

## France's Colonial Island: Corsica and the Empire

*Robert Aldrich*

“Without the Corsicans, there would not have been any colonies,” (“Sans les Corses, il n’y aurait pas eu de colonies,”) remarked General Henri Gouraud, one of the early twentieth-century heroes of French imperialism.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the role of the Corsicans in the overseas empire loomed large. In the 1930s, when Corsica accounted for only 0.75 percent of the total French population, Corsicans made up 22 percent of the colonial administration and a similar proportion of the European soldiers in the colonial military. Some 230,000 Corsicans lived in the colonies, including 100,000 in Algeria, 30,000 in Tunisia, 20,000 in Morocco, and 50,000 in the West Indies and the Americas.<sup>2</sup> One administrator, who served as governor of the French *comptoirs* in India and of New Caledonia, summed it up: “Personally, I like the Corsicans, and I

---

Robert Aldrich is Professor of European History at the University of Sydney. He is the author of *Vestiges of the Colonial Empire in France: Monuments, Museums and Colonial Memories* (London, 2005), and editor of *The Age of Empires* (London, 2007), among other works. This essay is part of a continuing research project funded by a grant from the Australian Research Council (ARC), on ‘province, nation and empire’ in nineteenth- and twentieth-century France.

I take the opportunity here to thank the ARC and also the Columbia University Institute for Scholars in Paris for a fellowship, from January through May 2008, which provided ideal conditions in which to carry out research. I greatly profited as well from participating in a study day on “‘Petites patries,’ ‘plus grande France,’ ‘nation’: une construction dialectique de l’État impérial ?,” organized by the Laboratoire Framespa-Diasporas (Toulouse II) and the Centre Roland Mounier (Paris), held at the University of Toulouse-Le Mirail on 20-21 May 2008.

<sup>1</sup> This essay draws substantially on two works produced in connection with an exhibition held at the Musée de la Corse in 2002, the catalogue entitled *Corse-colonies* (Corte, 2004), and the proceedings of a conference, with a similar title, *Corse-colonies: Colloque 19-20 septembre 2002* (Corte, 2004). (Given the similarity in titles, the first is footnoted below as “catalogue,” the second as “proceedings.”) See also a dossier on ‘Corse et outre-mer’, *Ultramarines, revue annuelle* [published by the Centre des archives d’outre-mer], no. 22 (Aix-en-Provence, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> Marien Martini, *Les Corses dans l’expansion française* (Ajaccio, 1953), 13. See also Toussaint-Jean Stefani, *L’Emigration corse dans la colonisation française: Contribution démosociologique à la colonistique* (Montpellier, 1950).

value them. If we have been able to keep the colonies, it's because of them. They go everywhere. All together, they can handle any job, from being a gendarme or a customs officer to being governor-general. They truly do represent the French province that has settled the colonies, all the colonies. The colonies are a real magnet for the Corsicans."<sup>3</sup> Albert Sarraut, one of the most famous colonialists—governor of Indochina, Minister for the Colonies, architect of the policy of colonial development in the 1920s—put it more succinctly: “From the tropics to the antipodes, Corsicans serve their country magnificently.”<sup>4</sup>

Corsicans had pioneered trade across the Mediterranean even before Corsica became a part of France in 1768.<sup>5</sup> France's takeover of the island from Genoa was the outcome of a European military campaign, but could also be seen as another episode in the long history of French expansion. It followed the loss of Quebec and the virtual exclusion of the French from India at the hands of the British. It preceded the conquest, by Corsica's most famous native son, of both a continental empire and a new, if even more short-lived, colonial empire across the Mediterranean in Malta, Egypt and the Middle East. The fall of Napoleon brought to an end the new imperial hopes, but from 1830 France again began expanding internationally, ultimately acquiring the world's second largest overseas empire.

“Colonization” implies colonists, though for a variety of reasons—including a declining birth rate and a greater access to land than obtained in some other countries—relatively few in France, unlike the masses of the British Isles, volunteered to move overseas to France's new outposts.<sup>6</sup> Corsicans proved an exception.

Corsicans faced a difficult life in their mountainous land, the “granite island” where picturesque villages perched on hilltops or nestled in valleys.<sup>7</sup> Pastoralism provided a mainstay (and the shepherd became an emblematic figure of Corsican life), though it seldom produced wealth. Most Corsicans lived a rustic existence, maintaining their language and culture long after Corsica was incorporated into France. Bastia and the smaller Ajaccio served as trading ports open for commerce between France, the Italian peninsula and throughout the Mediterranean, but the island cities could not compete with larger ports such as Marseille. The industrial revolution left Corsica largely untouched, despite construction of a railway from Bastia to Ajaccio in 1894. Most Corsicans battled isolation, illiteracy, the malaria that afflicted parts of the island until the 1940s and widespread poverty, even if the island

---

<sup>3</sup> “Les Corses, moi je les aime, et je les estime. Si nous avons su garder les colonies, c'est grâce à eux. Ils vont partout. Les uns et les autres peuvent tenir tous les emplois, depuis celui de gendarme ou de douanier, jusqu'à celui de gouverneur général, ils représentent vraiment la province française de peuplement aux colonies, dans toutes les colonies.... Les colonies, c'est le pôle essentiel de l'attraction des Corses.” François Pomponi, ed., *Mémorial des Corses*, vol. VI, *Les Corses à l'extérieur, 600-1950* (Bastia, 1981), 347.

<sup>4</sup> “Aux tropiques comme aux antipodes, les Corses servent magnifiquement leurs pays.” Quoted in Charlie Galibert, *La Corse, une île et le monde* (Paris, 2004), 68.

<sup>5</sup> The government made Corsica into a territory under the control of the monarchy. Interestingly, in a legal sense, it was neither a colony nor a fully-fledged province, and only in 1789 did the revolutionaries declare Corsica an “integral” part of France.

<sup>6</sup> Many European settlers in Algeria came from Italy, Spain and Malta; French projects included sending political prisoners and convicts to Algeria and New Caledonia as the nuclei of French settlements, and efforts to promote the migration of Alsatians and Lorrainers after 1870. See for example Fabienne Fischer, *Alsaciens et Lorrains en Algérie: Histoire d'une migration, 1830-1914* (Nice, 1998). More generally, on European migration, see Bouda Etemad, “Pour une approche démographique de l'expansion coloniale de l'Europe,” *Annales de démographie historique*, 113 (2007): 13-32.

