terms counterinsurgency (more on this later)—not only failed to achieve its intended effects, but often created new problems. More than a mere policy failure, France's consistent and assertive meddling had direct, deleterious impacts on the trajectory of independent Chad and the lives of ordinary Chadians. Indeed, Powell notes how while they are not solely culpable, "some responsibility for Chad's bloody descent into civil war, territorial fragmentation, Libyan occupation, and dictatorship lies squarely at the feet of French policymakers" (331). Nonetheless, Powell's emphasis on the thinking, decisions, and strategies of Chadian actors creates space for local agency, however circumscribed and limited it may have been. France comes across as a malign influence, but *France's Wars in Chad* avoids the use of flattening clichés about neocolonialism in favor of a nuanced and complicated narrative.

In their reviews, Bruno Charbonneau, Armel Dirou, Richard S. Fogarty, and Sarah J. Zimmerman agree that Powell's work represents a major contribution to historical scholarship on Chad's first few decades of independence as well as to histories of French intervention in Africa. All the reviewers emphasize Powell's impressive engagement with French archival sources. Given how large the French archive looms in Powell's project, the fact that his conceptual framing, as Sarah J. Zimmerman puts it, "eschews a popular trope, *Françafrique*," is significant. The voluminous production of documentation from the ex-colonial power could have created a vortex wherein projections of French power take on monocausal importance. By emphasizing, again in the words of Zimmerman, "the uneven mutual dependencies and beneficial exchanges among powerful Chadian and French men," Powell ensures that his work acknowledges power asymmetries while preserving a sense of contingency and agency. Similarly, Powell avoids simplistic narratives of colonialism to

---

<sup>1</sup> "France must demonstrate 'profound humility' towards Africa, Macron says ahead of four-nation trip," France 24, 27 Feb. 2023, <https://www.france24.com/en/france/20230227-macron-to-outline-france-s-revamped-africa-policy-ahead-of-four-nation-trip>, accessed 30 May 2023.

<sup>2</sup> For example, see Tony Chafer and Alexander Keese, eds., *Francophone Africa at Fifty* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013); Gregory Mann, *From Empires to NGOs in the West African Sabel: The Road to Nongovernmentality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Patrick Manning, *Francophone Sub-Saharan Africa, 1880-1995* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Frederick Cooper, "Possibility and Constraint: African Independence in Historical Perspective," *Journal of African History* 49, no. 2 (2008): 167-96.

<sup>3</sup> Notable Anglophone works on Chad include Mario Joaquim Azevedo, *The Roots of Violence: A History of War in Chad* (New York: Routledge, 2005); Sam C. Nolutshungu, *Limits of Anarchy: Intervention and State Formation in Chad* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1996); Julien Brachet and Judith Scheele, *The Value of Disorder: Autonomy, Prosperity, and Plunder in the Chadian Sahara* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019); Marielle Debos, *Living by the Gun in Chad: Combatants, Impunity and State Formation* (London: Zed Books, 2016).

neocolonialism. The reviewers note with approval his attention to continuities. Fogarty, for example, mentions Powell's discussion of Pierre Lami, who had been a colonial governor in Côte d'Ivoire and Senegal before "over[seeing] efforts to reform the Chadian administration in 1969-1970 while the French army was carrying out the intervention dubbed Opération Limousin." Rather than concluding in light of such linkages that independence was in name only, Powell takes pains in his response to the reviews to conceptualize neocolonialism as "an asymmetric power." The ambiguity inherent in asymmetry leaves space for Powell to delve into various moments of French intervention on their own terms, enriching his analysis.

That said, the reviewers offer several critiques of *France's Wars in Chad*. For example, Charbonneau argues that Powell might have been more attentive to both the Cold War context and the "historical legacies of the story he narrates." Likewise, Fogarty posits that Powell might have engaged more with scholarship on *Françafrique* and with "larger contexts of French colonialism and processes of decolonization across the French empire." However, by far the more sustained and trenchant critiques come from Dirou. While Dirou appreciates Powell's attentive research and scrupulous documentation, he takes issue with many of the book's fundamental premises and analyses. To take one example, Dirou argues that Powell's attention to "counterinsurgency" is "anachronistic" because "France ceased all action of this type after the Algerian War." I wonder whether France's dropping of the terminology of "counterinsurgency" while continuing military intervention that bears more than a passing resemblance to it (up to the present day) indicates less an abandonment of strategy than a change in semantics. Readers can of course make their own decisions, and Powell addresses them at length in his response. What seems clear, however, is that this animated response to Powell's research highlights the book's timeliness, relevance, and importance.

### Contributors:

**Nathaniel K. Powell** is a West and Southern Africa Analyst at Oxford Analytica. He is also an Honorary Researcher at Lancaster University's Centre for War and Diplomacy. He is currently based in Aberystwyth, Wales.

**Rebecca Wall** is Assistant Professor of African History at Loyola Marymount University. She received her PhD in history from Stanford University. Wall engages in interdisciplinary research, and she co-directs a digital history project, the Senegal Liberations Project, with colleagues at Stanford University and the National Archives of Senegal. In her book manuscript, Wall considers how West African nations balanced individual sovereignty with the need to jointly manage a critical water resource, the Senegal River. She is also involved in a project on the long-term relationship between climate change and migration in the Western Sahel.

**Bruno Charbonneau** is Professor of International Studies, and Director of the Centre for Security and Crisis Governance (CRITIC), at Canada's Royal Military College Saint-Jean. He is also founder and Director of the Centre FrancoPaix in Conflict Resolution at the Université du Québec à Montréal. He specializes and has published widely on French security policy in Africa, the international politics of conflict management, counterinsurgency, and climate security in West Africa and the West African Sahel.

**Colonel Armel Dirou** is a cavalry officer and mountain trooper and a graduate of the Royal College of Defence Studies (London), the NATO Defense College (Rome), the Joint Staff College (Paris) and the Military High Mountain School (Chamonix). Qualified with a Ph.D. from Paris Sorbonne University, he is a Visiting Research Fellow at King's College London and a Member of the Senior Common Room at University College of Durham. He has published papers and contributed to several books. An operationally experienced officer with a specialization in irregular warfare, he took part in different operations in the Balkans in Bosnia and Kosovo. He carried out three combat tours in Afghanistan, and, as a commanding

officer, he led an infantry Battle Group in the Central African Republic and in Chad. He also carried out capacity building missions for the UAE Army, Kyrgyz Special Forces, and the Afghan Army.

**Richard S. Fogarty** is Associate Professor of History at the University at Albany, State University of New York. A specialist on the history of the French colonial empire, the French army, and the First World War, he is the author of *Race and War in France: Colonial Subjects in the French Army, 1914-1918* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008) and the co-editor (with Andrew Tait Jarboe) of *Empires in World War I: Shifting Frontiers and Imperial Dynamics in a Global Conflict* (I.B. Tauris, 2014) and (with Melvin E. Page) of the Africa section, 1914-1918-online. *International Encyclopedia of the First World War*.

**Sarah J. Zimmerman** is an Associate Professor of history at Western Washington University. Her research focuses on the experiences of women and the operation of gender in West Africa, French Empire, and the Atlantic World. Her first monograph, *Militarizing Marriage: West African Soldiers' Conjugal Traditions in Modern French Empire* (Ohio University Press, 2020), historicizes militarization, marriage, and colonialism by focusing on *tirailleurs sénégalais* households in West Africa and across French Empire. Her new research attends to the gendered production of history and memory on Gorée Island--a UNESCO World Heritage site in Senegal. She has published articles in the *International Journal of African Historical Studies* and *Les Temps Modernes*.

---

 Review by Bruno Charbonneau, Royal Military College Saint-Jean
 

---

*“Il m’apprit à peindre, et en échange je lui écrivis son histoire. Il dit, et je pus montrer, et je vis le fleuve de sang qui traverse ma ville si paisible, je vis l’art français de la guerre qui ne change pas, et je vis l’émeute qui vient toujours pour les mêmes raisons, des raisons françaises qui ne changent pas.”<sup>1</sup>*

Every French president since Charles de Gaulle promised to reform France’s African policy, military posture, and security objectives on the African continent. All claimed to want to change French military practices or stop French meddling in African wars. Yet, every president since Charles de Gaulle ended up engaging French troops in African wars.

Understanding the continuity of French military interventions in post-colonial Africa has been the continuous object of academic research and debate.<sup>2</sup> The challenge is usually answered in one of two ways (which I simplify here for heuristic reasons). The first focuses on the decision-making process, which involves discussing the powers of the presidency and the different style of and conditions under which each president ends up keeping troops and authorizing interventions in Africa.<sup>3</sup> The other emphasizes the relationships, collusion, or cooperation between Franco-African elites who share common interests, notably in sustaining their respective power and the status quo.<sup>4</sup> Both approaches offer internal critiques and analyses of what constitutes Franco-African relationships and structures, in time and in space. Both perspectives are necessary, but they often neglect the global conditions that enable, enact, and authorize the reproduction of the *gendarme de l’Afrique* and its practices.<sup>5</sup>

In *France’s Wars in Chad: Military Intervention and Decolonization in Africa*, Nathaniel Powell makes an important contribution to France-Africa scholarship. He also works with, and navigates between, both approaches, while avoiding duplicating their clichés about presidential war powers or French neo-colonialism. His focus remains on French actors and archives—largely neglecting global factors like the Cold War context—but his attention to Chadian actors, interests, and strategies is particularly welcome and appreciated. It enables a narrative whereby France is not the almighty and all-powerful colonizer. Chadian actors are shown to make their own history, albeit under circumstances and conditions that were often imposed from outside and transmitted from the colonial past. There is no denying that Chadian-French relationships are asymmetric in terms of power and resources in Powell’s book, but the attention he gives to African agency allows him to

---

<sup>1</sup> Alexis Jenni, *L’art français de la guerre* (Paris: Gallimard, 2011), blurb.

