

# The Women of Corsican Nationalism: Between Tradition and Modernity (1975–98)

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## Abstract

This article investigates late twentieth-century Corsican nationalism through the lens of gender, drawing attention to how women have sought to play an active and creative role in the movement. Through a series of interviews with female nationalist militants, this article will focus on what belonging to the nationalist movement meant to Corsican women. Gender relations within the nationalist movement reflected the changes taking place in a society fluctuating between tradition and modernity.

## I

‘We were a minority in a minority. The infighting among the nationalists put a stop to the discussion of ideas. Our voices were stifled by this lead blanket. We proved incapable of freeing ourselves from the nationalist trend and of anchoring the feminist movement in civil society’.<sup>1</sup> With these words, Marie-Paule Gambini D’Orazio recalls the time she was active in the nationalist movement. In doing so, she drew attention to the complex relationship between feminist and nationalist activism—the central theme of this article.

The article investigates late twentieth-century Corsican nationalism through the lens of gender, drawing attention to how women have sought to play an active and creative role in the movement. Through a series of interviews with female nationalist militants, this article sheds light on what belonging to the nationalist movement meant to women. Gender relations within the nationalist movement reflected the changes taking place in a society fluctuating between tradition and modernity.<sup>2</sup> Female militancy

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<sup>1</sup> Marie-Paule Gambini D’Orazio (teacher), interview by author, Ajaccio, Corsica, 5 July 2022.

<sup>2</sup> Janine Renucci, *Corse traditionnelle et Corse nouvelle: La géographie d’une île* (Lyon, 1974).

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reproduced the dual aspect of an island in search of an identity between tradition and modernity. The words of the interviewed women reveal both their support for traditional family models and their attempts to overturn the power relations between men and women connecting nationalism and feminism. This study lies at the crossroads between political and oral history. With a few exceptions, works on the history of the Corsican nation reveal a widespread tendency to consider the rise of nationalism as the moment when Corsicans acquired an awareness of the existence of a perennial, primordial nation.<sup>3</sup> What emerges from the analysis of these works is an essentialist vision of nationalism based on the idea that nations are engendered by primordial sentiments, that is, the existence of a shared sense of belonging and of a shared heritage of symbols making the nation a ‘community of destiny’.<sup>4</sup> The authors of these works are usually journalists seeking to reconstruct the birth of the post-war nationalist wave.<sup>5</sup>

The article proposes an analysis of nationalism that goes beyond the scope of such studies. To do so, it focuses on women militants and the ways they now remember and relate their activities. Although the Corsican nationalist movement overall was dominated by men, female militants made a unique contribution to the cause. Nationalist women shared aims regarding the recognition of the Corsican nation and the economic and social renewal of the island. However, some nationalist women identifying as feminists pressed for legal changes and the end to practices confining them to subordinate roles, compared to men; whilst, on the other hand, some female nationalist militants were opposed to the feminist cause and embraced a traditional patriarchal model, making the nationalist battle their priority.

The article is placed within the articulated and methodological debate on gender analysis in nationalism studies.<sup>6</sup> It draws attention to the

<sup>3</sup> Xavier Crettiez, *La Question Corse* (Brussels, 1999); Thierry Dominici, ‘Le nationalisme dans la Corse contemporaine’, *Pôle Sud*, 20 (2004), pp. 97–112; André Fazi, *La recomposition territoriale du pouvoir: les régions insulaires de Méditerranée occidentale* (Ajaccio, 2009); Deborah Paci, ‘“Je suis corse, un homme de village”: Towards a Study of Contemporary Corsican Nationalism (1959–98)’, *History: The Journal of the Historical Association* 108 (2023), pp. 556–80; Deborah Paci, ‘La “comunità immaginata” corsa (1974–1984): il nazionalismo nello sguardo dei contemporanei’, in Andrea Geniola and Deborah Paci (eds), *Sulle tracce della comunità immaginata. Identità e istituzioni nell’Europa degli stati nazionali* (Milan, 2022), pp. 63–83; Pierre Dottelonde, *Aux origines du nationalisme corse contemporain: Récit d’une genèse 1959–1976* (Ajaccio, 2023).

<sup>4</sup> Anthony D. Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* (Oxford, 1986).

