

## Women's Movements and Repressive Regimes: A Comparison of Algeria and the Soviet Union

Understanding how people respond to repressive regimes is particularly important because it can reveal a disconnect between the institutions in place and citizens. What is more, focusing on those who are relatively powerless in society with limited ability to resist, such as women, the poor, or the uneducated, provides insights into the ways that these groups subvert regimes in unique ways. As such, this paper will compare the case studies of low-income female resistance in repressive regimes in the Soviet Union and Algeria. Observing the strong role of peasant women in the resistance movement against the Soviet Union, it is clear that women made their voices heard under repressive, authoritarian regimes. In a similar way, Algerian women under the French colonial government helped to construct a national identity and participated actively in the guerilla resistance movement. Repressive regimes in the 20<sup>th</sup> century in both the Soviet Union and Algeria used the empowerment of women and the expansion of women's rights in order to legitimize their regime. However, at the same time, the regimes aimed to depoliticize and discredit women's resistance by drawing on generalizations and stereotypes about a woman's character. These contradictory policies resulted in the need to accede to some demands of the women's resistance movement to contain the movement and limit the magnitude of resistance. The Soviet Union and Algeria are alike because of the imposed repressive regimes, the state of women's rights in the time period, and the existence of women's resistance movements. In this paper, I will argue that in repressive regimes that simultaneously promoted and undermined women's rights, women participated both directly and indirectly in resistance movements.

## Literature Review

In order to develop this body of research, I focused on qualitative, peer-reviewed sources in order to formulate my hypothesis. Next, I investigated each of the two case studies individually, focusing on the nature of the repressive regime, women's involvement in the resistance movement, and the pro-women policies orchestrated by the state concurrently with resistance movements. Finally, I compared the situations in both Algeria and the Soviet Union in order to evaluate my hypothesis. The literature concerning Algeria faces limitations because of the lack of research on colonial Algeria. Additionally, because I do not speak Russian or Algerian, I had to confine my research to scholarly peer-reviewed articles written in English without the advantage of extrapolating from primary sources. Furthermore, the majority of literature on women-led movements is primarily focused on post-colonial and post-Soviet societies, rather than nascent feminine resistance movements during the 1930s in the Soviet Union and the 1950s in Algeria.

Underpinning the logic of my hypothesis, Johnson and Saarinen argue that under authoritarianism, women often revert to traditional norms in order to seem less threatening to the regime.<sup>1</sup> However, as a result, they also argue that this behavior leads the movements to become less visible because their image is less political than others on the public stage. In a similar way, Lorch and Bunk analyze the actions of authoritarian regimes and their decisions regarding women's rights. They contend that authoritarian regimes promote women's rights in the eyes of the public to make themselves appear inclusive and representative of the population.<sup>2</sup> However, in reality, the regimes ignore women and their needs on a personal level, perpetuating

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<sup>1</sup> Janet Johnson and Aino Saarinen, "Twenty-First-Century Feminisms under Repression: Gender Regime Change and the Women's Crisis Center Movement in Russia," *Signs* 38, no. 3 (Spring 2013): 543-567.

<sup>2</sup> Jasmin Lorch and Bettina Bunk, "Gender Politics, Authoritarian Regime Resilience, and the Role of Civil Society in Algeria and Mozambique," *German Institute of Global and Area Studies*, no. 292 (October 2016): 7.

manipulative and misleading pro-women policies. Additionally, Viola provides evidence of unique female resistance among peasants in the Soviet Union.<sup>3</sup> As stated earlier, studying women's peasant movements in the Soviet Union and Algeria allows us to observe the alternative political cultures that may exist in repressive regimes.<sup>4</sup> Rejecting earlier claims in the field of political culture that institutions are a reflection of the people, Petro explains that in the Soviet Union people had a difference of opinion across time, primarily in the form of constrained autocracy, symphonic unity of church and state, and *sobornost*.<sup>5</sup> These ideas may not be entirely transparent when looking at the regime from the outside, which Scott explains as being due to the difference between hidden and public transcripts.<sup>6</sup> In an unequal power structure, the powerless, such as the peasants in the cases of the Soviet Union and Algeria, have to act and speak in a certain way in public, while having separate opinions that remain hidden to the powerful.<sup>7</sup> This literature helps to inform the comparison of the Soviet Union and Algeria, providing insight into overarching trends that span time and geography.