<sup>2</sup> One of first (if not the first) work on French security policy in Africa is Maurice Ligot, *Les accords de coopération entre la France et les états africains et malgache d’expression française* (Paris: Documentation française, 1964). Arguably, the study of French policy in Africa evolved into a small publishing industry that escaped academia after the publication of François-Xavier Verschave, *La Françafrique, le plus long scandale de la République* (Paris: Stock, 1999).

<sup>3</sup> See, for example: Tony Chafer, Gordon Cumming, and Roel van der Velde, “France’s Interventions in Mali and the Sahel: A Historical Institutional Perspective,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 43, no. 4 (2020): 482-507; Gordon Cumming, “Nicolas Sarkozy’s Africa Policy: Change, Continuity or Confusion?” *French Politics* 11, no. 1 (2013): 24-47; Benedikt Erforth, *Contemporary French Security Policy in Africa: On Ideas and Wars* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), François Gaulme, “Emmanuel Macron et l’Afrique : La vision et l’héritage,” *Études de l’Ifri* (Paris : IFRI, 2019) ; Yves Gounin, *La France en Afrique. Le combat des Anciens et des Modernes*. (Paris: De Boeck, 2009) ; Robin Luckham, “Le militarisme français en Afrique,” *Politique Africaine* 6 (June 1982): 45-71.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example : Jean-Pierre Bat, *Le syndrome Foccart : La politique française en Afrique, de 1959 à nos jours* (Paris: Gallimard, 2012); Tony Chafer, “Franco-African Relations: No Longer So Exceptional?” *African Affairs* 101, no. 404 (2002): 343-363 ; Pascal Chaigneau, *La politique militaire de la France en Afrique* (Paris: CHEAM, 1984); John Chipman, *French Power in Africa* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989); Raphaël Granvaud, *Que fait l’armée française en Afrique?* (Marseille: Agone, 2009) ; and Nathaniel Powell, “Battling Instability? The Recurring Logic of French Military Interventions in Africa,” *African Security* 10, no. 1 (2017): 47-72.

<sup>5</sup> Bruno Charbonneau, *France and the New Imperialism: Security Policy in Sub-Saharan Africa*. (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008); Charbonneau, “The Imperial Legacy of International Peacebuilding: the Case of Francophone Africa,” *Review of International Studies* 40, no. 3 (2014): 607–30.

show the limits of French influence and meddling, despite the significant role of France in Chadian trajectories. As he writes, “by the late 1970s French policymakers became increasingly incapable of influencing outcomes” (331).

Powell traces the role of France in the events “that gripped Chad from independence in 1960 to the rise of Hissène Habré’s dictatorship in 1982” (1). He frames his narrative as “a period of extended and incomplete decolonization” (1), which it certainly was. Through the 1960s, there were frequent protests aimed at the old colonial master. France was a critical actor in Chad because Paris subsidized the political process and the state’s budget, maintained public order, and supported the regime of President François Tombalbaye. As Powell demonstrates, the evolution of France’s influence and role was further complicated by the fact that Paris pursued, or sought to pursue, cordial relationships with Libya and the Central African Republic (to which we could add Sudan in the 1990s), while also trying to satisfy other Francophone African leaders, such as Ivorian President Félix Houphouët-Boigny, who wanted guarantees that the French military could be counted on to secure their respective regimes.

The narrative can also be considered as describing the period that set the stage, and several of the norms, practices, and limits, of French post-colonial military interventions. The book ends with the rise of President Hissène Habré in 1982, but the story obviously does not end there. Habré’s difficulties led to the creation of Operation Epervier in 1986. Launched after Libyan armed forces crossed the 16th parallel in support of Goukouni Oueddei, whom Habré had overthrown in late 1981 with the support of France and the United States, Operation Epervier was a central pillar of French (and American) security policy in the region until its transformation into Operation Barkhane in 2014. Epervier not only provided ‘regime stability’ (notably for Idriss Déby by intervening against Chadian rebels), but also consolidated and shaped the French military role in African conflicts. As such, it contributed to the French and American rhetoric of Chad as a pillar of and for regional stability. It also allowed and shaped French responses to crises in the region, as the examples of President Nicolas Sarkozy’s response to the Darfur crisis in 2008 (the joint EU and UN European Union Force (EUFOR) force in eastern Chad and northeastern Central African Republic (CAR)<sup>6</sup> and of the transformation of Serval into Barkhane in 2014 suggest. Powell discusses early on the legacies of the events he surveys (2), but unfortunately does not elaborate much further beyond references to it in the introduction, a three-page postscript to Chapter 9, and the last three paragraphs of the conclusion on Déby’s regime and current French operations in the Sahel.

Nevertheless, Powell successfully demonstrates that in Chad French counterinsurgency efforts ultimately contradicted the theory. If counterinsurgency is the combination of force and politics to build a state and a governable population—if as such it is a ‘competition in government’ between insurgents and counterinsurgents—the French indeed thoroughly failed. The use of military force to protect and stabilize Tombalbaye’s regime weakened the Chadian state, contributed to the fragmentation of Chadian territory, groups, and elites, and persuaded Libya to invade. One leader of insurgents (Habré) took control of the state, after ousting another ex-rebel President (Oueddei). It created conditions—willingly and unwillingly—that sustained or exacerbated violent conflicts. In this, as Powell acknowledges, he follows the path of Marielle Debos’s work<sup>7</sup> that showed how the expectation of war and violence become “part and parcel of governance strategies” (334). In Powell’s book, Chadian conflict actors all planned and acted on the expectation of French intervention. They both instrumentalized and were dependent on the French, despite hopes of Chadian sovereign autonomy.

For Powell, this French failure is the story of the collapse and “clear end” of a neo-colonial order—yet a collapse that did not last, since another neo-colonial order reappeared “as early as 1983” (341). He thus

---

<sup>6</sup> Charbonneau, “France,” in David R. Black and Paul D. Williams, eds., *The International Politics of Mass Atrocities: The Case of Darfur* (London: Routledge, 2010): 213-231.

<sup>7</sup> Marielle Debos, *Living by the Gun in Chad: Combatants, Impunity and State Formation* (London: Zed Books, 2016).

concludes that the 1979-1982 period was a transition between neo-colonial orders (342). Moreover, he argues that it is a process of transition that continued with Idriss Déby (who was alive when the book was written) and the French engagement in the Sahel since 2013.

It is an odd move to talk of ‘ends’ and ‘transitions’ in the last pages of the conclusion (although the argument about the end of a neo-colonial order is announced on the second page), especially because we do not know what distinguishes these neo-colonial orders beyond the name of the Chadian president. In the postscript to Chapter 9, Powell writes that “like their predecessors, Operations Manta and Épervier aimed to protect a political order [Habré’s regime] favorable to French interest in France’s African ‘*pré-carré*’” (328), suggesting a continuing of the same or a similar neo-colonial order, and thus making the claim about ends and transition confusing. It is not so odd, however, when read in the context of France-Africa scholarship, where discussions of continuity and rupture abound.<sup>8</sup> This minor (and seeming) contradiction is reminiscent of approaches that get stuck in their own binaries: is French policy coherent or incoherent, is it rupture or continuity, is France reengaging or disengaging from Africa? One regularly reads analyses that conclude with the French cliché: *plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose*.<sup>9</sup>

*France’s Wars in Chad* avoids the cliché. I do not include Powell’s book in the same category as those by policy analysts who make a living of and from such binaries. Powell’s historical analysis is thorough, subtle, and superbly informative. However, I am puzzled by the minimal, almost non-existent, analysis of the historical legacies of the story he narrates, especially given his clear intent to link it to ‘insights and lessons’ it can offer for France’s current war in the Sahel. Powell discusses the legacies that come into play in his narrative, as shown in a most interesting—yet far too short—discussion of French officers and non-commissioned officers comparing Chad and Algeria (98-100). These legacies point to the historical construction—and the reproduction—of a privileged sphere of intervention called Francophone Africa—where France continues and will continue to play a pivotal and unavoidable role in African conflict management. The durability of the *gendarme de l’Afrique*, and the roots of Franco-African codependency, are found in these legacies. Today’s Barkhane and its transformation into something else can only be understood in the structures, practices, and narratives that reproduce an exceptional zone for French military operations and that reaffirm and reproduce the specificity of Francophone Africa<sup>10</sup>—and which finds expression in, for instance, President Emmanuel Macron being able to normalize, in 2021, attending the funerals of Idriss Déby, and salute the memory of an “exemplary leader and a courageous warrior.”<sup>11</sup>

Certainly, Powell conveys well—too often implicitly perhaps—how a context-specific and crucial engagement shaped and informed later African and international expectations of French interventionism in Africa, its practices and limits; and French roles and responsibilities in African conflicts. That is certainly how I read the book as a political scientist and International Relations (IR) scholar. Maybe even more importantly and convincingly, Powell’s book also presents another example of the illusions that French and Western governments and militaries hold: the illusion of control and the illusion that military power and force can effect change. The French do not have a monopoly over this form of hubris, but the French version has been particularly resilient in Africa. And if the French engagement in the Sahel is any indication, there is no end in sight to it.

---

<sup>8</sup> See, for example: Cumming, “Nicolas Sarkozy’s Africa Policy: Change, Continuity or Confusion?”; and Gounin, *La France en Afrique*.

<sup>9</sup> I critique this binary in Charbonneau, “The Durability of the *Gendarme de l’Afrique*: From Empire to Counterterrorism,” in Tony Chafer and Margaret Majumdar, eds., *Routledge’s Handbook of Francophone Africa* (London: Routledge, forthcoming).