<sup>5</sup> Jean-Paul Delors and Stéphane Muracciole, *Corse la poudrière* (Paris, 1978); Pierre Dottelonde, *Histoire de la revendication corse (1959–1974)* (Paris, 1984); Renucci, *Corse traditionnelle et Corse nouvelle*; Paul Silvani, *Corse des années ardentes 1939–1976* (Paris, 1976); Michel Labro, *La question corse* (Paris, 1977); Thierry Desjardins, *La Corse à la dérive* (Paris, 1977); Dominique Antoni, *Corse: Corsica entre le statu quo et l’autonomie* (Verviers, 1978); Antoine Sanguinetti, *Procès des jacobins* (Paris, 1979); Antoine Ottavi, *Des Corses à part entière* (Paris, 1979); Wanda Dressler-Holahan, *Développement économique et mouvement autonomiste: Les cas de la Corse* (Grenoble, 1981); Sabino Acquaviva, *La Corsica: Storia di un genocidio* (Milan, 1982); Francis Pomponi, *Le Mémorial des Corses* (Ajaccio, 1982); Vanina, *Corse: la liberté, pas la mort* (Paris, 1984).

<sup>6</sup> Miranda Alison, *Women and Political Violence: Female Combatants in Ethno-national Conflict* (London, 2009); Cynthia Enloe, *The Curious Feminist: Searching for Women in a New Age of*

so-called women's or feminist 'standpoint theory', which challenges the notion of conventional scientific practices that have excluded women from sociological and historical investigation.<sup>7</sup> To make sense of their actions and experiences, studies into the role of women in nationalist movements elsewhere in the 1970s and 1980s, in places such as Algeria, Vietnam, Bangladesh, Québec, Oman and Palestine and in the Black Panther movement in the United States, have been explored.<sup>8</sup> Historians can use these cases to think about tensions between feminism and nationalism in this period. They see more of what was and was not specific to Corsica.

This study also draws upon the methods used in oral history, drawing on the work of Lynn Abrams, Donald A. Ritchie, Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, Alessandro Portelli, Della Pollock and Paul Thompson, to mention just a few examples.<sup>9</sup> The qualitative research involved in oral history proved to be particularly interesting because it

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*Empire* (Berkeley, 2004); Ranjoo Seodu Herr, 'The possibility of nationalist feminism', *Hypatia*, 18 (2003), pp. 135–60; Jon Mulholland, Nicola Montagna and Erin Sanders-McDonagh (eds), *Gendering Nationalism: Intersections of Nation, Gender and Sexuality* (London, 2018); Sita Ranchod-Nilsson and Mary Ann Tetreault (eds), *Women, States and Nationalism: At Home in the Nation?* (London, 2003); Jill Vickers, 'Bringing nations in: some methodological and conceptual issues in connecting feminisms with nationhood and nationalisms' *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 8 (2006), pp. 84–109; Lois West (ed.), *Feminist Nationalism* (New York, 2013).

<sup>7</sup> Joey Sprague and Mary K. Zimmerman, 'Overcoming dualisms: a feminist agenda for sociological methodology', in Paul England (ed.), *Theory on Gender/Feminism on Theory* (New York, 1993), pp. 255–80; Sylvia Walby, 'Gender, nations and states in a global era', *Nations and Nationalism*, 6 (2000), pp. 523–40; Sylvia Walby, 'Woman and nation', *International Journal of Comparative Sociology*, 33 (1992), pp. 81–100.

