

# Corsican Capers

## *Island separatists highlight French nation's malaise*

by Gerda Bikales

For longer than the thirteen rebellious British colonies of North America have been a nation, Corsica has been an integral part of France. One might think that this is time enough to form a solid bond. Alas! It isn't so.

### A Brief History

Before becoming French in 1768, Corsica had been ruled for five centuries by Genoa, the wealthy city-state and naval powerhouse on Italy's Mediterranean coast. Genoese control of the island had been heavy-handed and marked by repeated revolts. In one such uprising in 1736, a colorful adventurer known as Theodore de Neuhof brought much needed arms, money and promises of foreign help to the rebels, in return for the title of Theodore, King of Corsica. His reign was short – unable to deliver foreign troops, he fled the island as Genoa recaptured its dominant position. Another attempt at independence in 1755 was led by Pasquale Paoli, who envisioned a democratic constitutional government for his nation and convinced Jean-Jacques Rousseau to draft its constitution. After France bought the island from Genoa in 1768, Paoli continued his struggle, in vain. He was much admired in America, where a city in Pennsylvania still bears his name.

The name most widely associated with Corsica, however, is Napoleon Bonaparte. The future emperor was born in Ajaccio in 1769, a French citizen. He left the island at fourteen to attend military school in Paris, and soon distinguished himself as a bold general who went on to conquer much of Europe. The Napoleonic age gave post-Revolutionary France its period of greatest glory, and the dashing Corsican remains a much admired figure, even as his imperial exploits embarrass the politically

correct.

Annexing Corsica, France acquired a most beautiful Mediterranean island, blessed with an unspoiled shoreline and fine natural harbors, a majestic mountainous interior divided by deep green valleys, and a sunny climate. Its closest neighbor is the larger Italian island of Sardinia, just six miles south.

With the land came the people. Of Greek and Italian stock, Catholic since the fifth century, they spoke several Genoese dialects that had no written form until the nineteenth century. Geography, topography, and history combined to forge a society marked by fierce allegiances to family, village, and clan, ruled by *omerta*, the honor code of silence when dealing with outsiders; and by deadly *vendettas*, carried on across generations, that lead to murder rates that are among the highest in the world. These mores often invite comparisons with Sicily, a more distant island.

Traditionally, Corsica's economy has been based on agriculture and the raising of cattle, sheep and goats. The meager income from these pursuits has long been supplemented with the rewards of banditry, piracy and contraband – activities still practiced in updated form.

A difficult economy and relentless *vendettas* kept the island's population low. In 1800 it had 160,000 inhabitants, a number that increased over the next century to 260,000. But as the twentieth century approached, Corsicans found new opportunities on the continent and in the Americas.<sup>1</sup> Ironically, a people known then as now for lawlessness, distinguished themselves in law enforcement in France and in its colonies. Corsicans played a major role in France's colonial administration, especially in North Africa. They were well represented in the French military, protecting colonial interests and quashing rebellions. In France, they became policemen and *gendarmes*.<sup>2</sup> According to an unsigned article in *Figaro Magazine* (5 May 2000), Corsican emigrants moved in large numbers to Puerto Rico, where their descendants today number some

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400,000. The article, full of factual errors, claims that Pierre Toussaint Vivoni of Cape Corsica became “Puerto Rico’s first Mayor,” and showed a keen interest in politics. Some of the best known politicians in France today are of Corsican origin, including the law-and-order former Minister of the Interior, Charles Pasqua.

Emigration caused a steep drop in population, especially in the interior villages. Today the islanders number 250,000, but they are a broader mix of people. Despite its explosive politics, Corsica’s mild climate and wild beauty attract many retirees from the continent. And, as elsewhere in France, immigrants are a significant presence – around ten percent of the population. The newcomers settle mostly in the cities along the shore, leaving the interior depopulated.

### The Rise of Nationalism

In the course of its long and close association with a culturally domineering nation, Corsica’s own language has suffered. French is the usual language of Corsica, taught in its schools, and used by mainstream media. New settlers have shown no inclination to learn Corsican, a regional language at best, unsuited for the technological age, hardly spoken anywhere beyond the island. Thirty years ago, there were an estimated 70,000 Corsican-speakers, a number that has since plummeted to 25,000. Corsicans have watched their language wither and the culture it nourished fade. Fear of cultural identity loss drives a radical nationalist movement for independence.

Modern Corsican nationalism can be traced to Mussolini, who encouraged the island’s ethnic attachment to Italy. The turbulent war years that followed dissipated that flirtation, and in the post-war period innocently mistaking a Corsican for an Italian was a major *faux pas*.

The year 1962 is crucial in the evolution of Corsican nationalism. That year, France negotiated peace with Algeria after eight years of bloody guerilla warfare. It repatriated over a million French citizens implanted in colonial Algeria for generations. Many exiled refugees, in search of sunshine, relocated to the south of France. Some 17,000 moved further, to Corsica. Among them were vintners who had lost their lands and received generous government subsidies to acquire newly irrigated acreage suitable for wine cultivation. Native wine-growers, who had expected to benefit from the improvements, were scandalized when the best vineyards went to the refugees instead.