<sup>10</sup> Charbonneau, “Counter-insurgency Governance in the Sahel,” *International Affairs*, 97, no. 6 (2021), 1805-1823, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iab182>

<sup>11</sup> “Tchad. Emmanuel Macron au premier rang aux obsèques d’Idriss Déby,” *Courrier international*, 23 April 2021, <https://www.courrierinternational.com/article/tchad-emmanuel-macron-au-premier-rang-aux-obseques-didriss-deby>

---

 Review by Armel Dirou, King's College London
 

---

In this well-documented and well-informed book, Nathaniel Powell analyses the difficulties France has encountered in establishing a fair and balanced relationship with newly independent Chad. *France's Wars in Chad: Military Intervention and Decolonization in Africa*, the product of ten years of work, focuses in particular on France's military assistance to its former colony and what the author describes as French "counterinsurgency efforts" (6, 45, 67, 334). Powell focuses on one of France's main theatre of operations in Africa in the second half of the twentieth century. As he questions the benefits of French military engagement in Chad between the 1960s and 1980s, he formulates scathing criticism of the role France has retained in its former colony, particularly within the country's security apparatus. Moreover, his analysis highlights the counterproductive nature of "counterinsurgency efforts" which are said to have contributed to exacerbating the level of conflict and ultimately weakened Chad.

The book covers the period from the 1960s to the 1980s; this is a highly relevant choice as it allows for an extended analysis of the birth of postcolonial relations between France and Chad. Within the span of two decades, and confronted with the Algerian War (1954-1962), the French state engaged in efforts to massively restructure its administration. It also had to face the challenges of accompanying the independence process of its former colonies. Indeed, shaken by an unprecedented succession of conflicts since 1939, France never anticipated the emancipation of its colonies, which made setting the process in motion tricky. Political emergency under international pressure mainly led the French empire's dismantling and resulted in the lack, perhaps, of a long term vision. All these parameters complicated the equation France had to solve. To be sure, France did not want to be involved in additional conflicts after World War Two, the French Indochina War (1946–1954), and the Algerian War (1954-1962).

#### *Urgent decolonisation*

Despite these inherent features of the period, Powell asserts that France is exclusively responsible for the conflicts that have marked Chad's life since its independence. He considers that French action was counterproductive and biased. It would have been therefore appropriate to describe and analyse the internal political situation in France and the Cold War international environment. These elements would have highlighted French hesitation both in the policy to be defined towards its former colonies, and in its reluctance to intervene. Powell argues, for instance, that "such a policy often lacked of coherence and clearly elaborated goals" (13). Indeed, the haste with which independence was achieved meant that France and its colonies did not have time to prepare these processes or to train postcolonial future leaders.

France found itself in an ambiguous position, which is insufficiently highlighted by the book. How could it allow its former colonies to emancipate themselves while helping them to structure themselves, knowing that these new states could not count on many experienced civil servants? Did France have to abandon these countries to chaos and instability, or should it instead have helped them as much as possible? In the 1960s, France had to learn to help—but not to help too much. Also, faced with Chad's President François Tombalbaye's reluctance to accept French aid, and given the desire to preserve some influence in the area, General Charles de Gaulle decided to intervene in Chad both militarily and bureaucratically. De Gaulle himself, quoted by his special advisor for African affairs Jacques Foccart, said: "There is only one solution, to re-frame the Chadian army with French officers as we used to do for the nomadic groups. But this presupposes that at the same time a complete reorganisation of the Chadian administration is carried out, because it is unthinkable that we should provide Chad with an effective military instrument to allow the prefects to squeeze the peasant populations."<sup>1</sup> This temporary aid, provided through the expeditionary corps of General Edouard Cortadellas and the administrative reform mission (MRA) of Governor Pierre Lami, was

---

<sup>1</sup> Jacques Foccart, *Journal de l'Élysée* (Paris, Fayard, 1995), 500.



the last massive, official, and open interference by France in Chad. After 1972, France focused on an indirect approach.

### *The Cold War*

In Chad, the Libyan issue further complicated this equation, with the underlying issue of Soviet influence in the country, given that Colonel Muammar Gaddafi was sensitive to Moscow's positions. French policy in Chad was thus partly driven by East-West opposition as Libyan influence in the country developed. Chad's President Hissène Habré thus ended up receiving French and US support by default. Nonetheless, France had an ambiguous policy towards Libya, which it ambivalently considered to be both a threat and as a trade partner. France was paradoxically quite comfortable with Libya because it sold the country arms and planes, while condemning Gaddafi as the protector of many terrorist groups, including the Irish Republican Army. This induced a schizophrenic position where the *Service de Documentation Extérieure et de Contre-Espionnage* (SDECE) tried to assassinate the Libyan leader, but at the same time Paris disturbed US leaders by its lack of enthusiasm to really bring Gaddafi down.

However, France did not like Habré, and did not appreciate his agreement with US President Ronald Reagan.<sup>2</sup> Faced with the exactions of the dreaded Chadian political police, the *Direction de la Documentation et de la Sécurité* (DDS), and support for the creation by the CIA of a force of Libyan 'contras' led by Colonel Khalifa Haftar, France finally 'dropped' Habré and favoured the accession to power of Idriss Déby.

### *Neo-colonialism or decolonisation?*

That said, French interventions in Chad were not motivated by a particular defence of French economic interests. These took place sporadically and were devoid of a long-term vision. Above all, they responded to requests for assistance from African leaders, who had few resources at their disposal to launch their countries on a journey to independence. Through the defence agreements it had signed with them, France undertook to accompany them on the road to emancipation, but without taking a global approach. Moreover, in Chad, the defence agreements were less clear than in the other countries and made any French intervention difficult.

It is important to remember that historically the French have understood themselves to have held universalist values, i.e., they believe in human rights that should be universally applicable, and are convinced that the democratic principles they profess must be spread, and defended throughout the world, particularly in France's historical zone of influence. France is therefore officially committed to this value struggle, even though it sometimes carried it out clumsily. Thus, it would have been relevant to consider the work of Jacques Marseille in the book's discussion of the neo-colonialist debate. This would have tempered the remarks of Chadian economist and former minister Gatta Gali Ngothé, who claimed that France was draining "the wealth of the colonies towards the metropole" (21). Marseille argues that "in the decade following independence, the growth of French capitalism had never been so vigorous and its structural transformations so rapid."<sup>3</sup> Chad has never been a source of enrichment for France, and even less a profitable colony. Even Pierre Mendès France, the French socialist Prime Minister, said about the colonial empire in 1954 "that a

---

<sup>2</sup> Michael Shurkin, interviewed by Alexandre Jubelin, "Le Tchad, au carrefour des conflits du continent africain," *Le Collimateur*, 11 May 2021, <https://www.irsem.fr/le-collimateur/le-tchad-au-carrefour-des-conflits-du-continent-africain-11-05-2021.html>

<sup>3</sup> Jacques Marseille, "Colonisation, décolonisation et capitalisme (1880-1960)," *Vingtième Siècle, revue d'histoire*, no. 4 (Octobre 1984), 39.

choice had to be made between Indochina [more broadly the colonies] and the economic recovery of France.”<sup>4</sup>

### *Counterinsurgency policy?*

As interesting and thorough as Powell’s work is, it is based on an anachronistic premise. Indeed, the author incorrectly describes the French action as a “counterinsurgency effort,” despite the fact that France ceased all action of this type after the Algerian War. Even if it is true that “some in French military circles have viewed France’s first major intervention in Chad as a case of a ‘successful counterinsurgency’” (331), the trauma of the Indochinese and Algerian conflicts and the development of a nuclear doctrine that firmly, and perhaps somewhat rigidly, framed all military thinking, contradict the author’s statement. In addition to that, Michel Goya’s affirmation concerns only 1969-1972, and not the entire period covered by the study. The book thus seems to apply the “war on terror” and the American counter-insurgency concept to a very different time and theatre, even if the French cadres, officers, and non-commissioned officers who were deployed to Chad had mastered the tactical aspects of counter-insurgency.

There is a difference between policy, doctrine, and tactical techniques that are used on the field. During the 1960s, counter-insurgency was taboo in the French armed forces. Moreover, the Joint Staff College abolished the dissertations that had previously completed officers’ training in order to prevent those officers from researching the subject. There was neither a policy nor doctrine for counterinsurgency and the episode of the Frolinat, well described by Powell, also illustrates the French reticence, as Goya underlines, reporting that “General de Gaulle hesitated to launch an expedition which, a few years after African independence... would be disapproved of by public opinion.”<sup>5</sup> It is crucial not to confuse the different levels of responsibility and decision-making, because one cannot, with any scientific rigour, attempt to demonstrate the existence of an overall strategy, let alone a state policy, on the basis of elements at the tactical or even sub-tactical level.

### *References*

The author uses an impressive volume of primary sources, archival material and references. However, his work could have benefited from interviews with the protagonists of the events. More importantly, recent findings that could have counterbalanced Powell’s thesis go unmentioned. Research based on the archives of the Jacques Foccart fonds<sup>6</sup>, such as Oliver Forcade, Jean-Pierre Bat and Sylvain Mary’s *Jacques Foccart: archives ouvertes (1958-1974); la politique, l’Afrique et le monde* would have helped shed light on the actions of this hidden adviser to the Elysée. Some of Elie Tenenbaum’s research for his book, *Partisans et Centurions*,<sup>7</sup> is based on unpublished sources and should have been cited here because it fits perfectly into the subject of the book. It shows the strategic importance of Chad, the gateway to Fezzan and pivot of a north-south axis running from the Gulf of Guinea to the Mediterranean. Finally, a discussion of the radical change of French policy in Africa with the *Discours de La Baule* in 1990 would have given a more objective perspective on that topic as President Mitterrand declared the international aid provided by France would then be conditional on the democratisation of African States.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Paul Bairoch and Jacques Marseille, “Empire colonial et capitalisme français. Histoire d’un divorce,” *Annales. Economies, sociétés, civilisations* 43, no. 1, (1988): 147.