<sup>7</sup> Dorothy Carrington, *Granite Island: A Portrait of Corsica* (London, 1971).

contained undoubted resources of crops (fruits, sugar, olives, chestnuts) and minerals (copper, iron, mercury and asbestos). The French of the “continent” regarded Corsicans as colorful but backward compatriots, incarnated in Prosper Mérimée’s *Colomba*: mountaineers prone to vendettas, bound together by clannish loyalties and nurturing Bonapartist nostalgia.

Particularly adverse conditions in the mid and late nineteenth century contributed to distress. The population doubled from the Revolution until 1924, creating pressure on land and increased fragmentation in land-holdings. Competition from producers elsewhere imperiled exports of local agricultural commodities and farming lost status in local opinion. Phylloxera wreaked havoc in the vineyards. The continued lack of industrial development limited alternatives to rural life. A prime career possibility, however, came from work for the French state, either in the military or in the burgeoning echelons of the public service.<sup>8</sup> Such a career offered secure employment, a comparatively good salary, escape from rural poverty and the promise of local and national recognition. Working for the state, whether in military uniform or a civil servant’s frock coat, often meant leaving Corsica, at least temporarily. Along with public service (and often because of it), migration provided the other major avenue of social mobility for Corsicans. An exodus in the 1800s swelled the longstanding Corsican communities in Marseille and Nice, as well as in Paris, where in the *fin-de-siècle* Corsicans enjoyed an ambiguous reputation in Montmartre’s world of pleasure and crime. Many Corsicans travelled further: thousands settled in Spanish Puerto Rico and Venezuela. The empire also beckoned, both to settlers and those who did tours of duty in the army and administration.

Economic necessity thus drove many Corsicans to the colonies, though other motivations may have also come into play: the tradition of service in the Genoese and Napoleonic military, wanderlust, the solidarities and kinship networks that produced chain migration and the hope for many Corsicans that a return home would follow a stint overseas. (“A Corsican never goes into exile, he just takes a leave of absence,” according to one Corsican lawyer in Paris.<sup>9</sup>) In the late nineteenth century, a liberal and anti-Bonapartist political movement on the island embraced the creed of colonialism, partly in order to demarcate itself from the other political currents. Its leader, Emmanuel Arène, argued that imperialism provided a context in which Corsicans could seek a better life, but also a vocation through which the island and its people could prove their loyalty and worth to France.<sup>10</sup>

Colonialism, however, did not win the support of all, many critics seeing in colonial expatriation a good opportunity only *faute de mieux*. *L’Écho de la Corse et des colonies*, a newspaper first published in Algiers in 1909 (and in Paris from 1911), bemoaned the lack of attention paid by Paris to the needs of the island—clearance of swamps, better transport infrastructure, improved education and health care—in contrast to the enthusiasm shown for colonial conquests and the increasing amounts of money invested in the overseas empire. Later nationalists, such as the journalists of *A Muvra* in the 1920s and 1930s, took up these criticisms and laments. They charged that migration robbed Corsica of its best and brightest, while work in the colonial public service and military created dependency on the state. The dissidents repeated that Corsica received less favorable treatment than many a colony, and that with the

<sup>8</sup> Stefani, *L’Emigration corse*, Livre 1.

<sup>9</sup> “Un Corse ne s’exile jamais, il s’absente,” quoted in Paul Silvani, “La communication, son temps et ses formes,” in *Corses-colonies* (catalogue), 259.

<sup>10</sup> Jean-Paul Pellegrinetti, “La République aréniste et les colonies, 1881-1908,” *Corses-Colonies* (catalogue), 57-75.

added imposition of the French language and customs, Corsica itself was indeed becoming more and more of a colony.

Despite these reservations, the colonies attracted large numbers of Corsicans. The French settlement of Algeria—proximate to Corsica and, so promoters often claimed, a place with a similar landscape, climate and way of life—provided a major destination,<sup>11</sup> but Corsicans settled wherever the French acquired possessions. In North Africa, as elsewhere in the empire, Corsicans founded *amicales*, providing forums in which they could reminisce, exchange news and speak Corsican together. The *amicales* also formed mutual assistance societies, where the legendary ties among islanders came into play, and they served as lobby groups for colonial interests and for efforts to secure greater advantages for Corsica. Some fellow settlers looked on Corsicans and their insular solidarity with suspicion (as illustrated, for instance, in the figures of unsavory Corsicans in colonial novels and films). If the Corsican customs agent or policeman presented an object for bemused caricature, concerns emerged about Corsican criminality as well—a reputation that Corsican colonialists tried to counter by celebrating the achievements of islanders in the colonies.<sup>12</sup>

Personal honor, island solidarity, national allegiance and colonial spirit joined together among Corsicans in the empire, as shown in the activities of the *amicales* and the articles in *L'Écho de la Corse*, only one of a number of newspapers published by regionalist groups in the colonies. *L'Écho* served as the official organ of the Confédération Générale des Corses et des Amis de la Corse, which boasted 120 sections and 40,000 members around the world in 1912. Writers in the newspaper reported on annual Corsican fêtes and the meetings of countless Corsican groups—associations flourished in all of the major North African cities and in many smaller centers as well. “Corse Oranaise,” for example, welcomed more than a hundred members to its annual general meetings. Electing as its leaders officers from the postal service, the customs service, the mayor’s office and the army, it provided aid to colonial Corsicans fallen on hard times and even sent contributions to metropolitan France for disaster relief. The Oran club also remonstrated the national government about the needs of Corsica: “Completely abandoned to their misery...Corsicans have a choice only between going overseas or taking refuge in the civil service.”<sup>13</sup> Complaints about the poverty and underdevelopment of Corsica indeed seemed regular themes in the statements and petitions of such societies. The need for concessional tariffs for colonial passengers and subventions for steamship lines

<sup>11</sup> One particular village in Algeria, Sidi-Mérouan, was founded by Greco-Corsicans from Cargèse. See Marie-Claude Bartoli, “Sidi-Mérouan, une colonie gréco-corse en Algérie,” *Études corses* 3, no. 4 (1975): 111-41. Among other micro-histories are Jerry Dalthière, “De l’île de Beauté à l’île d’oubli... Transportés corses. Ils furent des pionniers des villages de La Foa et Farino [New Caledonia],” *Ultramarines*, 56-60.