### **Algeria in the 1950s-1960s**

Living under French colonialism, the Algerian people, specifically Muslims, faced repression and a lack of fundamental rights. From the outset, Muslims were the only ethnic group in Algeria who were not provided with automatic French citizenship.<sup>8</sup> Rather, they had to go through a complex legal process to obtain citizenship that required Muslims to relinquish the

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<sup>3</sup> Lynne Viola, *Peasant Rebels Under Stalin: Collectivization and the Culture of Peasant Resistance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 181.

<sup>4</sup> Nicolai Petro, *The Rebirth of Russian Democracy: An Interpretation of Political Culture*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 3.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, p. 28-109.

<sup>6</sup> James Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 1-16.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>8</sup> Savannah Pine, "Conscription, Citizenship, and French Algeria," *Kansas University Scholar Works* (2016), 44.

courts and legal systems unique to their ethnic group. Instead, they had to adjust their behavior and rights to fit within the French legal system that was imposed in Algeria. The lack of immediate rights for Muslims reflected France's view of them as inferior to Europeans and Christians, with an emphasis on reforming them through forcible means.<sup>9</sup> Taking the lack of rights further, the French imposed *Le Code de L'Indigénant*, a law which "gave the French officials in Algeria the power to fine or imprison Muslim Algerians without trial if they accused them of subverting law and order."<sup>10</sup> This code singled out the Muslim population yet again, furthering feelings of inequality between ethnic groups. Additionally, the law made any form of political protest or opposition a risky endeavor because of the threat of imprisonment without trial. Furthermore, the French colonial government ordered mandatory conscription for not only French citizens, but for all of those living in Algeria.<sup>11</sup> The main motivation behind this change was to protect against the growing threat of Germany in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The need for increased manpower in the military was important in Europe, but also to protect colonies on the African continent. Despite this stringent requirement and commitment to the French mainland, Muslim Algerians who were obligated to serve in the military were also not guaranteed French citizenship after conscription.<sup>12</sup> Overall, it is clear that the French structures imposed in Algeria constituted discriminatory institutions that were disliked by much of the Muslim population.

Women in French colonial Algeria had a unique standing and experience compared to their male counterparts. To the French, Algerian women were the "oppressed of the oppressed."<sup>13</sup>

Within the colony, there were three standing legal courts: Shari'a law for Muslims, Kabyle

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<sup>9</sup> Savannah Pine, "Conscription, Citizenship, and French Algeria," *Kansas University Scholar Works* (2016), 44.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44.

<sup>13</sup> Adrienne Leonhardt, "Between Two Jailers: Women's Experience During Colonialism, War, and Independence in Algeria," *Anthós* 5, no. 1 (2013), p. 8.

courts for Berbers, and French civil law for the cities.<sup>14</sup> As a result, Muslim women bound by Shari'a Law were subjected to practices that seemed completely uncivilized to the French, including polygamy and child marriage. Furthermore, when the Algerian War for independence began, only 4.5% of Algerian women were literate.<sup>15</sup> They were primarily excluded from public life in the colony, with no rights to vote, participate in the labor force, or attend school. Any feminist voices in Algeria came from the upper classes who lived in metropolitan cities. However, at the same time, the French colonial government had not provided any clear advancements in women's rights prior to the Algerian War.

During the decolonization campaign following World War II, Algerians chose to fight against the repressive French colonial government. The Algerian War began in 1954 to gain independence from France. The National Liberation Front (FLN) was the primary revolutionary group that coordinated the independence movement, using guerilla tactics and petitions for independence to the United Nations. One of the most unexpected developments, because of the rights of women discussed earlier, was the women who became involved in the revolution. It is estimated that Algerian women made up to 3% of all the participants in the FLN, about 11,000 total participants.<sup>16</sup> Additionally, this projection is undoubtedly an underestimate because of the lack of accurate data during this time. Women's involvement in the war effort could be seen on the front lines, perpetrating violence against their oppressors. Women were fighting against the French, but also in the hopes of an expansion of their rights following the end of the war.<sup>17</sup>

As the French became aware of the involvement of women in the Algerian independence movement, they formed targeted political messaging to attract women back to the French side. A

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<sup>14</sup> Sara Kimble, "Emancipation through Secularization: French Feminist Views of Muslim Women's Condition in Interwar Algeria," *French Colonial History* 7 (2006), p. 112.