<sup>5</sup> Michel Goya, “L’intervention militaire française au Tchad (1969-1972),” in *Lettre du RETEX – Recherche* no. 6, (26 Novembre 2013), 2, [https://www.c-dec.terre.defense.gouv.fr/images/documents/retex/06\\_Intervention\\_Tchad.pdf](https://www.c-dec.terre.defense.gouv.fr/images/documents/retex/06_Intervention_Tchad.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Oliver Forcade, Jean-Pierre Bat and Sylvain Mary’s *Jacques Foccart: archives ouvertes (1958-1974); la politique, l’Afrique et le monde* (Paris : Presse de l’Université Paris-Sorbonne, 2017), 432.

<sup>7</sup> Elie Tenenbaum, *Partisans et Centurions, Une histoire de la guerre irrégulière au XX<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris : Perrin, 2018), 522.

<sup>8</sup> The George Washington University National Security Archive contains a PDF of the speech: François Mitterrand, “Le discours de La Baule,” 20 June 1990, available at <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB461/docs/DOCUMENT%203%20-%20French.pdf>

Moreover, Powell does not cite a recent and essential academic work on the topic: Damien Mireval's 2018 dissertation, which discusses a France that had to adapt to an international situation that had become extremely competitive.<sup>9</sup> Mireval argues that France wanted to keep its autonomous situation awareness towards Chadian rebel groups, but was challenged in the Sahelian strip by the US and hampered by the Soviet Union. The dissertation is one of the most important and comprehensive new works on the subject, and the omission of any reference to it is unfortunate.

To conclude, I recommend this book to French readers as it helps them consider their history and the recent past French foreign policy from a foreign perspective. Nathaniel Powell has produced a remarkable book that is based upon a huge quantity of sources. Even though I do not share some of his analyses of what he is qualifying as “neocolonial order” (12, 13, 331, 341), which seems to be an excessive bow to the flavour-of-the-month, his book is stimulating.

Also, while Powell puts forth some legitimate criticisms, he does not offer suggestions for solutions to the problems he identifies. This work belongs to the “critical theories” genre, which tends to criticise, and not to identify better solutions that were cast aside in the past, or ways of avoiding mistakes in the future.<sup>10</sup> For a practitioner, this is frustrating, as this removes the relevance of the findings from the real world. Nonetheless, such critical reflections might be beneficial in the long term, provided they do not construct theories by turning the particular into generalities and if they present a better knowledge about doctrines and the different levels of decision making.

Finally, notwithstanding the huge amount of work which went into this book, I feel that it misses scientific rigour of engaging with the facts alone, rather than conducting research with the confirmation bias of an initial ideological approach.

---

<sup>9</sup> Damien Mireval, “Armées, sécurité et rébellions : le rôle du renseignement et des actions spéciales dans les guerres du Tchad (1969-1990)” (PhD diss., École doctorale Montaigne-Humanités, 2018).

<sup>10</sup> Alexandre Jubelin, podcast with Mathias Delori, *La guerre contre le terrorisme en actes : force et violence des démocraties libérales*, 23 March 2021, <https://www.irsem.fr/le-collimateur/la-guerre-contre-le-terrorisme-en-actes-force-et-violence-des-democraties-liberales-23-03-2021.html>

---

 Review by Richard S. Fogarty, University at Albany, SUNY
 

---

In 1979, French Foreign Minister Louis de Guiringaud declared, “Africa is the only continent which remains in France’s reach, within the range of its means. The only one where she can still, with 500 men, change the course of history” (226). The statement dripped with nostalgia for lost imperial grandeur and for the days when martial imperial heroes led small bands of French or Foreign Legion soldiers in the conquest of a French African colonial empire that stretched from Morocco and Algeria in the north, to the French Congo and Madagascar in the south. But while men such as de Guiringaud pined for the violent romance of empire building and mourned France’s reduced role on the international stage, they were also cultivating a distinctive neo-colonial relationship with many newly independent African nations which was built from political, military, and economic ties. Nathaniel K. Powell’s study of French involvement in Chad during the two decades that followed that country’s formal independence in 1960 is a vivid and detailed account of the consequences of France’s continued pursuit of power and influence in and beyond Africa.

France has intervened militarily in Africa more than any other former colonial power, or any power of any kind, by one count sending troops to the continent over 130 times since the end of the Second World War.<sup>1</sup> But this is only one part of a larger constellation of initiatives and policies that activist and author François-Xavier Verschave dubbed “*Françafrique*,” a corrupt and rapacious neo-colonialism that props up larcenous and murderous dictators and siphons off vast quantities of resources and wealth through personalistic ties among government and business figures in France and its former African colonies.<sup>2</sup>

A dry, landlocked, poor country that has never enjoyed the stability needed to exploit its mineral and oil wealth, Chad might seem an unlikely place to play a significant role in French conceptions of an African “*pré carré*,” or “backyard,” a place to assert French *grandeur* in an increasingly competitive geopolitical climate during the Cold War. But Chad was the site of numerous military interventions, “more,” by Powell’s count, “than any other country” (10), in part because of its strategically important central position in the continent, its imagined capacity as a “buffer zone” between Francophone Africa and Anglo- and Arabophone Africa, and its sentimental importance as the first colony to rally to the Free French side during the Second World War. By the end of the 1960s, Chad had come to occupy a central place in the ideological underpinnings of French foreign policy on the continent, which dictated above all the maintenance of France’s influence and prestige through an almost unconditional willingness to support clients in the region. French support for Chadian regimes, no matter how hopelessly unstable and mired in corruption and violence, stood as a symbolic demonstration of French commitment to “the great Franco-African family” (7).<sup>3</sup>

Broadly speaking, this meant that the decades Powell examines amounted to “a period of extended and incomplete decolonization” (1). More pointedly, these years saw the development of “neocolonialism in its purest form” (8) in Chad and elsewhere in France’s former colonial empire in Africa. Ultimately, Powell’s achievement in this study is not merely to document in almost dizzying detail the incredibly complex and shifting personalities and series of events during over two decades of perpetual political turbulence and endemic violence, but also to demonstrate clearly just how counterproductive French policy was. This is not just because it was an appalling tragedy for so many of Chad’s long-suffering people, but because nearly everything French officials did to build neo-colonialism “helped create the conditions for the collapse of”

---

<sup>1</sup> Anna Sundberg, “France: A Continuing Military Presence,” in Karolina Gasinska, ed., *Foreign Military Bases and Installations in Africa*, (Stockholm: Swedish Defense Research Institute [FOI], August 2019), 22. Powell himself counts over 50, and others provide further varying estimates, but all agree that French interventions number in the dozens and are more numerous than those of any other nation.

<sup>2</sup> François-Xavier Verschave, *La Françafrique: le plus long scandale de la République* (Paris: Stock, 1998).

<sup>3</sup> Tony Chafer develops most lucidly the familial aspects of French African policies in, “Chirac and ‘la Françafrique’: No Longer a Family Affair,” *Modern and Contemporary France* 13, no. 1 (February 2005), 7-23.

that very “neocolonial order” (12). In other words, Powell’s narrative is consciously ironic: “French stabilization efforts encouraged some of the country’s most destabilizing and violent elements” (331).

Time and time again, Powell describes French initiatives backfiring, worsening problems they were supposed to solve, conjuring into existence consequences they were supposed to forestall. Even the ostensibly successful elements of French policy, the best examples of which were direct armed interventions that arguably succeeded in their purely military goals, created further instability and disincentivized reform efforts by feckless client regimes that assumed their French friends would always bail them out and shield them from the consequences of rapacious taxation, negligent administration, and religious and ethnic discrimination and violence. Some of the ironies seem literally incredible, such as French policies that encouraged Chadians to oppose Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi’s designs and military interventions in the country, while France simultaneously sold Gaddafi’s regime weapons and provided training that helped underwrite his foreign policy initiatives and military aggression in the region, which were of course contrary to stated French goals and policies there. As one French diplomat noted to his superiors, this “seems contradictory” (339).

A brief review such as this cannot do justice to the complicated narrative of events that Powell handles so deftly. Suffice it to say, Chad’s independence was, from its inception in 1960, “more of an imperial restructuring than the end of empire” (14). This was true across much of the French colonial empire in Africa, and was quite deliberate: the euphemistic and vaguely Orwellian name of the government body that oversaw the construction of this new, imagined neo-colonial order was the “Ministry of Cooperation,” and this cooperation more often than not amounted to an agreement between French and African elites to retain many of the structures of empire for mutual benefit in terms of power and wealth. The words of French leaders were sometimes rather more revealing than they intended, as when President Charles de Gaulle said in 1969, “Chad must remain what it was; it must remain a friend of France, it is its only chance” (45). He might well just have said Chad must remain a colony.

This was the political and ideological background of development efforts, political support, and military interventions, all of which went hand in hand. Pierre Lami, who oversaw efforts to reform the Chadian administration in 1969-1970 while the French army was carrying out the intervention dubbed *Opération Limousin*, had served as a colonial governor in Côte d’Ivoire and in Senegal before independence. Thus it was hardly surprising that his reforms recapitulated some of the basic approaches of French colonial administration. Lami’s successor in Chad, Henri Paillard, had also served as a colonial administrator, and his efforts of “digging wells and building schools, health clinics, markets, and other need infrastructure” (60) in order to win over and raise up the indigenous population were precisely the approach French colonialism had taken in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>4</sup> As for *Opération Limousin*, this “seemed like a reconquest of Chad” (66), despite the French commander’s strenuous insistence that the effort was nothing like the recent war in Algeria, and was “entirely different than the struggle of a colonized people for independence” (99).