Tensions escalated between the rival growers, centered around the wine trade. But something more was afoot: the presence of these exiles in Corsica was proof of French vulnerability. Unlike other countries in France’s crumbling colonial empire, Algeria’s status had been like Corsica’s – both had been tightly woven into a nation that proclaimed itself “one and indivisible.” Yet,

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Algeria had successfully fought its way to independence. Liberation from French rule was no longer unthinkable.

Bombings and blasts directed at public buildings and at tourist facilities started in the sixties. In 1975, the violence took a more ominous turn when two *gendarmes* were killed in a battle with armed guerillas. After that, bombs went off nightly somewhere on the island. By 1980, the violence spilled over to continental France, when two agents guarding the Iranian Embassy in Paris were gunned down. A later explosion targeted the *École Nationale d’Administration*, the country’s prestigious training school for government service, in Strasbourg. The City Hall in Bordeaux was badly damaged in a bombing – a clear message for Alain Jupé, then Prime Minister and Bordeaux’s Mayor.

### Economic Downturn

The economic crisis precipitated by oil shortages in the 1970s hit Corsica hard, drying up the safety valve of continental jobs. Tourism, a potential growth industry for this beautiful island with no other resources, had been successfully promoted, but the terrorists would have none of it. Wrapping themselves in the mantle of

environmental purism, they destroyed tourist facilities under development, scaring off investors and vacationers

The economy suffered, but the guerillas prospered. As bombs became a part of daily life, the rebels collected “protection” money from intimidated businesses and homeowners. Loose accounting had long been the rule in Corsica, allowing the nationalists to line their pockets with a portion of the subsidies that started flowing abundantly from Paris.

Deadly feuds soon erupted within the terrorist community – disputes over turf in the various rackets, as much as over ideology or strategy. The *crescendo* of assassinations targeting dissident gang members, anti-nationalists, law enforcement, and local elected officials rattled the island and panicked the mainland. The violent Front for the National Liberation of Corsica (FLNC), created in 1976, was outlawed and went underground. It split into three factions, which in turn spawned shadowy rival organizations. Their frequent changes of name and leadership are meant to confuse.

The nationalists’ demands ranged from formal recognition of Corsica’s uniqueness – and the right to “adjust” French laws accordingly – to autonomy, to full independence. All factions insisted on restoring the Corsican language and promoting its culture. Traditionally highly centralized, the French government had already taken steps toward regionalization, a process greatly accelerated by the ongoing meltdown in Corsica. Successive French governments responded to the insurrection with strong rhetoric about restoring law and order, bringing criminals to justice, and never negotiating with terrorists. As a practical matter, they aimed for a set of compromises around the less radical proposals. The cultural demands netted the creation in 1982 of the first university in Corsica, which immediately became a hotbed of nationalist agitation; other concessions included the promotion of Corsica’s haunting folk music, subsidized television programing in Corsican, and optional

courses in that language in the schools. An updated demand would make its study *mandatory* for all students.

The government hoped to placate the nationalists by establishing an island-wide elected Assembly, with major responsibilities for the political and fiscal management of the island and power to establish specialized agencies. The new institutions provided more opportunities for election fraud. Relative to its small population, Corsica

has a profusion of elected and appointed politicians and a surfeit of functionaries, many allied with criminal interests and all enjoying salaries and perks from their positions. To grease the wheels, money has been thrown around liberally in the form of tax abatements, “tax-free zones,” agricultural credits and numerous subsidies. More money yet has been coming in from the European Union, always ready to encourage regionalism at the expense



Members of the National Front for the Liberation of Corsica hold a press conference.

of national governments.

## Violence Escalates

Far from retreating, the separatists grew bolder. In a chilling display of unity in January 1996, several hundred masked and armed terrorists called a midnight press conference, jammed with journalists who had no trouble locating the outlaws, while the police remained clueless. Pictures of masked guerillas brandishing rifles, on television and in every newspaper, exposed the government’s pathetic helplessness.

The apex of violence was reached in February 1998, when Claude Erignac, the Prefect of Corsica, was gunned down on a street in the capital, Ajaccio, in front of numerous witnesses. To rub it in, a handgun stolen earlier from the police station in Pietrosella was left at the scene.

It is nearly impossible to convey to readers unfamiliar with France's prefectoral system the enormity of this attack or the shock-waves it produced. That famous Corsican, Napoleon Bonaparte, had introduced the system in 1800, to bring the State closer to the people. The country was divided into small *départements*, each headed by a Prefect who, in theory, would be accessible to any citizen. Over time, the

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Prefects acquired a great deal of authority, far beyond the merely administrative. Dressed in their elegant navy-blue uniforms with gold decorations, the Prefects embody the prestige and legitimacy of the French State. None had ever been assassinated before.<sup>3</sup>

The French nation shuddered in revulsion. How could this have been allowed to happen? It was easy to point fingers. Despite all the tough rhetoric, gross financial irregularities had been tolerated, high profile crimes went unpunished, and negotiations with terrorists had gone on right in the Prime Minister's office. Corsica had become outlaw territory, beyond the reach of French law.