<sup>12</sup> *L'Écho de la Corse* damned a cinema in Algiers for showing a film entitled “Bandits corses”—an example of “films absolument monstrueux par l’absurdité” (“films whose absurdity makes them absolutely monstrosities”) (Aug. 14, 1910); the cinema withdrew the movie. Later the paper intoned, “Que de fois nous sommes-nous élevés contre la propension de certains esprits à vouloir malgré tout, présenter la Corse sous l’aspect d’une seconde Calabre et ses habitants sous celui de farouches bandits” (“How many times have we raised our voices against the propensity of certain people, despite everything, to portray Corsica as a second Calabria and its residents as fierce bandits!”) (Nov. 27, 1910). One of the poems about the Corsican colonial martyr Sergeant Casalonga included the lines: “Osera-t-on encore penser dire / Qu’en notre belle Corse, il n’est que des bandits?” (“Would they dare now to say / That there are but bandits in our fair isle?”) (Apr. 23, 1911).

<sup>13</sup> “Complètement abandonnée dans la misère...il ne reste plus aux Corses qu’à s’expatrier ou à se réfugier dans le fonctionnarisme.” *L'Écho de la Corse* (July 31, 1910).

between North Africa, Corsica and the continent, emerged as particular concerns, emphasizing not only the continuing problem of transport but also the importance of regular visits home for diasporic Corsicans.

*L'Écho de la Corse* proudly printed articles on Corsicans killed in colonial action, such as a feature concerning Sergeant Jérôme Casalunga. Casalunga and nine *tirailleurs sénégalais* (soldiers recruited from throughout sub-Saharan Africa for the French army), dispatched to confront insurrection in a remote outpost in Madagascar in 1904, had to take refuge in a church, where they spent all their bullets against the “natives” besieging them; before being killed, along with his fellow soldiers, Casalunga managed to destroy the remaining weaponry so it would not fall into the rebels’ hands. His death meant that “Once again Corsica thrills with joy and patriotic pride. The honor roll of its military exploits is enriched with another glorious name, written in the stoically shed blood of the hero of Amposiména.”<sup>14</sup> In speaking of his “Herculean death struggle” (“herculéenne agonie”), the journalist vaunted Corsican bravery in the service of empire and “the affirmation of our attachment to France” (“l’affirmation de notre attachement à la France”). Another issue of the paper printed almost an entire page of poems in Casalunga’s memory, while a later edition reported on the erection of a statue of the hero in his native Corsican village of Alata. As Casalunga’s mother listened, speakers lauded Corsicans’ willingness to sacrifice themselves for France, one warning against any “insurrectionary thoughts of a few misguided people” (“pensées de révolte de quelques égarés”) (“insurrectionary thoughts of a few misguided people”) and affirming that “we are not among those who will ever wave any other banner than the Tricolor flag” (“nous ne sommes pas de ceux qui déploieront jamais d’autre drapeau que le drapeau tricolore.”)<sup>15</sup>

Lists of military medals and honors awarded, and of diplomas earned, underlined Corsicans’ successes, while regular features in *L'Écho de la Corse* condemned “anti-Corsican” views about island violence. The visit to Tunis and Algiers of General Ordioni, one of the highest-ranked officers of Corsican origin and inspector-general of the French gendarmerie, provided an edifying opportunity for the newspaper to recount his humble origin in Corte, to applaud the success of the self-made man and to bemoan the continued poverty of his native island. Articles on culture—ranging from evocations of chestnut groves to poems written in the Corsican language—recalled the old homeland to readers, and the occasional piece on Bonaparte (“Le Génie de Napoléon” in 1911, for example) reminded Corsicans of the ties between past glories and present-day duties in the island and abroad. Less grandiosely, advertisements told readers where to procure Corsican specialties and services provided by compatriots in North Africa—advertisements ranged from an anisette distiller to a photographer, from a clairvoyant to a midwife—and also touted transport tickets for home leave.<sup>16</sup>

Corsicans overseas formed a close-knit community, self-identified through their associations, newspapers and networks of patronage and clientelism. Others identified them, with esteem, as leaders in the French colonial enterprise or, for their detractors, as somewhat shady characters using personal and island connections in almost conspiratorial fashion. The articles in *L'Écho de la Corse* bespeak anger

<sup>14</sup> “la Corse une fois de plus tressaille d’allégresse et de fierté patriotique. Le livre d’or de ses fastes militaires s’est enrichi d’une nouvelle page glorieuse écrite avec le sang stoïquement versé du héros d’Amposiména.”

<sup>15</sup> *L'Écho de la Corse*, July 13, 1910 (feature), April 23, 1911 (poems), May 7, 1911 (statue).

<sup>16</sup> The following paragraphs are based on a survey of issues in the Archives d’Outre-Mer, from 1909 to 1912.

against such allegations of corruption and crime,<sup>17</sup> yet these very concerns also witness a certain fragility in self-perception. The seemingly regular need for mutual aid to colonial Corsicans in distress suggests that a certain number of settlers from the island did not enjoy the fruits of success. The constant bemoaning of the misery in Corsica and denunciations of the state's unwillingness to address Corsican grievances about under-development, education, transport and disease, show that even while celebrating their contributions to colonialism, many Corsicans gazed back to the island from which they hailed with a sad resentment that lack of opportunities there had forced them into expatriation.