The neo-colonial, or even colonial, elements of French policy that were so in evidence during these early years of the 1960s and early 70s set the tone for what followed, and only became more pronounced during the presidency of Valéry Giscard d’Estaing (1974-1981). Giscard possessed “a romanticized and paternalistic vision of France’s role” (106) in Africa. It is not too much, in fact, to call him an unreconstructed colonialist. He waxed nostalgic for what he himself called a “colonization which left behind neither rancor, nor antagonism, ... characterized by a very limited economic exploitation, and which allowed the meeting of two civilizations... curious to discover one another, and humanly compatible” (106). He also took a childlike

---

<sup>4</sup> Alice Conklin, *A Mission to Civilize: The Republican Idea of Empire in France and West Africa, 1895-1930* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997). On the relationship between colonialism and international aid and development, see Bastian Becker, “Colonial Legacies in International Aid: Policy Priorities and Actor Constellations,” in Carina Schmitt, ed., *From Colonialism to International Aid: External Actors and Social Protection in the Global South* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

satisfaction in the exertion of French military power in Chad, describing in his memoirs his habit of sitting in his Paris residence, gazing at reconnaissance photos of the effects of French air strikes and what they represented: “Africa, cruel war, and success” (160).

Powell traces the effects of such attitudes on French policies and actions, narrating the stories of high-profile kidnappings, civil war, coups d'état, a second major French military intervention (Opération Tacaud, launched in 1978), Nigerian peacemaking efforts, French military intervention launched from Chad into the neighboring Central African Republic, Libyan intervention in Chad, and the rise to power of Hissène Habré in 1982. Habré's bloody rule forms a “postscript” to Powell's account (327-330), but it too was underwritten by neo-colonial policies and relationships with France (including another military intervention, Opération Manta, in 1983-1984), as well as the United States. That Habré himself would end his life in prison in Senegal, once he had been overthrown and exiled from Chad in 1990, then tried and convicted of war crimes, only underscores the abject failure of France to build any kind of “order” in Chad, neo-colonial or otherwise.

*France's Wars in Chad* is a detailed, reliable, and judicious guide to this complicated history. Only two curious lacunae stand out. The first is the absence of engagement with the concept of and literature about ‘*Françafrique*.’ The author cites one recent work in this literature, but does not introduce the term itself to his readers.<sup>5</sup> It is curious that Powell does not to invoke it, since events in Chad amount to such a prominent example of what Verschave was trying to capture with this term.<sup>6</sup>

The second omission is also historiographical. The study is deeply rooted in prodigious research in French archives and many of the relevant secondary literatures. But there is little engagement with larger contexts of French colonialism and processes of decolonization across the French empire. For instance, how did the French military's relationships with Chadian forces compare with the French army's vision of martial ties prevalent in West Africa and described so revealingly by Ruth Ginio in a recent and important book?<sup>7</sup> Did former colonial relationships play the same kinds of roles in Chad in shaping postcolonial relationships as they did in places such as Mali, which has been explored so fruitfully by Gregory Mann?<sup>8</sup> How do French actions in Chad, and French understandings of events there, fit into broader French thinking about decolonization that, for example, Todd Shepard has so tellingly described?<sup>9</sup> The point here is not to flagellate the author for having failed to cite every remotely relevant work in a study that is already so rich in detail and insight, but to lament that research this meticulous and analysis this trenchant might not speak as fully and clearly as it could to broader fields in French and European colonial and postcolonial history. Powell's work deserves a wide readership in these fields and beyond.

Only a few months after *France's Wars in Chad* was published, Chad's president of thirty years, Idriss Déby, was killed while fighting against rebels in the north of the country. His son, General Mahamat Idriss Déby, now leads the government, at least for the time being. It remains to be seen what this will mean for French policy in the region. As Powell notes at the end of his book, the survival of the elder Déby was critical to broader French goals and initiatives across the Sahel (the semi-arid band of territory between the Sahara in the north and the savanna in the south). Perhaps the most important element of these is Operation Barkhane, a recent and ongoing French military intervention in Africa aimed at defeating Islamist insurgents in five

<sup>5</sup> Pascal Airault and Jean-Pierre Bat, *Françafrique : Opérations secrètes et affaires d'État* (Paris: Tallandier, 2016).

<sup>6</sup> In addition to Verschave's work itself, cited above, Chafer's, “Chirac and ‘la Françafrique’: No Longer a Family Affair,” and Maja Bovcon's, “Françafrique and Regime Theory,” *European Journal of International Relations* 19, no. 1 (2013): 5-26, are good guides to some of the literature.

<sup>7</sup> Ruth Ginio, *The French Army and Its African Soldiers: The Years of Decolonization* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2017).

<sup>8</sup> Gregory Mann, *Native Sons: West African Veterans and France in the 20th Century* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).

<sup>9</sup> Todd Shepard, *The Invention of Decolonization: The Algerian War and the Remaking of France* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006)

former French colonies (Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Chad). Chad's participation in Barkhane, the headquarters of which is located in the capital of N'Djamena, gave the elder Déby "structural leverage over his French patrons" (343), as Powell notes. This did not save the president from the violence that has wracked his country virtually without pause since 1960, but these most recent events are powerful reminders of the importance and timeliness of Powell's scholarship. And we can say of these events what Powell says about the elder Déby's leverage vis-à-vis France in the final sentence of the book: they do "not bode well for the people of Chad" (343).

In the months following the publication of Nathaniel K. Powell's *France's Wars in Chad*, several events illustrated the book's timeliness. In April of 2021, Chad's President, Idriss Déby, died unexpectedly following injuries sustained while visiting a desert town beset by armed militants who were opposed to his government. During the final decade of his life, Déby coordinated with the French military to deploy Chadian soldiers as peacekeeping and anti-terrorism forces across the Sahel.<sup>1</sup> The Franco-Chadian relations described in Powell's book offer a prologue to Déby's exploitation of French military assistance to transform Chad into a regional "gendarme" in the twenty-first century.<sup>2</sup> In June of 2021, French archival professionals and historians participated in a global campaign to oppose an amendment in an anti-terrorism law that would radically alter public access to military and state intelligence records. France's National Assembly adopted the amendment on June 30, but a constitutional council struck it down the following month.<sup>3</sup> *France's Wars in Chad* relies on secret service records to chronicle France's neo-colonial interventionism in Chad. At a time when the legacies of French empire are energetically debated by multiple publics, France's military past, present, and future in Chad is an important subject.<sup>4</sup>

Chad is an unlikely site for a monograph on French military imperialism in Africa during the 1960s and 1970s. It is in a region of the African continent that has a small historiographical footprint.<sup>5</sup> Colonial histories that discuss Chad tend to reflect the arc of the archive and subsume Chadian communities into broad processes unfolding in French Equatorial Africa (AEF).<sup>6</sup> The scholarly literature on French interventions in France's former African colonies also inclines toward regional, as opposed to national, studies.<sup>7</sup> *France's Wars in Chad* adds to scant anglophone literature on Chad and eschews a popular trope, '*françafrique*,' to describe French intervention there. *Françafrique* is a term frequently used to frame the corrupt, patrimonial, and violent

<sup>1</sup> Rahis Israel Manamon, "Dépenses militaires du Tchad dans la guerre contre le terrorisme en Afrique centrale et au Sahel: entre puissance militaire régionale et crise de sécurité humaine," *Africa Development / Afrique Développement* 44, no.1 (2019): 45-54.

<sup>2</sup> Jérôme Tubiana and Marielle Débos, "Déby's Chad: Political Manipulation at Home, Military Intervention Abroad, Challenging Times Ahead," *Peaceworks: United States Institute for Peace* 136 (2017), 1- 40; Ketil Fred Hansen, "Regime Security in Chad. How the Western War on Terror Saved the Chadian Dictatorial Regime," *Ante Portas – Studia nad Bepiecznstwem* 2, no.9 (2017): 55-69.

<sup>3</sup> For a timeline of these debates, see "Suivre les actualités du débat sur l'accès aux archives classifiées 'Secret-Défense,'" Archivistes.org, last modified 22 July 2021, <https://www.archivistes.org/Suivre-les-actualites-du-debat-sur-l-acces-aux-archives-classifiees-secret>.

<sup>4</sup> See Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy, "Rapport sur la restitution du patrimoine culturel africain: Vers une nouvelle éthique relationnelle," November 2018, [https://web.archive.org/web/20190328181703/http://restitutionreport2018.com/sarr\\_savoy\\_en.pdf](https://web.archive.org/web/20190328181703/http://restitutionreport2018.com/sarr_savoy_en.pdf); Marlene Daut, "When France Extorted Haiti – the Greatest Heist in History," *The Conversation*, 30 June 2020, <https://theconversation.com/when-france-extorted-haiti-the-greatest-heist-in-history-137949>; Charles Forsdick, "Compensating for the Past: Debating Reparations for Slavery in Contemporary France," *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies* 19:4 (2015): 420-429; Fanny Pigeaud and Ndongo Samba Sylla, *Africa's Last Colonial Currency: The CFA Franc Story*, trans. Thomas Fazi, (London: Pluto Press, 2021); Yvan Guichaoua, "The Bitter Harvest of French Interventionism in the Sahel," *International Affairs* 96 no. 4 (2020): 895-911.

<sup>5</sup> Important monographs include Mario Joaquim Azevedo, *The Roots of Violence: A History of War in Chad* (New York: Routledge, 2005), Bernard Lanne, *Histoire politique du Tchad de 1945 à 1958: administration, partis, élections* (Paris: Karthala, 1998). Sam C. Nolutshungu, *Limits of Anarchy: Intervention and State Formation in Chad* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1996).