Succeeding the fallen Prefect was Bernard Bonnet, chosen for his tough-guy reputation. He had dealt with cultural separatists before, in the country's southwest. A few months later, Bonnet was arrested and jailed for overzealous law enforcement, involving arson of an unlicensed waterfront restaurant frequented by gangsters. This tragicomical episode once again showcased the government's indecisiveness and willingness to court the criminal bosses.

On the continent, support for separation from Corsica has zoomed – a referendum to grant independence to the island would pass handily. But Corsicans are adamantly opposed to secession, and given

a chance to vote would defeat it overwhelmingly. Constitutional opinion and the Algerian precedent hold that separate referenda in both Corsica and France must agree on independence. Predictably, a referendum would resolve nothing.

After the defeat of the Socialists in 2002, a new conservative government tried another approach. For more than twenty years, the government had chosen to deal only through *les élus*, the island's elected politicians, some of them suspected of terrorism and racketeering, not to mention election fraud. Nicolas Sarkozy, the new Minister of the Interior, chose to bypass them. He asked Corsicans directly to approve a decentralization plan leading to fuller autonomy. The referendum was narrowly defeated last July, by voters confused by its legalistic phrasing and suspicious of its true intent. The dramatic arrest on the day before the vote of Prefect Erignac's presumed killer, more than five years after the murder, was too staged to produce the hoped-for outcome.

Arson, bombings, and attacks on the civil order have resumed. It's back to the *status quo*.

### Deep-seated Double-Mindedness

The strands of this intolerable stalemate are woven into the fabric of Corsican life. As one expert puts it, "in every family there is a customs inspector, a *gendarme*, a gangster and nationalist..."<sup>4</sup> France has no partner in crafting an exit strategy.

Every way out leads through dangerous territory. Should some constitutional *legerdemain* leading to separation be found, it will quicken the demands of other regions within metropolitan France aspiring to extensive autonomy. In the words of a former Minister of the Interior: "Who would be naive enough to think that whatever has been granted to Corsica won't be demanded by the Basques, by Brittany, by Savoy, and Franche-Comté?"<sup>5</sup> He might have added Alsace, which is reclaiming its German roots.

But France, the prime mover of a European Union Constitution that will raise human rights to new heights, can hardly afford to apply the harsh, bloody measures necessary to restore the rule of law. Further, in the name of a Federated Europe, it is engaged in a process of self-imposed deconstruction, giving up the symbols of nationhood such as a currency and an immigration policy of its own, hoping to restore its lost power and influence as a province in the enlarged European Union rather than

as an independent nation-state. The imposition of authority by strong-arm tactics is strictly *verboten*.

The Corsican impasse will not end soon.

### And Then There's Puerto Rico

The unhappy relations between France and Corsica hold a lesson for Americans. In recent years, the issue of

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statehood for Puerto Rico – a Spanish-speaking Caribbean island – has repeatedly come up in Congress, and is sure to resurface. Puerto Rico is a largely autonomous "Commonwealth" with ties to the United States that go back to 1898. Statehood sentiment is gaining momentum on the island, largely because of anticipated social welfare benefits and because its promoters assure voters that no change of language will be required.

In comparison, Puerto Rico has far less in common with the United States than Corsica has with France. Corsica's Mediterranean people, Catholic, entirely French-speaking and citizens of France for 235 years, had favored something close to unity, which arguably had been realized at some time. But the politicization of nostalgia for a waning cultural past has made Corsica ungovernable, and in the process has badly undermined the Western World's first and formerly one of the strongest of nation-states. Were Puerto Rico – with its more than three million Latin American people (and another three million living in the U.S.) – to enter the Union of States, we would soon face intransigent demands for "Puerto Rican exceptionalism" that no self-respecting nation-state can tolerate. The option of independence for an *Estado de Puerto Rico* would be forever gone. We fought a fratricidal Civil War to assert that principle.

The Corsica conflict teaches us that the statehood decision must not be Puerto Rico's alone. The American

people, too, must be consulted before Congress takes this irrevocable step into a future of diminished unity and lost cohesiveness.

It has been said that Puerto Rico, with its intense Spanish-language loyalty, is our potential Quebec.

It is also our potential Corsica. •

#### NOTES

1. According to an unsigned article in *le Figaro* magazine (5 May 2000), Corsican emigrants moved in large numbers to Puerto Rico where their descendants today number some 400,000. The article, full of factual errors, claims that Pierre Toussaint Vivoni of Cape Corsica became "Puerto Rico's first mayor."
2. A national corps of police officers functioning in the country's smaller cities and countryside, attached to the Ministry of Defense.
3. Jean Moulin, a former prefect who was head of the *Résistance* during the German occupation, was captured and killed by the Gestapo.
4. Jean-Marc Fombonne-Bresson, quoted in *le Figaro*, 10 February 1998, 10B.
5. Jean-Pierre Chevènement, quoted in *le Figaro*, 16 May 2001, 5.

*"And then one day the grid went down and never*