Some of the overseas Corsicans stood out as important personages in the colonial "who's who"—men such as Xavier Coppolani, credited with bringing Mauritania under French rule,<sup>18</sup> François Pietri, the energetic Inspecteur-Général des Finances in Morocco, and a number of senior military officers, such as Ordioni. Other Corsicans remained less well known, except as hometown heroes, but they, too, added value to Corsica and the colonies. Charlie Galibert's fascinating study of Jean-Simon Bonardi highlights the life of a village orphan, reared largely by an elder sister and mentored by his uncle, a parish priest. Bonardi volunteered for the colonial army in 1893, at the age of twenty-three, and embarked for Tonkin, where he distinguished himself in a brave military attack against local rebels and Chinese troops, his exploits much reported in the Corsican press. Afterwards he served honorably in Madagascar, then in the French Soudan. He returned to Corsica after a decade in the colonies, and was called up again during World War I, receiving the Legion of Honor the day he was sent to the front. Throughout his travels, Bonardi always carried with him a map of his native region in Corsica. He wrote regularly to his family, taking part through correspondence in business decisions, though it seems that he kept secret some details of the soldier's life (including trysts with concubines) even while describing his work and the exotic places where he was posted. He sent money to sisters, some of it invested into the purchases of land for the family. Bonardi returned, his chest bearing several colonial decorations, to a now prosperous estate of vineyards and townsmen soon elected him mayor.<sup>19</sup>

Bonardi's itinerary was exemplary: the modest upbringing, the military career that afforded him peregrinations around the empire, the importance of kinship ties, the remittances he sent home that provided a much welcome supplement to family income, the extension of his land-holding in Corsica and his triumphant repatriation. Many colonial Corsicans shared a biography similar to that of Bonardi, though some became more involved in colonial and national public life than he did. Jean Nicoli, a generation younger than Bonardi, provides a further case study of a Corsican in the empire, a man keenly interested in the indigenous people but also drawn into the maelstrom of European politics. Born in 1899 in San Gavinu di Carbini, a village so poor that it lacked even a church bell, Nicoli was one of five children in a family of farmers and grocers; one brother ended up in Algeria, another in the Ivory Coast. Nicoli imbibed French nationalism as a student at the teacher-training school in

---

<sup>17</sup> The paper nevertheless did publish occasional articles on crime, such as a report on a violent dispute between brothers-in-law in Bastia, an attempted murder in one village, and the funeral of a sergeant killed during election violence elsewhere in Corsica—all in the issue of August 7, 1910.

<sup>18</sup> Georges Coppolani, *Xavier Coppolani, fils de Corse, homme d'Afrique, fondateur de la Mauritanie* (Paris, 2005)—one of a number of biographies (often written by family members) or autobiographies of Corsicans in the empire.

<sup>19</sup> See Galibert, *La Corse, une île et le monde* which provides a detailed study of Bonardi, his career and his milieu.

Ajaccio and as a soldier; mobilized several months before the 1918 armistice, he served in recaptured Alsace until 1921. After several years as a primary-school teacher in rural Corsica, Nicoli and his wife left for the Soudan, in western Africa, where they taught for a decade in Kayes, Mopti and Sikasso. Leaving Corsica brought sorrow, but Nicoli wrote in his diary that

I feel in my heart of hearts the well-being of the parched traveler who begins to quench his thirst at a clear and cool stream. I prefer to travel and suffer and live my life to its fullest rather than lead the existence of a village school-teacher—no, my character could never be satisfied with that sort of life. To suffer, yes, but in the colonies, with the wide horizons, the sands and bright light, the heat and the storms, the evenings and the sound of the tom-toms—the colonies with their suffering and risks, but with their charms.<sup>20</sup>

Nicoli's notebook recorded the various sensations he experienced in the African bush, wonderment at the landscape but also fatigue at the oppressiveness of heat and dust. Nicoli also reminisced about the traditions of Corsica—he described the All Saint's Day commemoration and noted that he and his wife spent one day agreeably singing Corsican songs. Thoughts of his island provoked melancholy, but also disheartenment about political factionalism and poverty there. Concerned meanwhile about the poor state of Africans and the deleterious effects of colonization, Nicoli published an article on "L'enfant noir dans l'AOF [Afrique occidentale française]," wrote letters on behalf of Africans protesting against forced labor and transcribed a book of Malian folk-tales. He sent his own children back to Corsica for education, and when his wife fell ill, he left Africa for a post in Paris, then transferred to Corsica. He promoted the teaching of Corsican history in state schools, replicating his own efforts to teach something about African history to his pupils in the Soudan. Politically active, Nicoli supported the Popular Front, and during World War II, he joined the "Terre Corse" organization and engaged in clandestine Resistance action, becoming a Communist in the meantime. In August 1943, Italians captured Nicoli, shot him and decapitated his corpse.<sup>21</sup>

With his intellectual bent and progressive views, Nicoli does not perhaps represent the stereotypical colonial. However, he does illustrate well the possibilities for a rural boy to seize opportunities offered by colonialism, the ways in which that colonial experience reinforced his sense of being Corsican and, at the same time, of being French, while opening his eyes to the wider world and its inequities. In discussing his teaching strategy in Africa and in Corsica, Nicoli wrote about "concentric" circles: "Why should we not set up in our Corsican schools a basic curriculum imitated from the curriculum of the Soudan: the history and geography of

---

<sup>20</sup> "je sens au fond de moi-même ce bien-être du voyageur assoiffé qui commence à se désaltérer à une source claire et bien fraîche... je préfère souffrir mais voyager et remplir ma vie que de vivre cette vie vide d'instituteur du village. Non, mon caractère ne pourra jamais se faire à cette vie. Souffrir, mais [dans] la colonie avec ses vastes horizons, avec ses sables, avec sa lumière claire, avec ses chaleurs, avec ses tornades, avec ses soirs, avec ses tam-tams. La colonie avec ses souffrances, ses risques et ses attraits."

<sup>21</sup> François Arzalier and Francette Nicoli, *Jean Nicoli, de la colonie à la Corse en résistance: L'Itinéraire d'un homme libre* (Ajaccio, 2003); the book was published in an earlier, undated edition in Mali.

the local area, the region, Corsica, France, etc.”<sup>22</sup> Serving in the colonies, defending Corsican identity and fighting for France in the Resistance provided complementary points of reference. The testimonies of other Corsicans confirm this multi-focal perspective, whether it was experienced more privately, as with Bonardi, or had a more evident impact on political and cultural *engagement*, as occurred with Nicoli.<sup>23</sup>