<sup>8</sup> Monique Gadant, 'Quelques réflexions sur le mouvement des femmes en Algérie: nationalismes et luttes féminines' *Journal des anthropologues*, 42 (1990), pp. 109–16; Monique Gadant, *Le nationalisme algérien et les femmes* (Paris, 1995); Malika Remaoun, 'Les associations féminines pour les droits des femmes' *Insaniyat*, 8 (1999), pp. 129–43; Frances S. Hasso, 'The "women's front": Nationalism, feminism, and modernity in Palestine' *Gender and Society*, 12 (1998), pp. 441–65; Sherna Berger Gluck, 'Palestinian women: gender politics and nationalism', *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 24 (1995), pp. 5–15; Steffi S. Deb, 'The Liberation War of Bangladesh: women and the alternative narratives of the war', *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 22 (2021), pp. 78–86; A. Salma and M. Jeyran, 'The long road to liberation: archive, history-making and the place of women in the Dhofar Revolution' *Kohl: A Journal for Body and Gender Research*, 9 (2023), pp. 9–24; An T. Nguyen, *Vietnamese Women's Movement for the Right to Live: The Constructive Nexus Between Nationalism and Feminism in the Vietnam War, 1970–1975* (Orono, 2016); Marianna Miggiolaro Chaguri and Flávia X. M. Paniz, 'Women's war: Gender activism in the Vietnam war and in the wars for Kurdish autonomy' *Sociologia & Antropologia*, 9 (2019), p. 896; Chantal Maillé, 'Front de libération des femmes du Québec', *L'Encyclopédie Canadienne* (22 February 2021), <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/fr/article/front-de-liberation-des-femmes-du-quebec> [accessed 21 October 2024]; Antwanisha Alameen-Shavers, 'The woman question: gender dynamics within the Black Panther Party', *Spectrum: A Journal on Black Men*, 5 (2016), pp. 33–62; Ashley Farmer, Mary Phillips, Robyn C. Spencer and Leela Yellesetty, 'Women in the Black Panther Party', *International Socialist Review* 111 (2018–2019), <https://isreview.org/issue/111/women-black-panther-party/> [accessed 21 October 2024].

<sup>9</sup> Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Theory* (London, 2016), pp. 1–3; Donald A. Ritchie, *Doing Oral History* (Oxford, 2014); Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (eds), *The Oral History Reader* (London, 2016); Alistair Thomson, 'Four Paradigm Transformations in Oral History', *The Oral History Review*, 34 (2007), pp. 49–70; Alessandro Portelli, *The Text and the Voice: Writing, Speaking, and Democracy in American Literature* (New York, 1994); Alessandro Portelli, 'Living voices: the oral history interview as dialogue and experience', *The Oral History Review*, 45 (2018), pp. 239–48; Della Pollock, 'Oral history', in Shannon Rose Riley and Lynette Hunter (eds), *Mapping Landscapes for Performance as*

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requires the use of interdisciplinary methods capable of linking practice and theory.<sup>10</sup> As Abrams points out, it is not just what is said that is important but also the way in which it is said and the meaning that it assumes in the context in which it is being said.<sup>11</sup>

This methodological approach provides the basis for examining the testimony of nine women militants who were interviewed in their homes in Bastia, Ajaccio and Bonifacio during the summer and autumn of 2022. These women were born between the mid-1950s and mid-1960s, with one exception (Ghjermana De Zerbi, who was born in 1939). They chose not to use pseudonyms but their real names. In some cases, they asked not to be videoed. The language used in the interviews was French. A translation of their responses is provided for this article. All of the interviewees were asked the same questions, with minimal variations, about family ties to nationalist exponents; date and place of birth; memories of their childhood and adolescence linked to their family environments; their schooling and educational background; the emergence of their political interest and involvement in nationalist activism; and their memories of two of the most important feminist and nationalist groups involving women: the *Donni Corsi* ('Corsican Women') movement and the *Manifeste pour la vie* ('Manifesto for Life'). The sample of interviewees is representative of a generation of female militants motivated by regionalist and then autonomist demands, in the context of the movement that emerged in the 1970s to promote the rebirth of the Corsican language and culture. They embraced nationalist militancy from the mid-1970s onwards, when political claims became more insistent and critical of power relations with central government.

## II

Part of the French State since 1769, the island of Corsica is a territorial collectivity, with a special status, and four representatives in the French parliament. The *Collectivité de Corse* has two main institutions, both based in Ajaccio: the Corsican Assembly, a legislative body, and the Executive Council. There are also three consultative bodies: the Economic, Social, Environmental and Cultural Council, the Chamber of Territories and the *Assemblea di a ghjuventù* (Youth Assembly), which represents the interests of young people.<sup>12</sup> The official language in Corsica is French. However, Corsican is spoken by a substantial section of the population, and increased use of the language became a rallying cry for the nationalists. In general, despite legislation mandating the use of French in Corsica, one can note the phenomenon of *diglossia*—that is,

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*Research* (London, 2009), pp. 145–48; Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History* (Oxford, 2000).

<sup>10</sup> