Introduction

Shortly before midnight on August 10, 1960, the famous writer André Malraux stepped onto a balcony in front of a large crowd in Fort-Lamy, the capital of the French colony of Chad. As French minister of culture, he had come as President Charles de Gaulle's official representative to preside over the ceremonies marking the territory's independence. While Malraux invoked Chad's historical role as a launching pad for Free French Forces in the Second World War and the linked destiny of the two nations, the lights suddenly went out. A power shortage had plunged Fort-Lamy into darkness. Someone in Malraux's entourage scrambled to find a flashlight so he could finish the speech and so François Tombalbaye, Chad's leader, could read his.[1] With this inauspicious beginning, independent Chad would soon embark on a tragic path leading to decades of violent conflict, foreign interventions, state collapse, and bloody dictatorship.

As in many of France's former colonies, Chad's newfound independence was an ambiguous one. This book aims to trace the important French role in the downward spiral that gripped Chad from independence in 1960 to the rise of Hissène Habré's dictatorship in 1982. In many respects, this should be viewed as a period of extended and incomplete decolonization as French actors remained heavily involved in the Chadian state and later strove to establish, restore, cajole, or impose political order in the country. Most visibly, this took the form of two major military interventions.

Reluctantly ordered in the last weeks of de Gaulle's presidency, the first lasted from 1969 to 1972. It rapidly took the form of a counter-insurgency effort dedicated to restoring state authority over a countryside in revolt over excessive taxation, authoritarian rule, ethnic

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[1] David Styan, "Chad's Political Violence at 50: Bullets, Ballots and Bases," in Tony Chafer and Alexander Keese, eds., *Francophone Africa at Fifty* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), p. 237.

persecution, and political marginalization. While militarily successful, it failed to restore, or establish, the kinds of state legitimacy necessary to ensure peace. In other respects, it encouraged regime retrenchment and further rebellion.

The second intervention, ordered by French president Valéry Giscard d'Estaing in early 1978, aimed to stop Libyan-backed rebels from seizing the country's capital. Though initially successful, it contributed to the collapse of the Chadian state the next year. It ended ignominiously in April 1980 amidst a renewed civil war. This was soon followed by a Libyan military occupation. Through a torturous, confused, and partly successful combination of covert operations and diplomatic maneuvering, French officials contributed to getting Libyan forces out of the country, only to find themselves backing a fractious coalition government incapable of defending itself. This set the stage for seizure of power by Hissène Habré, one of postcolonial Africa's worst dictators.

This story is an important one. For historians of Franco-African relations, France's interventions in Chad are critical for understanding the nature of France's role in postcolonial Africa. These interventions aimed, above all else, to maintain French credibility as a guarantor of a stable political order favorable to pro-French African elites, thus maintaining France's regional hegemony. This book attempts to address the question of whether these policies achieved their aims.

Chad's postcolonial experience with France also emphasizes the extent to which formal independence for many of France's African colonies only represented an important step, rather than an end, to the process of decolonization. France's massive presence in Chad's economy, state, and security services in the 1960s illustrate this. Furthermore, the ways in which the French capacity to influence events declined over the first two postcolonial decades highlight the limits to French power.

This book should also serve as a useful case study for scholars interested in civil wars and foreign interventions. Lenses of analysis focused on the causal role of state behavior and its relations with local actors are of particular importance in understanding Chad's conflicts.[2] Chad's wars revolved around several major fault lines – including

[2] For the emphasis on state actors, see: Paul D. Williams, *War & Conflict in Africa* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016), p. 361.

North/South, Muslims/non-Muslims, Francophones/Arabophones, pastoralists/farmers, as well as more localized ethnic divisions. The ways in which these fault lines emerged, hardened, or became central to various aspects of Chad's conflicts were intimately tied to the behavior of the Chadian state and its French patron. Partly this resulted from the French colonial heritage, partly from the governance strategies employed by Chadian rulers, and partly by French policies, which encouraged regime retrenchment. Violence that might initially erupt in response to state abuses could take on more local tinges in the form of ethnic or even religious conflict.

Much as the Chadian state could often mobilize French resources to fend off its enemies, local communities could mobilize state resources to both defend themselves and attack their enemies. The relationship, and frequent disconnect, between national-level cleavages and local ones constituted a major driver of violence and insecurity throughout the period covered here.[3] While this account's focus on France implies an elite-level analysis of Chad's conflicts, readers should understand that they only constitute one key part of the story.