<sup>6</sup> J.P. Daughton, *In the Forest of No Joy: The Congo-Océan Railroad and the Tragedy of French Colonialism* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company: 2021); Eric T. Jennings, *Free French Africa in World War II: The African Resistance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

<sup>7</sup> Bruno Charbonneau, *France and the New Imperialism: Security Policy in Sub-Saharan Africa* (London: Routledge, 2016); Tony Chafer and Alexander Keese, eds., *Francophone Africa at Fifty* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015).



means through which French agents made France’s authority manifest in its former empire.<sup>8</sup> By contrast, Powell focuses readers’ attention on Franco-Chadian relations to portray the uneven mutual dependencies and beneficial exchanges among powerful Chadian and French men. Even though the book focuses on the French dimensions of Chad’s postcolonial conflicts, Powell attends to important details in domestic processes that influenced Chadian leaders’ interactions with and reliance on French assistance. France’s interventions “aimed to maintain French credibility as a guarantor of a stable political order that was favorable to pro-French African elites, thus maintaining France’s regional hegemony” (2). French-funded militarization became an important component of governmental legitimacy in early independent Chad.

Violence and political instability are the dominant themes in the scholarly literature on independent Chad. One branch of scholarship examines the *longue durée* of violence—including medieval state formation (Waddai, Kanem, Baguirmi), colonial state militarization, or cultural traditions of accumulation and survival—to understand the origins and causality of governmental instability.<sup>9</sup> Another branch focuses on state-authored violence at the intersection of national politics and international diplomacy.<sup>10</sup> Powell’s compact, two-decade history of French interventions in Chad adds to these approaches by framing conflict and political volatility through the lens of decolonization. Powell tracks France’s gradual decolonization in Chad through cycles of militarization and demilitarization after the country’s independence in 1960. He describes Chad’s early postcolonial era as “more of an imperial restructuring than the end of empire” (14), encouraging readers to be attentive to complex power relations within Chad that determined opportunities for French military diplomacy in the region.<sup>11</sup> Powell’s periodization of decolonization encourages readers to question the language we use to characterize historical processes involving foreign intervention and authority in twentieth-century Africa. Significantly, he uses the term “Franco-Chadian neo-colonial state” to describe 1960s and 1970s Chad.

French diplomatic, intelligence, and military sources inform this text, but *France’s Wars in Chad* is not a one-sided history of French neo-colonial domination. Powell emphasizes the “role of contingency and individual agency in a wider context often (and rightly) understood as neocolonial” (7). He evaluates the possibilities and constraints that shaped Franco-Chadian relations during the early postcolonial era. Foreign stakeholders reinforced and undermined the central forces of state building, which simultaneously compromised the Chadian government’s autonomy and reduced the state’s accountability to its citizens. Chad’s first elected president, François Tombalbaye (in office 1960-1975), relied heavily on foreign military assistance to legitimize his government and maintain Chad’s territorial integrity. Tombalbaye used the Franco-Chadian army to strategically deploy violence that buttressed his government. Powell details secret agreements between Tombalbaye and French government officials that extended beyond normative military assistance and mutual defense contracts. In a situation of widespread domestic unrest, France had written consent to take command of the Chadian military to protect Tombalbaye’s presidency in case of open rebellion (17-18). France pursued regional dominance with the mutual support of African allies. These tightly-bound

---

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Borrel, Amzat Boukari-Yabara, Benoît Collombat, Thomas Deltombe, eds., *L’Empire qui ne veut pas mourir: Une histoire de la françafrique* (Paris : Seuil, 2021); François-Xavier Verschave, *La Françafrique: Le plus long scandale de la République* (Paris: Éditions Stock, 1998).

<sup>9</sup> Julien Brachet and Judith Scheele, *The Value of Disorder: Autonomy, Prosperity, and Plunder in the Chadian Sahara* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019); Marielle Débos, *Living by the Gun in Chad: Combatants, Impunity and State Formation* (London: Zed Books, 2016).

<sup>10</sup> Ahmad Allam-Mi, *Autour du Tchad en Guerre: Tractations politiques et diplomatiques, 1975-1990* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2014); Mohamed Tétémadi Bangoura, *Violence Politique et conflits en Afrique: le cas de Tchad* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2005); Millard Burr and Robert O. Collins, *Africa’s Thirty Years War: Libya, Chad, and the Sudan, 1963-1993* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1999).

<sup>11</sup> This argument follows Tony Chafer’s arguments in *The End of Empire in French West Africa: France’s Successful Decolonization?* (New York: Berg, 2002).

relationships of neo-colonial diplomatic and military reciprocity effectively limited other imagined political futures for people living within the territorial borders of Chad.

Powell demonstrates that Tombalbaye used French military resources to suppress internal dissent through tactics similar to those of French colonial conquest and military rule (57-58). The origins of rural armed rebellions against Tombalbaye's government are also located in the legacies of uneven colonial development. France invested more heavily in agricultural regions of southern Chad, and imposed coercive labor extraction schemes on the communities living there.<sup>12</sup> Chad's rural north experienced colonialism as military occupation with little economic or political development. Tombalbaye continued colonial practices of promoting southerners within civilian government and the national military. Southern bureaucrats and servicemen participated in the political marginalization and violent repression of opposition groups in northern Chad.<sup>13</sup> These communities challenged Tombalbaye's government with collective tax evasion and open protest. The Franco-Chadian military's use of deadly force catalyzed armed rebellion. Powell details the actors, interest groups, and shifting alliances of militants in northern Chad. In 1966, these forces coalesced into Frolinat (the National Liberation Front of Chad), which sought to liberate Chad from President Tombalbaye, his French underwriters, and the violence of the Franco-Chadian army.

*France's Wars in Chad* is a fantastic contribution to the history of French military imperialism in sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>14</sup> Significantly, this monograph illustrates how French military imperialism persisted beyond the formal end of the colonial era. In Powell's analysis of Franco-Chadian military personnel and operational strategy, he calls attention to numerous continuities that extended from France's counterinsurgent wars in Indochina and Algeria into Chad—the most obvious being French President General Charles de Gaulle's African policy. The French military incorporated Chad into a long sequence of counterinsurgent wars that began in Indochina in 1945 and continue into France's current counterterrorism operations in the Sahel. *France's Wars in Chad* highlight two major interventions. The first involved a counterinsurgency operation spanning 1969-1972 (Operation Limousin) and the second aimed to repel Libyan-backed rebels from the N'Djamena in 1978. French military intervention contributed to the collapse of the Franco-Chadian state and created a context that facilitated Hissène Habré's autocratic presidency from 1982-1990.

Franco-Chadian military diplomacy was typified by a complex array of backdoor deals, violent acts of force, the rise and fall of militias and secessionist groups, and fractured political parties, as well as the militarization of regional and international policy. The book's tight chronological organization gives order to major historical actors, military operations, and governmental institutions during France's ambiguous decolonization during the 1960s and 1970s. Powell tracks the evolution of Chadian political groups and militias (like Frolinat) through their internal workings, ideological shifts, leadership changes, and funding streams. These groups were invested in the violent overthrow of the Franco-Chadian state, which propped up the leadership of Tombalbaye until his assassination in 1975. Powell also weaves regional actors into this diplomatic history to

<sup>12</sup> Lori Leonard, "Women Who Change into Men: A Gendered History of Precarity in 'Useful' Chad," *Africa* 89, no. 3 (2019): 521-40; René Lemarchand, "The Politics of Sara Ethnicity: A Note on the Origins of the Civil War in Chad" *Cahiers d'Études Africaines* 20 (1980).

<sup>13</sup> Ketil Fred Hansen, "Chad: Armed Presidents and Politics" *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics* (2020), 4. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.1803>

<sup>14</sup> For colonial era histories see: Sarah J. Zimmerman, *Militarizing Marriage: African Colonial Soldiers' Conjugal Traditions in Modern French Empire* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2020); Amadou Ba, *Les Sénégalais à Madagascar: Militaires Ouest-Africains dans la Conquête et la Colonisation de la Grande Île, 1895-1960* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2012); Gregory Mann, *Native Sons: West African Veterans and France in the Twentieth Century* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006); Myron Echenberg, *Colonial Conscripts: The Tirailleurs Sénégalais in French West Africa, 1857-1960* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1991); for postcolonial era literature see notes above and Benedikt Erforth, *Contemporary French Security Policy in Africa: On Ideas and Wars* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020); Bruno Charbonneau and Tony Chafer, *Peace Operations in the Francophone World: Global Governance Meets Post-Colonialism* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2014); Marco Wyss, "The Gendarme Stays in Africa: France's Military Role in Côte d'Ivoire," *African Conflict and Peacebuilding Review* 3, no.1 (2013): 81-111.

highlight how Libya, Nigeria, Cameroon, Sudan, and the Organization of African Unity (OAU) challenged and contributed to the longevity of France's authority in Chad. Even though France lost a reliable ally in Tombalbaye, it became a long-term stakeholder in Chad's future.

In terms of organization, early chapters detail the African policies of French presidents de Gaulle and Georges Pompidou. Later chapters telescope out to integrate regional actors and events into this history, signaling the denouement of France's outsized influence over Chadian affairs. In the late 1970s, Nigeria brokered peace agreements that resulted in Chad's Transitional Government of National Unity (*Gouvernement d'Union Nationale de Transition*, GUNT). Powell includes a chapter on France's relationship with Jean-Bédel Bokassa's Central African Empire, providing important context for France's regional political objectives. From the late 1960s, Libya's head of state, Muammar Gaddafi, backed Frolinat and rural Chadian militias with the intent of destabilizing the Franco-Chadian state. Libya's support culminated in the annexation of the Aouzou Strip in 1973, and Gaddafi's attempt to merge Chad with Libya in 1983. France's military authority in the region decreased throughout the 1970s. However, the French government continued to spend heavily on administrative and military support that maintained Chad's autonomy from Libya and aimed to rebuild the government following its collapse in 1979.