<sup>15</sup> Leonhardt, "Between Two Jailers: Women's Experience During Colonialism, War, and Independence in Algeria," p. 8.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

complete overhaul to women's rights within Algeria was initiated, relying on the idea that Algerian women needed to be civilized and assimilated into French culture. The French philosophy was that the only way to make these changes was to replace religious laws and customs with the secular French legal system. Therefore, in 1958, the French offered full French citizenship and voting rights to Algerian women for the first time.<sup>18</sup> Overall, their "main plan for retaining 'l'Algérie française' (French Algeria) was stopping the rebellion through... social reforms that promoted women's education, voting rights, unveiling campaigns, health care, and jobs."<sup>19</sup> The secretary of state, Sid Cara, managed the restructuring of Muslim marriage and divorce laws to give women more agency in their marital decisions as well as limiting polygamy and child marriage.<sup>20</sup> The French also created organizations to educate and include women in the pro-French movement, specifically the *Mouvement de solidarité féminine* (MSF). This organization "sponsored the production of journals, *Femmes Nouvelles*, and later *Miroir*, and weekly radio shows aimed at attracting Algerian women to the French cause."<sup>21</sup> MSF also developed a propaganda campaign in order to point out the lack of women's rights within the FLN because of its hierarchal structure between men and women in the organization.<sup>22</sup> Above all, it is important to note that these developments were an attempt to gain political support during the Algerian War and not exclusively an effort to improve women's rights in Algeria. This shift in opinion also had contradictory roots, because the proposals being implemented in French Algeria were extremely conservative in their inclusion of women, compared to those in France. Algerian women only experienced reforms in their voting powers and citizenship in

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<sup>18</sup>Elise Franklin, "A Bridge Across the Mediterranean: Nafissa Sid Cara and the Politics of Emancipation during the Algerian War," *French Politics, Culture & Society* 36, no. 2 (Summer 2018), p. 29.

<sup>19</sup> Leonhardt, "Between Two Jailers: Women's Experience During Colonialism, War, and Independence in Algeria," p. 9.

<sup>20</sup> Franklin, "A Bridge Across the Mediterranean: Nafissa Sid Cara and the Politics of Emancipation during the Algerian War," p. 29.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40.

order to appease them, while French women were provided more progressive campaigns for equal educational, employment opportunities, and maternity leave in mainland France.<sup>23</sup>

Despite the social reforms created by the French government in Algeria, the French did not achieve their goal of gaining support from Algerian women. First, the continuation of veiling for Muslim women, indicated their connection with their cultural and religious heritage that could not be erased by French efforts to accumulate support for their cause.<sup>24</sup> Veiling also served a utilitarian purpose in the FLN's armed movement. Beyond a symbolic embodiment of religious tradition, veiling "allowed the female fighters to smuggle weapons and bombs and travel unnoticed by French soldiers and police."<sup>25</sup> On a personal level, women also embraced their traditional role as a mother in order to promote Islamic values and historic beliefs to their children. For example, Algerian women cultivated and continued traditions among their children in order to emphasize traditional Muslim values, rather than the values held by the French colonial government.<sup>26</sup> As a result, Algerian women were able to further the cause of the FLN using their conventional role in society.

In the case of Algeria, the repressive colonial government imposed by the French resulted in a resistance movement for independence. The French colonial government searched for legitimacy during the Algerian War through the promulgation of women's rights and freedoms. Despite the social reforms that were made, the evidence is not clear that women were enticed by expansions to their rights and freedoms. Instead, Algerian Muslim women participated in

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<sup>23</sup> Sara Kimble, "Emancipation through Secularization: French Feminist Views of Muslim Women's Condition in Interwar Algeria," p. 116.

<sup>24</sup> Franklin, "A Bridge Across the Mediterranean: Nafissa Sid Cara and the Politics of Emancipation during the Algerian War," p. 29.

<sup>25</sup> Leonhardt, "Between Two Jailers: Women's Experience During Colonialism, War, and Independence in Algeria," p. 10.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

different ways in the movement for independence, some fighting for the FLN and others educating their children in traditional religious values.

### **The Soviet Union in the 1930s**

The Soviet Union faced the height of its repression during the reign of Joseph Stalin from 1929-1953. At the beginning of his time in power, Stalin aimed to speed up the pace of collectivization and industrialization, often with force involved. Rather than listening to the needs and wants of the people, Stalin's administration made decisions about the goals of the Soviet Union with the expectation that people would adjust to be loyal to the state.<sup>27</sup> Forced collectivization most heavily affected peasants, who had limited resources and abilities to fight back against the imposed conditions. Irrational disappearances and deportations characterized the era, creating a time of confusion, absurdity, and discontent for many Soviet citizens. The total death toll, both direct and indirect, from Stalin's collectivization program was almost 20 million people as a result of starvation, dekulakization, and the gulags.<sup>28</sup> Collectivization unraveled the traditional culture of the village, imposing arbitrary constraints and structures in place of peasant-developed institutions. However, because of the extreme repression by Stalin and his administration, people were unable to speak against the regime without the threat of harm to themselves and their families.