Chad's experience also furnishes a clear example of the interactive and often contradictory relationship among conflicts, foreign interventions, and state-building. As political scientist Sam Nolutshungu noted, Chad's history and the weight of foreign intervenors in the evolution of its conflicts meant that the line between "internal" and "external" often blurred. This fuzziness profoundly affected the development of the Chadian state and its elites.[4] In particular, Nolutshungu anticipated later theories of "extraversion" by several years. He argued that Chad's politics were characterized by a "manipulation of dependence" in which both state and nonstate actors attempted to mobilize French support and resources for their own political projects.[5] Throughout the two decades covered by this book, virtually every one of Chad's armed factions would benefit from or seek French support at one point or

[3] This phenomenon is hardly unique to Chad. See: Stathis N. Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

[4] Sam C. Nolutshungu, *Limits of Anarchy: Intervention and State Formation in Chad* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996), p. 15. Possibly due to his untimely death of cancer in 1997 and Chad's relative obscurity in American academia, his work has not had the influence it deserves.

[5] Ibid., p. 14. For the most influential text on extraversion, see: Jean-François Bayart, "Africa in the World: A History of Extraversion," *African Affairs*, Vol. 99, No. 395 (2000), pp. 217–267.

another. Even when France was absent, it always weighed on the political calculus of Chadian faction leaders and elites.

In part, this resulted from the inherent fluidity of alliances between and among the state and armed groups.[6] This only intensified as the Chadian state began to collapse in the late 1970s. In this sense, Chad's experience prefigured the kinds of conflicts parts of Africa would suffer in later decades. For instance, the period covered in this book marked the emergence of a fragmented territory controlled by a plethora of armed groups, most seeking control of the state. A number of contemporary observers described this scene in terms of "warlordism," which had many parallels to later conflicts in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Somalia, and the Democratic Republic of Congo, among others.[7]

Chadian state collapse both partly resulted from and attracted foreign interventions, which prolonged civil war and profoundly shaped the nature of subsequent state-building. The history of France's role in Chad provides a telling example of the ways in which foreign intervention aiming at stabilization and a negotiated political settlement can contribute to increased factional strife. It may also provide a relevant object lesson for policymakers today. In some limited respects, the recent history of Mali, and of the Sahel more broadly, parallels Chad's misfortunes of the 1970s and 1980s.[8]

As in Chad, resources from Libya helped to upset the balance of power in Mali in 2012, turning a low-intensity conflict into a full-blown civil war that split the country into two. In both Chad and Mali, political tensions arising from the conflict weakened the ruling regime as well as the state, resulting in a coup d'état. In both cases, ransoms

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[6] See: Marielle Debos, *Living by the Gun in Chad: Combatants, Impunity and State Formation* (London: Zed Books, 2016).

[7] See: Robert Buijtenhuijs, *Le Frolinat et les guerres civiles du Tchad: 1977–1984* (Paris: Karthala, 1987), p. 331, and Roger Charlton and Roy May, "Warlords and Militarism in Chad," *Review of African Political Economy*, Vol. 16, No. 45/46 (1989), pp. 12–25. William Reno argues, however, that Chad's case differed somewhat from later variants in that some leaders of armed groups derived part of their legitimacy as traditional leaders rather than having prewar links to state patronage networks. See: William Reno, *Warfare in Independent Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 170–171. As Reno acknowledges, though, this was only partly the case.

[8] For France's 2013 intervention in Mali, see: Christopher S. Chivvis, *The French War on Al Qa'ida in Africa* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016); and Jean-Christophe Notin, *La guerre de la France au Mali* (Paris: Editions Tallandier, 2014).

derived from kidnappings by rebel groups helped to finance their acquisition of weapons and patronage, allowing them to recruit and assert themselves more forcefully on the national stage. Also, both conflicts arose in part from political and economic imbalances between poorer communities in the North and a (relatively) wealthier and more educated southern elite, which dominated government. In both cases, northern combatants, many from pastoralist communities, benefited from high levels of mobility and vast strategic depth to mount successful offensives against southern-dominated governmental authorities.