Powell's book concludes by drawing connection between the Franco-Chadian neo-colonial state and contemporary Franco-Chadian military cooperation. French military coordination with Tombalbaye's government in 1960s and 1970s offers insight into France's relationship with Idriss Déby (in office 1990-2021) and the large presence of Chadian soldiers in Operation Barkhane. Headquartered in N'Djamena since 2014, Operation Barkhane provides French military assistance and coordination to Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, and Chad (the G5 Sahel countries) to counter terrorism in the Sahel. Operation Barkhane facilitated Chad's emergence as a regional military powerhouse and made regime stability in Chad crucial to French counterterrorism efforts in the Sahel. In a move that shares great similarity with the military intervention in 1969, France used airstrikes against rural Chadian rebels to protect Idriss Déby's presidency in 2019 (342-3). Déby's death in April 2021 likely influenced French President Macron's decision two months later to end Operation Barkhane. *France's Wars in Chad* provides readers with a history of French military imperialism in Chad that serves as prologue for understanding the troubling current events related to Franco-Chadian militarization in the Sahel.<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> Relevant news stories concerning Chadian soldiers & anti-French military protests: André Kodmadjingar, "Indignation suite aux actes de viols des militaires tchadiens au Niger," *VOA* 6 April 2021 <https://www.voaafrrique.com/a/indignation-et-consternation-suite-aux-actes-de-viols-de-l-armée-tchadienne/5841055.html> (accessed 19 July 2022); "Malian Police Disperse Protest Against French Military Presence," *Reuters* 21 January 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-mali-security-france-idUSKBN29Q0SG> (accessed 29 July 2022); "French Army Convoy Blocked by Burkina Faso Protesters reaches Niger," *Aljazeera* 26 November 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/11/26/french-army-convoy-blocked-by-burkinabe-protesters-reaches-niger> (accessed 28 July, 2021).

Response by Nathaniel K. Powell, Honorary Researcher, Centre for War and Diplomacy, Lancaster University

---

First of all, I would like to thank Bruno Charbonneau, Armel Dirou, Richard Fogarty, and Sarah Zimmerman for devoting their time to reading the book and writing about it. This is no small thing, especially in the middle of a pandemic and amid heavy and frequently increasing academic workloads. I would also like to extend my gratitude to Frank Gerits for organizing the roundtable and Diane Labrosse for editing it.

I am flattered by the positive reception the book seems to have received, both here and with reviewers elsewhere. I am very happy that my attempt to present a detailed narrative of French involvement in Chad's first two postcolonial decades did not obscure some of the book's broader arguments about the murky and often illegible workings of power and influence.

The story told in the book is a complex one which I have done my best to make accessible to non-specialists. I think Sarah Zimmerman distils my argument better than I do in noting the book's emphasis on "uneven mutual dependencies" which characterize(d) Franco-Chadian relations and both shape(d) and limit(ed) French options and influence.

*Neo-Colonialism*

Since the book's argument both reaffirms and complicates 'traditional' narratives that are focused on French neo-colonialism, it is worth discussing my use of the term. This connects two criticisms which the reviewers raise – from rather opposite perspectives. Despite the abundance of literature that appeared on the subject in the 1960s and 1970s, the term is not particularly well-theorized, nor is there a single agreed-upon definition.<sup>1</sup>

To put it simply, my use of the term is meant to denote an asymmetric power relationship, in which France exercised considerable political influence and power in Chad and maintained a dominant position in Chad's economy. As the book notes, however, even preponderant influence and overwhelming power does not always translate into control (22).

Bruno Charbonneau raises the point that my argument about the end of a certain "neo-colonial order" in Chad fails to adequately distinguish between different kinds of neo-colonial orders. The problem partly lies in the fact that the "transition" away from France's influence in domestic politics occurs with the end of my narrative. When Hissène Habré took power in June 1982, French influence was arguably at its nadir, and that is where the book ends. This made it difficult to compare and contrast French influence before 1979 with France's post-1982 role.

The point I wanted to make is that prior to the 1979 collapse of the Chadian state, the French role in the country was not only that of an external intervenor. It was an 'internal' intervenor as well. The Chadian state itself was staffed by large numbers of French administrators, aid workers, military advisors and intelligence officials. The economy was dominated by French interests. The "Franco-Chadian state" (17-22) that I describe early in the book epitomized this form of neo-colonial relationship.

After 1982 however, the 'internal' nature of the French presence was massively reduced, while the external 'interventionist' aspect remained (and remains today). As I note in the book, this did not signify an end to

---

<sup>1</sup> For classical expressions of the idea, see: Kwame Nkrumah, *Neo-Colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism* (London: Panaf, 1965); Samir Amin, *L'Afrique de l'Ouest bloquée*, (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1971).

neo-colonialism per se, but a weakening of overall French influence over the political choices of subsequent Chadian governments.

This leads me to Armel Dirou's critique that my discussion of French neo-colonialism is misplaced because France only had negligible economic interests in Chad. I probably should have been clearer on that particular point. However, I neither argue that Chad was economically significant for France, nor that French interventions there were motivated by economic interests. The same point applies, as I have argued elsewhere, to French military interventions on the continent in general. Indeed, if any French economic interests came into play in Chad, it had to do, as Dirou rightly mentions, with France's ambiguous relations with Libya.

Nonetheless, as I outline in the book, Chad's own economy was immensely dependent upon French imports, exports, and investments. Moreover, French actors and interests were deeply imbricated within Chad's economy (the cotton sector, import-export, the currency, etc.). This was the norm in nearly all of France's former colonies. This does not infirm Jacques Marseille's thesis that the empire (and especially a peripheral region such as Chad) was decreasingly important for French capitalism after World War II.<sup>2</sup>

Like colonialism though, neo-colonialism is a social fact in the neo-colony far more than it is in the metropole. Chad in its first post-independence decades typified this vastly unequal and exceptionally dependent relationship that, in my opinion, can only be described as neo-colonial.

#### *The Cold War*

Both Charbonneau and Dirou have also suggested that I could have placed more emphasis on the Cold War context. In part, this was deliberate, though I probably should have been more explicit about it. There were two reasons for my choice. Unlike in Zaire or Southern Africa, direct Cold War considerations were rather marginal in official and unofficial French deliberations about Chad and Libya during the 1960s and 1970s. Indeed, the contrast in the archival record is stark. Cold War fears infused French reporting and intelligence on Zaire during the Shaba invasions of 1977 and 1978. They also played a critical role in French military efforts to save Mobutu Sese Seko—most notably in the 1978 airborne assault on Kolwezi.<sup>3</sup> However, these discussions are virtually absent at the same time and among the same policymakers regarding Chad.

The Cold War as a structuring feature of international politics grew more salient in Chad in the 1980s, but this was much more of an American obsession than a French one. Indeed, many French policymakers rejected American Cold-War-inspired interpretations of Libyan behavior. Even Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, who sought at times to overthrow Muammar Gaddafi, did not perceive the Libyan threat in primarily Cold War terms, and indeed maintained an ambiguous (and highly counterproductive) relationship with Libya throughout his presidency.

The other reason that I downplay the Cold War in my narrative is to illustrate that, despite its centrality to global politics, it was peripheral to political dynamics in much of Central Africa at the time. Of far more importance were regional interests – most notably Libyan expansionism – and French commitments in

---

<sup>2</sup> See Jacques Marseille, *Empire colonial et capitalisme français: Histoire d'un divorce* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1984). It also might be worth noting that at least part of Marseille's thesis has been seriously challenged on empirical grounds: Elise Huillery, "The Black Man's Burden: The Cost of Colonization of French West Africa," *Journal of Economic History* 74, no. 1, (2013): 1-38.

<sup>3</sup> See: Nathaniel Powell "The 'Cuba of the West?' France's Cold War in Zaire, 1977-1978," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 18, no. 2, (2016): 64-96.

protecting local political orders. The idea here is that one can write a political and international history of much of postcolonial Africa that leaves the Cold War at the margins.

### *Literature*

Similarly, in his otherwise highly complimentary review, Richard Fogarty notes the absence of any discussion of “*Françafrique*.” The term is widely used to describe the nefarious networks of personal and political relations linking French and African elites as conduits for French neo-colonialism. It is also frequently used to describe the entirety of postcolonial French policy towards Africa.<sup>4</sup>

Fogarty’s criticism is a valid one, though I would argue that I do discuss *Françafrique* frequently in the text – particularly in the first chapter and my chapter on Bokassa – though without using the term. Admittedly though, it is an odd lacuna and I should have foregrounded the term more explicitly.

That said, as Zimmerman notes, avoiding the “trope” of “*Françafrique*” in the Chadian framework has the advantage of opening space for an analysis of the particularities of the Franco-Chadian relationship. In Chad, intense interpersonal elite relationships and individual ‘French connections’ played a less influential role in French policymaking (as opposed to Chadian political dynamics) than they did in ‘core’ countries such as Côte d’Ivoire, Gabon, and Senegal, among others.

Both Fogarty and Dirou also both lament my decision to not engage more deeply with existing historiography. Fogarty in particular notes an absence of discussion of the literature on French empire and decolonization. The main reasons for this are space considerations and the fact that my book covers a period which postdates that which is addressed in much of that literature.