Corsicans thus played an extremely important role in the French empire and the empire proved equally significant for Corsicans and Corsica. Colonial lobbyists and politicians (both local and national) celebrated Corsicans' contributions and academic observers joined the chorus. Toussaint-Jean Stefani's 1950 thesis on Corsican immigration to the colonies detailed in a determinedly colonialist and patriotic fashion the itineraries and achievements of Corsicans who served the empire. Stefani traced their imperial and entrepreneurial spirit back to the early modern age (repeating speculation that Christopher Columbus might have been Corsican). With hagiography buttressed by statistics, he proudly proclaimed the place of Corsicans in colonial administration in 1939—more than a fifth of tribunal presidents and *procureurs*, a tenth of education inspectors, 15 percent of tax collectors, 38 percent of customs officers, a third of *sous-chefs* in penal administrations, half of agricultural inspectors. The protectorate of Tunisia counted twenty-five Corsican heads of *communes* (municipalities), twenty-five judges, over thirty postal officers, more than twenty school principals and an equal number of tax collectors. Over a tenth of highest-ranking administrators (and a far larger proportion of subaltern *fonctionnaires*) in Indochina were Corsicans, and Stefani added, to point out that not all Corsicans clustered in the public service, that in some regions of Vietnam a quarter to a third of rubber planters came from the island. Corsica, in sum, sent more of its native sons—Stefani did not tabulate the women<sup>24</sup>—to the colonies than any other *département* in France. Stefani concluded not only that Corsicans stood in the forefront of colonialism. In somewhat fanciful analysis, he argued that their background endowed Corsicans with a fair-minded, modernizing colonial approach: with “his egalitarian spirit, instinctively he is without racial prejudice; he knows how to take an interest in the natives and understand them, and he knows how to rule

<sup>22</sup> “Pourquoi ne pas imposer dans nos écoles corses un programme minimum imité des programmes soudanais: histoire et géographie du ‘pays,’ de la région, de la Corse, de la France, etc.” Quoted in *ibid.*, 96.

<sup>23</sup> See for instance a testimonial pamphlet about Jean-Marc Franchi, *A travers la vie d'un colon corse en Algérie* (n.p., [ca. 1960]), which quotes Louis Costa-Marini, a Corsican governor-general of Algeria: “‘Siatte Cors'e Francesi' est l'invocation de la petite patrie à la grande.... Il donne son sens à la mission de la Communauté française [established in 1958]. ... soyons Algériens et Français” (“‘Be Corsican and be French' is the invocation of our island land to the fatherland... This gives meaning to the mission of the French Community... Be Algerians and French”) (page 53). Marc-Louis Lanfranchi, *Un Instituteur Corse en Algérie française* (n.p., 2002) recounts the life of a Corsican teacher in Constantine who, after his retirement, won election as mayor of his native village on the island. Lucia Molinelli Cancellieri, *Charles Cancellieri, l'insoumis, 1895-1957: Essai biographique* (Nîmes, 1998) is the biography of a Marxist lawyer, a prominent member of the Corsican community in Saigon who became an ardent critic of colonialism and defended several Vietnamese nationalists accused of murder in the inter-war years. See also Philippe Franchini, “Charles Cancellieri ou la défense des patriotes vietnamiens,” *Corses-colonies* (catalogue), 82-86. The *Corse-colonies* catalogue has chapters on several figures: Monique Dondin-Payre, “L'action du colonel Jean-Luc Carbuccia en Algérie,” 41-56; Pascal Torre, “François Pietri, Directeur général des Finances au Maroc (1917-1924),” 77-94; Ange Rovere, “François Vittori (1902-1977),” 95-104. See also Michel Vergé-Franceschi, “Le docteur François Devoti (1855-1896), un Bastiais, médecin en chef des colonies,” *Corse-colonies* (proceedings), 65-79.

<sup>24</sup> Little still has been written on Corsican women in the colonies—an interesting subject for further research.

them.”<sup>25</sup> Necessity, and history, had been the mother of imperial work of which Corsicans could be proud, and the exigencies of the post-World War II empire would continue to provide, Stefani intimated, new possibilities. He closed his study with parting wish to fellow Corsicans: “With the spirit of duty and sacrifice of their fathers, may they serve, in the context of the French Union, both their ‘little fatherland’ [of Corsica] and the great French fatherland.”<sup>26</sup>

The establishment of the French Union in 1946 coincided with the onset of the anti-colonialist assault with eight years of war in France’s possessions in Southeast Asia, the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu and the independence of the countries of Indochina. As the French lowered the Tricolor over colonial outposts, often with the flight of settlers,<sup>27</sup> Corsicans viewed imperial retreat with dismay. For so long proclaimed as lands of opportunity and salvation, the remaining colonies seemed endangered redoubts of French and Corsican presence. Corsican opposition to independence for Algeria, not surprisingly, grew especially strong. The 100,000 *Français d’Algérie* who claimed Corsican heritage no doubt hoped that their tenure remained secure, but the Franco-Algerian war that began in 1954, and the inability of French forces to defeat the nationalists, made their positions uncertain. Lack of resolve to defend *Algérie française* provoked action among Corsicans. In league with the Comité du Salut Public set up in Algiers in May 1958, in opposition to the perceived willingness of the Paris government to negotiate with the Algerian nationalists, Corsican rebels in that month occupied the prefecture in Ajaccio, joined by a *député* of Corsican heritage who flew in from Algiers to boost morale. Corsica momentarily seemed the soft underbelly of metropolitan France with the start a possible *coup d’état* spearheaded by the generals in Algiers. The rebels and mutineers believed that only the return of General de Gaulle would secure the future of *Algérie française*, and when he indeed became premier, then president, they hoped their demands had been understood. Further years of bloodshed in Algeria and mounting opposition to the war in France turned the tide in favor of independence. Although a majority of the Corsican electorate voted in 1961 in favor of Algerian independence, diehard defenders of French Algeria, several Corsicans prominent among them, threw their support behind the Organisation Armée Secrète and even tried to take over Corsica by an attempted coup.<sup>28</sup>

Between 15,000 and 17,000 *Français d’Algérie* arrived in Corsica in 1962 and the years immediately following—the numbers represented a tenth of the population of the island. Despite the Corsicans’ previous engagement in the empire, many islanders resented the settlement of *pieds-noirs* (and other migrants), especially as the *rapatriés* benefited from various loans and subventions that allowed them to acquire property easily; a number took advantage of land and capital to become successful producers of *vin ordinaire*.<sup>29</sup> This “colonization” of Corsica, coupled with the ideas of the New Left current in the late 1960s and early 1970s, led to a resurgence of

<sup>25</sup> “son esprit égalitaire, instinctivement, il n’a pas de préjugé raciste; il sait s’intéresser aux natifs, et les comprendre et il sait s’imposer.” Stefani, *L’Emigration corse*, 148.