In both cases as well, the North-South dichotomy, while in some respects predating colonialism, derived its particular characteristics from a colonial reconfiguration of political organization and the imposition of new institutions. The effective conquest of the North of both countries by a collection of rebel movements engendered serious splits among rebels in both situations, threatening to complicate attempts at mediation and peacemaking. In both Chad and Mali, rebel advances southward triggered a major French intervention (1978 and 2013, respectively) in defense of the ailing and deficient southern government.

In Chad, regional powers and the Organization of African Unity (OAU) attempted to mediate the conflict as well as organize military interventions. In Mali, the UN deployed a peacekeeping mission aimed at helping the reconstituted Malian government to stabilize the country. In Chad, a short-lived OAU Inter-African Peacekeeping Force charged with stabilization failed, due to a lack of resources and an ambiguous mandate. Today, the ongoing efforts of the "G5 Sahel," comprising Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Chad, to effectively deploy a multilateral force to secure porous borderlands likewise suffers from funding uncertainties and an ill-defined mission.[9]

Meanwhile, in August 2014, the French operation in Mali, Opération Serval, merged with a 28-year-long French operation in Chad, Opération Épervier, along with additional elements and an expanded mandate to become Opération Barkhane. Unlike previous French interventions, Barkhane's mandate extends throughout the G5

[9] See: Nicolas Degrais, "Cinq ans après, une radioscopie du G5 Sahel: Des réformes nécessaires de l'architecture et du processus décisionnel," *Observatoire du monde arabo-musulman et du Sahel*, March 2019. pp. 1–140, found at : https://www.frstrategie.org/web/documents/programmes/observatoire-du-monde-arabo-musulman-et-du-sahel/publications/201913.pdf.

Sahelian countries. Responding to the persistence of various armed groups, the new operation's official mission initially aimed to "support the armed forces of partner countries in the Sahel in their struggle against armed terrorist groups" and "contribute to preventing the reappearance of terrorist sanctuaries in the region."[10]

France's 1969–1972 intervention in Chad offers some insights into the kinds of obstacles to success that this mission may face. Like Barkhane, it aimed to support Chad's army and government in their fight against a major insurgency. French counterinsurgency efforts combined military operations with efforts to reform the Chadian administration. It also armed and trained numerous ethnic militias to help contain and suppress the rebellion. While militarily successful, French investment in Tombalbaye's regime and its empowerment of local chiefs contributed to longer-term instability. French protection meant that Tombalbaye no longer had much incentive to reach out to Chad's marginalized communities, and the militia policy undermined efforts to reestablish state administration. It may also have contributed to high levels of local violence later in the decade.

In many respects, Barkhane and the broader UN and international engagement in favor of the G5 states risk similar outcomes. The political elites of the countries at the core of the Sahel's crises – Mali, Niger, and Chad – have benefited enormously from the resources and protection procured from the international community. This creates disincentives for these actors to push for the kinds of reforms and concessions necessary to provide sustainably stable futures for their peoples. Furthermore, French and broader Western dependence on Chadian strongman Idriss Déby for their policy goals may enable behaviors and practices that could undermine regional stability for years to come. A better understanding of previous French engagement in Chad can help to illustrate the dangers of just such a policy.[11]

This book also outlines the rise to power of Hissène Habré. Habré's regime stands accused of killing some 40,000 people and imprisoning

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[10] French Defense Ministry, "Opération Barkhane," found at: www.defense.gouv .fr/operations/operations/sahel/dossier-de-presentation-de-l-operation-barkhane/operation-barkhane, accessed 11.08.2014 (via the Internet Archive Wayback Machine – www.archive.org).

[11] See: Nathaniel K. Powell, "Battling Instability? The Recurring Logic of French Military Interventions in Africa," *African Security*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (2017), pp. 47–72.

and torturing tens of thousands more. In May 2016, the Extraordinary African Chambers, an African Union–authorized special criminal tribunal established in Dakar, convicted Habré of crimes against humanity, torture, and war crimes. His sentence of life in prison was upheld on appeal the following year.[12] As illustrated later in this book, Habré's ruthless methods did not begin when he seized power in June 1982. Instead, he left a bloody trail behind him of executed prisoners, ethnic massacres, and indiscriminate urban warfare. French observers knew full well what kind of leader he would become, long before he consolidated his control over the country.