In comparison to Algeria, women in the Soviet Union were granted many rights and privileges that were not afforded to most throughout the world. First, following the Bolshevik Revolution, women in the Soviet Union were given the right to vote. Additionally, divorce laws

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<sup>27</sup> Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/archives/intn.html>, accessed December 10.

<sup>28</sup> New York Times, <https://www.nytimes.com/1989/02/04/world/major-soviet-paper-says-20-million-died-as-victims-of-stalin.html>, accessed December 10.

were loosened and reproductive rights were guaranteed.<sup>29</sup> In large part, however, the women's rights mentioned were primarily accessed by those in the cities, while the peasant population remained rooted in a highly patriarchal society.<sup>30</sup> Peasant women were treated as the property of men with little opportunity for personal advancement and autonomy. As a whole, Russian women were only 13.1% literate and did not have access to educational resources.<sup>31</sup> Stalin heavily promoted the idea of the nuclear family, with the mother as a nurturing and caring figure. As a result, the patriarchal tendencies in the Soviet Union were furthered as a result of the goals of the state to have a strong economy and functioning institutions, while in Algeria the patriarchal tendencies existed mainly as a result of religion and Shari'a law. The patriarchal nature of the Soviet Union was developed primarily from arbitrary state priorities, rather than the primordial bonds of religion in Algeria.

The general nature of resistance was relatively risk averse, which Keenan describes as a characteristic central to Russian political culture.<sup>32</sup> Individuals tried to speak out as much as possible while risking the least possible amount of damage to their lives. Peasants in the Soviet Union capitalized on the "weapons of the weak" to affect change in the regime, including "foot-dragging, evasion, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander and sabotage."<sup>33</sup> Many peasants attempted to flee the villages before they were forced to join collective farms. Eventually, the Soviet Union created an internal passport system that prevented peasants from

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<sup>29</sup> New York Times, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/12/opinion/why-women-had-better-sex-under-socialism.html>, accessed 10 December 2019.

<sup>30</sup> In Defence of October, <https://www.bolshevik.info/women-before-during-and-after-the-russian-revolution.htm>, accessed 10 December 2019.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Edward Keenan, "Muscovite Political Folkways," *The Russian Review* 45, no. 2 (April 1986): 115-81.

<sup>33</sup> James Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985): xv-xix, 1-27.

leaving the collective farm, reminiscent of serfdom and being tied to the land.<sup>34</sup> Peasants resisted by performing anonymous damage to the regime, particularly arson.<sup>35</sup> Despite these efforts, peasants were never able to fully unite across geographical distances and they achieved relatively little progress in the form of policy changes.

Women created a distinctive form of resistance in the Soviet Union. Women's protests, *babi'i bunty*, were characterized by the Soviet regime as outbursts of female hysteria.<sup>36</sup> However, these female protests were grounded in rational thought, out of a fear of survival and the loss of their deepest held values. Women were particularly effective in protests as they were less likely than men to receive harsh treatment, and "armed force was used in only seven cases to put down a *babii bunty*."<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, women frequently brought along their children to protests in order to signal to the authorities that the resistance would be peaceful and to keep themselves safe. The men were aware of the danger that they faced if they chose to actively protest as the women were doing, causing them to stand on the sidelines of protest in order to avoid retribution.

To legitimize the regime in peasant communities, the Soviet Union began to push policies favorable to women, as they were the most outspoken adversaries of the regime with fewer constraints than men. First, to appease women protestors, "during the 1930s the Stalinist state attempted to promote women to administrative positions in the collective farms."<sup>38</sup> At the same time, the regime was emphasizing the importance of women having a professional career rather than focusing only on family life. Furthermore, the Stalin regime began to improve women's

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<sup>34</sup> Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Stalin's Peasants: Resistance and Survival in the Russian Village* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994): 96.

<sup>35</sup> Viola, *Peasant Rebels Under Stalin: Collectivization and the Culture of Peasant Resistance*, p. 121.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 181.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 198.