<sup>26</sup> “Puisse-t-ils avec l’esprit de devoir et de sacrifice de leurs pères, servir, dans le cadre de l’Union Française, leur Grande et leur Petite Patrie.” *Ibid.*, 202. Other works echoed details and the proud local and regional sentiments; for example, *Les Corses au Maroc* (n.p., 1937).

<sup>27</sup> A number of Corsicans, however, remained in South Vietnam until 1975.

<sup>28</sup> See Paul Silvani, *Corses des années ardentes, 1939-1976* (Paris, 1976), 81-90.

<sup>29</sup> *L’Implantation en Corse des Français d’Afrique du Nord*. Tome I: *L’Implantation et ses effets économiques* (Nice, 1971), provides information on 550 farms of *pieds-noirs* in eastern Corsica; Gabriel-Xavier Culioli, “Aux origines colonisatrices de l’anticolonialisme nationalise,” *Corse-colonies* (catalogue), 353-70.

Corsican nationalism and, more radically, to calls for island independence.<sup>30</sup> In August 1975, several armed commandos from the Action Régionaliste Corse occupied a wine-cellar belonging to a *rapatrié* in Aléria, a protest against the subventions given to *pièds-noirs*. The incident provided a signal moment in the new militancy of the nationalist movement, which, somewhat paradoxically, recruited considerable support among sons of *rapatriés*, young men no longer enjoying the benefits that their fathers had claimed as colonial masters in Algeria, but now confronting poverty and limited opportunities in Corsica. By the 1980s, calls for the “decolonization” of Corsica sounded loudly even if they came from a minority of the population. Militants also joined in solidarity with Kanaks in New Caledonia and other *indépendantistes* in the remaining French overseas territories, leading the right-wing politician Charles Pasqua to remark that the defense of French rule in Corsica began in New Caledonia.<sup>31</sup> Though the situation quietened in the “confetti de l’empire” of the Pacific, Caribbean and Indian Ocean, episodic violence, bitter debate and recriminations about migrant *continentaux* have continued to mark current events in Corsica.

Corsica’s relationship with the empire, in the long term, was therefore complex. Corsica, for Vanina Profizi, was an “entre-deux,” a bridge between the *métropole* and the empire, a reservoir of colonial settlers, a rival with the colonies for development assistance and an island with decidedly colonialist and colonized traits.<sup>32</sup> Their island taken over in a bout of French expansion in the late 1700s, Corsicans were at the forefront of renewed French imperialism, symbolized by Napoleon, and Corsicans formed mainstays of the empire. For the Corsicans who became Frenchmen *sans frontières*, the empire offered seemingly unbounded opportunities; though not all found fame and fortune, enough succeeded to inspire the dreams of other would-be colonials. Yet, whatever might be suggested about islanders’ innate penchant for exploration and aptitude for conquest, expatriation clearly represented a response to the lack of possibilities at home, and resentment festered at the poor state of Corsica even compared to some colonies. Corsicans overseas formed self-help networks, congregated into associations, nurtured ancestral traditions with almost obsessive pride, yet this allegiance revealed a level of unease, a mentality of defense against other settlers, the centralized state that the Corsicans served and, of course, against the “natives” who might threaten their hard-won gains. Colonial success, individually and collectively, provided redemption from poverty, insular isolation and the demeaning caricatures of Corsicans as violence-prone bandit mountaineers, yet the very persistence of such stereotypes forced the championing of Corsican bravery and honor, and pledges of allegiance to the French flag and to the Republic for which it stood.

Beneficiaries of overseas colonialism, most Corsicans not surprisingly opposed the imperial retreat, some supporters making last-ditch efforts to keep the

---

<sup>30</sup> See Nicolas Giudici, *Le Crépuscule des Corses: clientélisme, identité et vendetta* (Paris, 1997), who questions: “Comment distinguer les premiers attentats imputables aux nationalistes corses des derniers attentats imputables aux nationalistes français” during the Algerian War? (“How can one differentiate the first attacks blamed on Corsican nationalists from the last attacks blamed on French nationalists?”) (page 22). Giudici argues that after 1962, Corsica felt itself a “besieged” island, and that the Corsican nationalists also took their cues from the nationalist struggle in North Africa.

<sup>31</sup> Dominique Ghison, Wassissi Iopué and Camille Rabin, eds., *Ces Iles que l’on dit françaises* (Paris, 1988).

<sup>32</sup> Vanina Profizi, “La Corse dans l’ensemble imperial français” (unpublished paper) at the Toulouse conference mentioned previously; Ms Profizi is completing a doctoral thesis on Corsicans in French West Africa.

flag flying in North Africa. When that failed, Corsica became home to a large cohort of *rapatriés*, who themselves ironically formed the target of attack, but also provided recruits for the radicalized nationalist movement. Corsica was (perhaps arguably) the most colonialist region of France, but for some militants, the island was also a colonized province of the Hexagon. Colonialism, in short, forms a vital and integral part of the history of the Corsica in the actual fact of Corsicans' role in France's overseas empire, but also in the way that colonialism provided an ideology for use by groups ranging from Arène's empire loyalists of the *fin-de-siècle* through the moderate nationalists of the 1920s and 1930s to the radicals clamoring for independence (and willing to employ violence against the state) in the 1970s, from defenders of the French empire in its dying days to advocates of the national liberation of Corsica from the post-colonial French state.