Approach

This book is written as an unabashedly narrative history. I find this approach useful for two reasons. First, outside of Chad, the country's history of conflict and foreign interventions is an unfamiliar one to most audiences. This includes many academics, activists, and policymakers. Even in France this story is largely unknown beyond a small circle of soldiers, scholars, and activists. To date, there exist few archivally sourced studies of French policy in Chad's various conflicts.[13] This book represents a first effort to trace the French role in Chad's first two postindependence decades.

Second, and perhaps more important, this method presents the best way of emphasizing the role of contingency and individual agency in a wider context often (and rightly) understood as neocolonial.[14] In

[12] See: Celeste Hicks, *The Trial of Hissène Habré: How the People of Chad Brought a Tyrant to Justice* (London: Zed Books, 2018).

[13] To date, the most extensive work is Ahmat Yacoub's short study of Franco-Chadian relations in the 1960s. See: Ahmat Yacoub, *Les Relations franco-tchadiennes dans les années soixante* (Paris: Publibook, 2003). Marc DeVore has also published two articles analyzing France's first intervention in Chad, based on military records. See: Marc R. DeVore, "Institutions, Organizational Culture, and Counterinsurgency Operations: Why Do States Fight Similar Insurgencies Differently?" *Comparative Strategy*, Vol. 32, No. 3 (2013), pp. 169–191; and "Preserving Power after Empire: The Credibility Trap and France's Intervention in Chad, 1968–1972," *War in History*, OnlineFirst; first published, Sept. 20, 2018, pp. 1–30.

[14] For a nuanced analysis of the early neocolonial relationship, see: Alexander Keese, "First Lessons in Neo-Colonialism: The Personalisation of Relations between African Politicians and French Officials in sub-Saharan Africa, 1956–66," *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, Vol. 35, No. 4 (2007), pp. 593–613.

particular, it helps to clarify why a neocolonial relationship predicated on maintaining a stable authoritarian postcolonial order failed so spectacularly in Chad.

This requires an initial discussion of the relationship between structure and agency in the postcolonial Chadian context.[15] Any analysis of postcolonial politics in most of France's former African colonies must take into consideration the enormous weight of French power.[16] In his classic 1951 article "La situation coloniale: approche théorique," French anthropologist Georges Balandier took colonial ethnographers to task for ignoring the central role of colonial domination in shaping societies in colonial territories. He argued that, given the sheer power of foreign political and economic control, it made little sense to study colonized communities in isolation from their "colonial situation," which had profound impacts on social structures, identities, and politics. Balandier also presciently suggested that this would remain true for postcolonial societies.[17]

Indeed, France's presence in most of its former African colonies after independence was nothing short of pervasive. This included the maintenance of regional military commands and bases, powerful French counselors embedded in local executives, large numbers of French military advisors with command responsibilities in African militaries, French-staffed intelligence agencies, French-dominated common currency regimes, and French subsidies to African state budgets. This was neocolonialism in its purest form.

It responded to several mutually reinforcing imperatives: maintaining France's status as a global power, enhancing French independence within an otherwise bipolar Cold War environment, guaranteeing access to vital raw materials, and protecting certain economic interests. The plethora of African clients also provided supportive votes at the United Nations and diplomatic assistance in other international fora.

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[15] For a deeper discussion of this question in the context of contemporary French policy in Africa, see: Benedikt Erforth, *Contemporary French Security Policy in Africa: On Ideas and Wars* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), pp. 25–50.

[16] For more on this, see: John Chipman, *French Power in Africa* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989).

[17] Georges Balandier, "La situation coloniale: approche théorique," *Cahiers internationaux de la sociologie*, Vol. 11 (1951), pp. 44–79. For a retrospective look at this theme, as well as an overview of the evolution of postcolonial studies in France, see: Marie-Claude Smouts (ed.), *La situation postcoloniale: les postcolonial studies dans le débat français* (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 2007).

Above all perhaps, especially during de Gaulle's presidency, it represented an important element of international prestige for a French political class scarred by a long run of defeats, stretching from the fall of France in 1940 to the losses of Indochina and Algeria.