Dirou on the other hand specifically takes me to task for not citing Damien Mireval’s exceptional research on French intelligence in Chad. All I can say is that I wish that I could have! Mireval had unqualified access to a host of defence ministry archives and personal papers which I was unable to consult. His work would certainly have improved my own analysis and made my book a better one. Unfortunately, I was only able to obtain a copy of his dissertation after my final manuscript proofs had been submitted. His book, *Tchad: Les guerres secrètes de la France: Les arcanes du renseignement français (1969-1990)* was also published after mine.<sup>5</sup>

Fortunately, our works are largely complementary rather than contrasting in significant ways. Mine is more focused on the political dimensions of France’s interventions and concentrates on a shorter timeframe. Mireval on the other hand marshals his extensive expertise in intelligence matters to narrate and analyze that side of the story, pushing on until 1990. I heartily recommend it.

### *French Responsibility*

Dirou suggests my book argues that France is “exclusively responsible” for Chad’s conflicts. I think this misses some of the nuances of my argument. In fact, I make the opposite claim. I note that due to colonial legacies, regional imbalances, and state-building imperatives, it is “unlikely that postcolonial Chad could have remained peaceful, even in the absence of a strong French presence” (13).

Instead, what I try to do is analyze the *way* in which Chadian politics and postcolonial French policies interacted with each other. In this sense, France certainly contributed to Chadian instability, state collapse and

---

<sup>4</sup> See: Thomas Borrel, Azmat Boukari Yabara, Benoît Collombat, and Thomas Deltombe, eds., *L’Empire qui ne veut pas mourir: Une histoire de la Françafrique* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 2021).

<sup>5</sup> Damien Mireval, *Tchad: Les guerres secrètes de la France: les arcanes du renseignement français (1969-1990)* (Versailles : VA Editions, 2021).

subsequent authoritarian consolidation. These processes, or at least the way they played out, are inexplicable without reference to France's role. Moreover, many French officials acknowledged this at the time. But contributing to these processes does not make France the only 'guilty' party throughout the period. A book focusing more on the Libyan role would be equally damning.

### *Counterinsurgency*

Dirou further suggests that the book is based on the "anachronistic premise" that French operations were counterinsurgency operations. He suggests my use of the term is inappropriately and ahistorically applied to French involvement in Chad.

I'm not sure I'd agree with Dirou that this is a premise of the book. The chosen terminology also has little relevance for my argument. Dirou is correct to note that counterinsurgency was "taboo" in official French military doctrine after the Algerian War. Nevertheless, this places too much emphasis on official doctrine, definitions, and pronouncements. The French government also did not describe its operations in Chad as 'wars.'

By any definition not strictly tied to the Joint Staff College's narrow doctrinal conceptions at the time, France's first major military effort in Chad (1969-1972) was a counterinsurgency operation. It aimed above all to militarily suppress an insurgency and simultaneously to build up the capacity of the Chadian state in order to address the 'root causes' of the rebellion. Indeed, historian and counterinsurgency scholar Elie Tenenbaum, whom Dirou mentions in his review, pointedly describes Operation Limousin as "one of the last veritable French counterinsurgency operations of the 20<sup>th</sup> century."<sup>6</sup>

Moreover, many of the French officers involved perceived Operation Limousin as a counterinsurgency. The continuities and similarities with operations conducted in Algeria were widely noted, and the Indochinese and Algerian experiences directly informed France's military and political strategies. It is true that the French commanding general, Edouard Cortadellas, exerted a considerable effort in trying to convince both the public and his own officers that what they were doing was different than what had been done in Algeria. Shakespeare might have suggested that he doth protest too much.

What was different was the scale (much smaller in Chad) and the fact that French forces were doing this in conjunction with, and on behalf of, a nominally independent government rather than on their own. In any case, I apply that label only to France's first intervention. For the second, I note that, "unlike the 1969–1972 French intervention, Opération Tacaud had no mandate to defeat the rebellion or to conduct any kind of counterinsurgency operation" (159).

### *Policy recommendations*

Dirou also criticises the lack of concrete suggestions for addressing the problems I identify in the book. This relates to how officials could have performed better and how present day policymakers could avoid the mistakes of the past. He situates this as part of problematic "critical theories" approach which refuses to offer constructive alternatives.

If the book were a think tank piece, policy paper, or perhaps a work more clearly anchored in political science, this critique might have more merit. However, such imperatives often clash with historical methods. One main purpose of the discipline is to analyze events of the past in their complexity. If a book is written as a policy memo, it risks seriously deforming its subject. What this means in practice is that while mistakes are

---

<sup>6</sup> See Élie Tenenbaum, *Partisans et centurions: Une histoire de la guerre irrégulière au XX<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris: Perrin, 2018), 410.

sometimes easy to identify, alternatives are often not because of the multitude of variables under consideration which impede counterfactual reasoning.

Indeed, throughout the book I am reasonably clear about which decisions I consider to have been major mistakes. For instance, the policy of empowering ethnic militias to counter Frolinat rebels, which was directly inspired by counterinsurgency practices in Indochina and Algeria, had profound effects in weakening Chadian state authority in the longer term. This was understood at the time within the Cooperation Ministry yet its warnings were ignored (58).

The decision to send Pierre Galopin as a negotiator to free hostages in Tibesti was another mistake that was clearly telegraphed in advance by a number of France's interlocutors (114). General Forest's 1979 decision to allow a faction of the northern rebellion to move into N'Djamena was key in the collapse of the state and effective ethnic cleansing of the capital which ensued. French Ambassador Louis Dallier and many officials in Paris recognized this as a major mistake—both then and subsequently (203-204). In many ways Chad still suffers from the consequences of that decision. The problem of course in noting such things is that one is immediately forced to think of alternatives, few of which may have seemed palatable or relevant at the time.

The book also on several occasions makes the point that the ambiguity inherent in Franco-Libyan relations had a profoundly destabilizing influence on Chad. The implication of that analysis, which was understood by many French officials at the time, is that a more forceful French stance against Gaddafi may have spared Chad a degree of Libyan interference.

I would however hesitate to cast these observations as 'lessons from history.' While some elements of this book are potentially generalizable and have policy implications, this is only in a very loose sense. It would also imply accepting the ideological premise that intervening on behalf of an authoritarian, violent, and predatory state was a legitimate exercise to begin with. Indeed, as I note in the book, many of the officers and soldiers serving in Operation Limousin did not accept this premise and considered it an "inadmissible" and "shameful" operation (101).

In that vein, if I had to suggest lessons from the book, my answer would not likely satisfy most practitioners. It is usually far easier for outside intervenors to make things worse than make them better; no conceivable policy made in Paris could have improved Chadian state capacity or legitimacy; those that it did implement did much to damage both. There is no policy recommendation that can be made in such circumstances.

I could easily extend this recommendation to policymakers in Paris today. Firmly backing Chad's "transitional" military authorities will not improve the country's democratic prospects and will only deepen wider regional resentments against France's military presence. A recommendation then to simply leave Chad would not, of course, be taken seriously in Paris (or Washington).

### *Ideology*

Finally, Dirou suggests that the book lacks academic rigor because it adheres to an "ideological approach" instead of "engaging with the facts alone." Here he refers to my highly critical treatment of French policy and its impact.

Indeed, for those who have lost comrades and sacrificed much in France's many overseas military engagements, my conclusions may seem unfair. Some of these operations, such as the 2013-2016 Operation



Sangaris in the Central African Republic, have literally saved thousands of lives. Dirou himself played a key role in Sangaris as a battlegroup commander.<sup>7</sup>

A more narrowly focused military analysis of French interventions in Chad and elsewhere on the continent could paint a more positive picture. Historically, French forces have overcome serious logistical, environmental and material constraints to achieve impressive results on the ground.<sup>8</sup> Military analysts frequently praise a military culture which prizes adaptability, flexibility, command-level initiative and risk-taking.<sup>9</sup> My book discusses several examples of the success of these approaches in practice at the tactical level (eg. 90-91; 160-162).

However, such an analysis carries its own assumptions, unspoken or otherwise, which give it an equally “ideological” tinge. For instance, for all its effectiveness in a purely military sense, the French military has often been deployed to protect profoundly iniquitous political orders in the name of an ideologically construed notion of “stability.” The failure to interrogate or even acknowledge the basis of these claims, or the longer-term consequences of successful French actions, represents a strong, though often implicit, ideological position. I would go further and argue that such a position has led to clear policy failures, such as the recent French exit from Mali.<sup>10</sup>

Ultimately, no work of history, politics or military analysis can escape ideology. Such a bias is usually more evident to those who fundamentally disagree with its premises, but no unbiased account can ever be written. In that sense though, Dirou’s reproach might have more force if it were directed at the book’s underlying assumptions rather than criticizing their mere existence.

### *Conclusion*

I have already written too much, so to conclude I would just like to reiterate my thanks to the reviewers for taking the time to read and engage with my book. It is a great reward for a writer to elicit such a rich and wide-ranging response to what one writes. I especially appreciate their efforts given that I have forced each of them to wade through a narrative covering a complex set of conflicts. Certainly writing it was no easy task. I hope I have managed to satisfactorily respond to their comments and critiques.

---

<sup>7</sup> For Dirou’s own fascinating account, see: Armel Dirou, *Security and International Relations in Central Africa: A Practitioner’s Perspective* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022).

<sup>8</sup> For an expansive and critical assessment see : Michel Goya, *Le temps des guépards: La guerre mondiale de la France de 1961 à nos jours* (Paris: Tallandier, 2022).

<sup>9</sup> See Michael Shurkin’s excellent overview of French thinking: Michael Shurkin, “France’s War in the Sahel and the Evolution of Counter-Insurgency Doctrine,” *Texas National Security Review* 4, no. 1 (2020/2021): 35-60. <http://dx.doi.org/10.26153/tsw/11707>

<sup>10</sup> See: Nathaniel Powell, “Why France Failed in Mali,” *War on the Rocks*, 21 February 2022, <https://warontherocks.com/2022/02/why-france-failed-in-mali/>