What does the case of Corsica reveal about French colonialism and, more generally, about modern France? First, it shows some of the specific connections between provinces and colonies. One of the newer approaches to French colonial history takes a regionalist perspective—recent theses and books, for instance, have treated links between Le Havre, Lyon, Bordeaux, Marseille and the Limousin and the empire.<sup>33</sup> Meanwhile, in a pioneering study, Herman Lebovics has analyzed “how new understandings of French regionalism became intertwined with a new history of French colonialism.”<sup>34</sup> Looking at colonialism from a regional level makes it possible to identify some of the local stakes in French expansion and how the experience of colonialism varied around different parts of France, to see how and why particular cities or provinces developed an imperial vocation, to reconsider the theory of “municipal imperialism” (or regional imperialism),<sup>35</sup> to discover ways in which colonialism became a rallying-point for local politicians and their electoral campaigns or a banner for other groups, such as merchants and missionaries.<sup>36</sup>

In the case of Corsica, the history includes the economic instigations for migration and the opportunities presented by colonialism. It illustrates the welding of a peripheral region to the nation, but also the retention of regionalist links and identities amongst its people. It reveals the hopes and disappointments of empire, the paradoxes of the imperial venture and migration. Those paradoxes vividly appeared in one cartoon in *A Muvra* picturing a shepherd with goats looking at a mirage of towers labeled (in Corsican) Syria, Morocco, Paris, Indochina, Tunisia and Madagascar. Jean Franchi, president of the Fédération des Groupements corses, at the association's

<sup>33</sup> See for example, Jean-François Klein, *Soyeux en mer de Chine: Stratégie des réseaux lyonnais en Extrême-Orient (1843-1906)* (Thesis, University of Lyon II, 2002); Claude Malon, *Le Havre colonial de 1880 à 1960* (Le Havre, 2006), Christelle Lozère, *Bordeaux colonial, 1850-1940* (Bordeaux, 2007), and Reine-Claude Grondin, “L’empire palimpseste: l’exemple des années Trente dans le Limousin,” *French Colonial History* 7 (2006): 165-80. There is, as well, a series of books published by the Chambre de Commerce et d’Industrie de Marseille on the history of economic links between Marseille and the colonial empire, as well as studies in Hubert Bonin, Catherine Hodeir and Jean-François Klein, eds., *L’Esprit économique impérial (1830-1970): Groupes de pression et réseaux du patronat colonial en France et dans l’outre-mer* (Paris, 2008). For studies of other regions of imperial powers, see for example, T.M. Devine, *Scotland’s Empire, 1400-1815* (London, 2003) and Aliza S. Wong, *Race and the Nation in Liberal Italy, 1861-1911: Meridionalism, Empire, and Diaspora* (London, 2006).

<sup>34</sup> Herman Lebovics, *Bringing the Empire Back Home: France in the Global Age* (Durham, NC, 2004), 7.

<sup>35</sup> The concept of “municipal imperialism” was used by John Laffey, in “Roots of French Imperialism in the Nineteenth Century: The Case of Lyon,” *French Historical Studies* 6, no. 1 (1969): 78-92, and developed in several subsequent articles.

<sup>36</sup> See for example, Joseph Michel, *Missionnaires bretons d’outre-mer: XIXe-XXe siècles* (Rennes, 1997), and Yannick Essertel, *L’Aventure missionnaire lyonnaise, 1815-1962* (Paris, 2001).

thirteenth congress in Algiers in 1938, intoned: "For us, people uprooted from our native land—because this land could not give us what we had to go elsewhere to find, to countries that had not been French for as long as had our own land—[Corsica] remains our 'little fatherland'."<sup>37</sup>

Second, an examination of a region such as Corsica underlines the various uses of empire and the functionalist nature of colonialism. Historians have often explained overseas expansion from the top down. Hobson's "economic taproots of colonialism" (or Lenin's view of imperialism as the highest stage of capitalism) stressed the role of business. An alternative view, presented in the French case by Henri Brunschwig, underlined the primacy of geopolitical imperatives for colonialism.<sup>38</sup> More recently, since the "cultural turn" in history, emphasis has been placed on race, ethnocentricity and the imaginary of 'others' that formed a cultural stratum for imperial ventures.<sup>39</sup> However, one can also focus on imperialism "from below," the way that it functioned at provincial, municipal and village level, the opportunities it presented for the "average" French man or woman searching for a career, adventure and fortune. Behind the fine words voiced at the banquets of the *amicales* or at the unveiling of monuments to colonial martyrs, most Corsicans were perhaps relatively little interested in the greater glory of France, the design of grand projects for the *mise en valeur* (wholesale development) of distant domains, or high-minded ideas of the civilizing mission. (The very small number of Corsican missionaries in the empire is noticeable.) For Corsicans, empire meant employment, social promotion and the possible fulfillment of aspirations for a better life than if they remained in an underdeveloped island. Colonialism opened a two-way conduit for military men and *fonctionnaires* who served overseas then returned home, bringing back status and savings, ready to assume roles as *notables* and benefactors. Therefore, the function of empire was not so much ideological, as pragmatic, for the Corsicans and probably others: a question of career rather than commerce or Christianity.

Third, the Corsican case shows the complex relationships between regionalism, nationalism and imperialism in the Third Republic and afterwards: the tensions between the *petite patrie* of village, town or region, the *patrie* of the republican nation-state sanctified by patriotic and nationalist ideology, and what one might call the *plus grande patrie* of Greater France. As various writers, most recently Graham Robb,<sup>40</sup> have shown, France formed a congeries of different cultures right through the nineteenth century, and even efforts by the state—through politicization, education, military service, propaganda and colonialism—to mould the regions and cultures into a nation, differences persisted.<sup>41</sup> The history of regionalist links with the colonies reveals how these particularities expressed and maintained themselves

---

<sup>37</sup> "Pour nous, déracinés du sol natal, parce que ce sol nous a refusé ce que nous sommes allés trouver ailleurs, dans un pays qui n'est pourtant pas français depuis aussi longtemps que nous le sommes, elle demeure notre petite patrie." François Pomponi, ed., *Le Mémorial des Corses*. Tome 6. *Les Corses à l'extérieur 600-1950* (Ajaccio, 1981), cartoon from 409; quotation from 403.

<sup>38</sup> Henri Brunschwig, *French Colonialism, 1871-1914: Myths and Realities* (London, 1966).

<sup>39</sup> The various publications of Pascal Blanchard, Nicolas Bancel, Sandrine Lemaire and their colleagues in the ACHAC group are key examples; among other works is the compendium *Culture coloniale en France: De la Révolution à nos jours* (Paris, 2008), to which the present author contributed a chapter on colonial museums.