In practice, this meant that political stability became both a precondition for and aim of French policy on the continent. In some respects, it may have succeeded. A statistical analysis conducted by economists Paul Collier, Anke Hoeffler, and Dominic Rohner has suggested that from 1965 to 1999, former French colonies were only a third as likely as other comparable African countries to experience a civil war. They attributed this difference to the security guarantee that France provided to many of its former possessions.[18]

Reality was of course more complex, and "stability" is a relative term. French policymakers certainly saw instability as a constant threat from the beginning. From 1963 to 1975, for instance, 11 former French territories experienced 16 successful coups d'état.[19] This did not compare favorably to the rest of the continent, which experienced 21 successful coups in 16 countries over the same period.[20] The key French concern, though, generally remained the political attitudes of new regimes toward France and their commitment to preventing unwanted Communist, anticolonial, or even American influence from interfering with French prerogatives. With a few exceptions – most notably in Guinea, Congo-Brazzaville and Dahomey – French policymakers succeeded in protecting their own sphere of influence.[21] A 1964 intervention to reverse a coup in Gabon bolstered French commitment in this regard. This signaled that France would protect its closest clients (especially in Gabon, Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, and Senegal) from overthrow.

[18] Paul Collier, Anke Hoeffler, and Dominic Rohner, "Beyond Greed and Grievance: Feasibility and Civil War," *Oxford Economic Papers*, Vol. 61, No. 1 (2009), p. 15.

[19] MAE La Courneuve, DAM 1959–1979, Carton 298, "Tableau récapitulatif des coups d'états militaires en Afrique," undated, 04.1975. The coups were: Togo (1963, 1967), Congo-Brazzaville (1963, 1968), Dahomey (1963, 1965, 1967, 1969, 1972), Central African Republic (1966), Haute-Volta (1966), Mali (1968), Madagascar (1972, 1974), Niger (1974), and Chad (1975).

[20] Ibid. The above document lists 23 coups, though two of these were unsuccessful (Ethiopia in 1960 and Ghana in 1967).

[21] See : Jean-Pierre Bat, *La fabrique des "barbouzes": Histoire des réseaux Foccart en Afrique* (Paris: Nouveau Monde éditions, 2015).

In Chad, however, the "Franco-African state" failed to hold together as the country slipped into a recurrent cycle of armed conflict. This raises the question of why Chad was the only French African client to experience insurgency, war, and state collapse on such a large scale in the early independence years.[22] Addressing this question requires examining the ways in which conditions specific to Chad interacted with the broad and imposing field of French influence. This demands an attention to chronology and the relationships between key actors that a narrative approach is well-equipped to provide. Such an approach also allows for a meticulous analysis of the limits to French power, particularly in the strategies employed by various Chadians to maximize their autonomy from external constraints.

The narrative approach is also useful for presenting a detailed case study of French military interventionism in Africa. From 1960, when most of its colonies won their independence, to the present day, France has intervened over fifty times on the continent.[23] The most significant of these operations aimed to protect sitting regimes or political orders from disruption or overthrow. Chad has seen more of these interventions than any other country. This book provides a thorough accounting of France's first two interventions there. The narrative approach here serves to underline the uncertainties and ambiguities behind French policymaking, the limits of its effectiveness, and its impact on Chad's political trajectory.

In that vein, this book aims to provide an archivally sourced account of French involvement in Chad's growing conflicts following its independence in 1960. The most substantial set of sources comes from the French Foreign Ministry Archives and the wide and eclectic range of material found in the little-known files of the "chargés de missions géographiques" in the Cooperation Ministry, located in the French

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[22] Cameroon was the closest comparable case, with a major insurgency breaking out against the French colonial authorities in late 1957. Though the main rebellion was crushed by 1962, scattered remnants survived into the early 1970s despite ferocious French and Cameroonian state repression. See: Thomas Deltombe, Manuel Domergue, and Jacob Tatsitsa, *Kamerun! Une guerre cachée aux origines de la Françafrique (1948–1971)* (Paris: La Découverte, 2011).

[23] For a rough list, see Commission des Affaires Etrangères, "Engagement et diplomatie: quelle doctrine pour nos interventions militaires?" Assemblée Nationale, *Rapport d'Information no. 2777*, May 20, 2015, pp. 115–133; Also see: Bruno Charbonneau, *France and the New Imperialism: Security Policy in Sub-Saharan Africa* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2008).