<sup>38</sup> Institute of Historical Research, <https://archives.history.ac.uk/history-in-focus/Gender/chatterjee.html>. Accessed 10 December 2019.

education, promoting technical training programs and higher education.<sup>39</sup> In factories, women were given management positions and allowed to speak out against issues within their workplace. With women in formal positions of power, the regime was attempting to involve women in legal institutions to make them believe that they had representation for their ideas. However, this policy was simply another continuation of the depoliticization of women's movements. If there were women in power, the resistance movement seemed even more irrational because their ideas were hypothetically being expressed in the leadership of the collective farm. However, because the resistance movement wanted private property rather than the collective farm, this leadership rarely represented the actual interests of women in the *babi'i bunt*y. Furthermore, the benefits of training programs often did not reach peasants in villages, making the advantages negligible to those isolated in rural areas unless they were able to leave the communal villages prior to the internal passport system. The educational programs also were a thinly veiled front for the Soviet regime to politically indoctrinate the women in the community to increase support for official government interests.<sup>40</sup> Overall, it is clear that each of these policies served an alternative purpose for the regime, rather than simply promoting women's rights and opportunities.

Although the Soviet Union continually tried to delegitimize the women's movement, women drew on their stereotypes to be able to continue their messaging with fewer consequences than faced their male counterparts. The resistance movement was characterized as "doubly subversive in that they not only directly challenged state power, but inverted traditional gender roles and therefore the patriarchal hierarchy of the village and state."<sup>41</sup> Women realized the

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<sup>39</sup> Institute of Historical Research, <https://archives.history.ac.uk/history-in-focus/Gender/chatterjee.html>. Accessed 10 December 2019.

<sup>40</sup> Viola, *Peasant Rebels Under Stalin: Collectivization and the Culture of Peasant Resistance*, p. 184.

<sup>41</sup> Viola, *Peasant Rebels Under Stalin: Collectivization and the Culture of Peasant Resistance*, p. 202.

power that they had in settling into the expectations that the Soviet Union had for them and they took advantage. Additionally, women advocated for the rights of all of those in the village, making them proponents of community standards and values.

## **Conclusion**

Overall, in the Soviet Union in the 1930s and Algeria in the 1950s, both populations experienced government repression and the creation of social reforms in order to legitimize their regimes. There are some similarities between the way women responded to repressive regimes. First, it is clear that despite the risks associated with participating in resistance movements, women expressed their discontent regardless, coordinating in their communities or on a larger scale. Furthermore, women in both Algeria and the Soviet Union capitalized on the power that they occupied within the hidden transcript. Scott explained acts of resistance in the hidden transcript as actions that went largely unnoticed by the powerful.<sup>42</sup> In Algeria, women taught their children traditional values in the home, contrary to the policies that the French colonial government was trying to institute. In the Soviet Union, it is possible that peasants coordinated within their hidden transcripts in order to formulate the idea of placing women in front of men to keep them safe.

However, contrary to my hypothesis, the two case studies showed that women in Algeria and the Soviet Union had extremely different responses to their repressive governments. In Algeria, the number of women who participated in overt resistance to the regime was smaller, but more violent, compared to the Soviet Union, with some women choosing to join the National Liberation Front guerilla army in order to physically fight for independence. The use of force in

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<sup>42</sup> James Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 1-16.

Algeria may have been dependent on the time period and the structural conditions in which people were acting. Because Algeria went through its revolution after World War II when the majority of colonies were gaining independence, they had access to information which indicated that they could be successful with the use of force. An additional difference between the two cases is that Algerian women chose, for the most part, to refuse the rights proposed by the French colonial government. In contrast, Russian peasants played into stereotypes throughout collective farm meetings for short amounts of time. This may also have been a result of Algeria's structural conditions, in which Algerian citizens were extremely devoted to their religious values and had a greater opportunity to oppose the regime.

The existence of random disappearances, dekulakization, and the gulags in the Soviet Union stifled the population's ability and will to coordinate resistance efforts on a large scale. The direct threat to Russian peasants' way of life made it challenging to find ways to be involved in resistance. Instead, peasants would have been focused on protecting their lives from the threat of starvation and persecution by the state. However, it seems likely that more women participated in the resistance movements in the Soviet Union compared to Algeria because of the large population and the high percentage of peasants within the Soviet Union. Furthermore, in the Soviet Union, resistance acted not only as an act against the government but also as an act against the patriarchy. Women's role as leaders in peasant protests usurped the traditional values that were outlined in society and Putin's idea of the nuclear family. In Algeria, women did not take a large leadership role in the resistance movements so as to usurp the patriarchal gender roles in place. Overall, it is clear that the interplay of state policies and women's resistance movements provides insight into the motivations, intentions, and opinions of the general populations in both Algeria and the Soviet Union.

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