<sup>40</sup> Graham Robb, *The Discovery of France* (London, 2007); see also Stéphane Gerson, *The Pride of Place: Local Memories and Political Culture in Nineteenth-Century France* (Ithaca, NY, 2003).

<sup>41</sup> On this point, and the role of schools in forging a nation, see Jean-François Chanet, *L'École républicaine et les petites patries* (Paris, 1996).

overseas, yet how the colonial context provided a crucible for the forging of nationalism.

Partly through their colonial experiences—service to the state, mixing with people from other regions, “Gallicization”—there is here a case of the metamorphosis of “Corsicans into Frenchmen.”<sup>42</sup> The exact process and its result, however, appear differently to various historians. Anne Meistersheim suggests that Corsicans became Frenchmen through colonialism. François Negroni characterizes the colonial union between Corsicans and France as a “mariage blanc” (“marriage of convenience”). Gabriel-Xavier Culioli, for his part, underlines the “complexe corse” (“Corsican complex”) created in the empire: “Simultaneously Corsica resisted integration while trying to become French at any price.”<sup>43</sup>

Colonial promoters vaunted Corsicans as the standard-bearers of French grandeur overseas, the heroic conquerors and defenders of the empire. In their eyes, colonial exploits redeemed Corsicans of their dubious reputation as rustic half-Italian yokels prone to vendettas. Corsican colonials provided models not only for their fellow islanders but also for the nation of which they were citizens. Yet, colonialism also worked to reinforce, for many, a sense of Corsicanness, as Corsicans clustered in the army and public service, formed *amicales*, proudly kept alive their language, music and other traditions even in Antananarivo or Saigon, as they looked back to the island where their success overseas would give them prestige and clout.<sup>44</sup> Simon Bonardi literally carried his island map around with him from Vietnam to Madagascar to the Soudan, and others carried the island with them in their mental and emotional baggage. Nevertheless, precisely because of their colonial and overseas connections, Corsica was less of an enclave; Corsica was home to many residents—Simon Bonardi and Jean Nicoli among them—with international experiences and contacts, and the island turned increasingly outward—rather than inward-looking, indeed looking towards the farthest reaches of the empire.

At the same time, as the regionalists of the late 1800s and early 1900s maintained, imperialism drained Corsica of ambitious men and women, Paris diverted funding away from the pressing needs of the island (and other poor regions of France) for imperial projects. Certain Corsicans, returning home, grew disheartened to find that the island was less modernized than many colonies, shocked for instance that most of Corsica lacked electricity when Algiers was already brightly lit. Some demanded greater efforts by Paris for development of the island. If such efforts were not forthcoming; and if cultural alienation and political domination continued, others argued, Corsica, too, needed to be decolonized.

Centrifugal and centripetal forces were at work in the dynamics of regionalism, nationalism and imperialism. Such forces drew Corsica into the national orbit, but also created counter-currents that loosened that pull, all the while projecting

---

<sup>42</sup> The allusion, of course, is to Eugen Weber’s *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870-1914* (Stanford, 1976), and to later studies that engage with Weber’s interpretation, notably James R. Lehning, *Peasant and French: Cultural Contact and Rural France during the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1995).

<sup>43</sup> “La Corse résista à l’intégration en même temps qu’elle chercha à tout prix à devenir française.” François de Negroni, “Corses et continentaux aux colonies, histoire d’un mariage blanc,” *Corses-colonies* (catalogue), 149-162; Anne Meisterheim, “Le destin ambigu des Corses aux colonies?,” *Corse-colonies*, 197; Gabriel-Xavier Culioli, *Le Complexe corse* (Paris, 1990).

<sup>44</sup> See Jean-Louis Pretini, “Saigon-Cyrnos,” in *Saigon, 1925-1945: De la «Belle Colonie» à l’éclosion révolutionnaire ou la fin des dieux blancs*, ed. Philippe Franchini (Paris, 1992), 92-103. Philippe Franchini, *Continental Saigon* (Paris, 1976), offers the recollections of a Corsican-Vietnamese *métis* and proprietor of Saigon’s leading hotel.

Corsica and France into and then out of an imperial field. Seeing imperialism as a vortex of centrifugal and centripetal movements—of people, products and cultures—stresses the multiple vectors of imperialism and the mutual influences exercised by the *métropole* on the colonies, and the empire on the *mère-patrie*.

The case of Corsica also illustrates the heritage of empire, not just in the specific and crucial history of the *rapatriés* and the nationalists, but also in the way that empire itself was remembered. The language, ideologies and sometimes tactics of the Corsican “*fronts de libération nationale*” echoed the anti-colonial movements in Asia and Africa of an earlier generation.<sup>45</sup> In the face of their actions, national authorities promised (though avoiding the charged word) to “pacify” the island, all the while designing programs for administrative decentralization and economic *mise en valeur* that owed much to initiatives pioneered by colonial-era policy-makers. In 2002, the museum in Corte held the first major exhibition ever produced on “Corse et colonies,” the curators remarking that although many Corsican families retained memories of the empire, and perhaps prized as keepsakes a North African carpet, a West African statue or some Indochinese silk, the history of colonialism in the island, as elsewhere in France, had for many years after decolonization received little attention and analysis. The massive catalogue, and accompanying papers from a conference on Corsica and the empire, themselves constitute a *lieu de mémoire*.<sup>46</sup>

The rediscovery of Corsica's colonial connections adds new elements to the history of the island: Corsica's role in the Mediterranean and the wider world; the deeds (and sometimes misdeeds) of Corsicans overseas; the role of colonialism in island life but also the prominent role of several Corsicans in anti-colonialism; the complicated tension among French nationalism, Corsican nationalism and imperial nationalism; the place of migrants to Corsica, including continentals, *rapatriés* and a growing number of Maghrebins. As in the rest of France, and not just in Corsica, colonialism and its legacy have left a heavy imprint, which continues to mark present-day issues of local identity, self-government, migration and multiculturalism.

---

<sup>45</sup> For another pertinent example of late colonial (or post-colonial) links between French regions and the *outré-mer*, see Herman Lebovics's discussion of Larzac and New Caledonia in *Bringing the Empire Back Home: France in the Global Age* (Durham, NC, 2004).

<sup>46</sup> Some omissions in an impressive overview, such as the role of Corsicans in opposition to the decolonisation of Algeria, are notable.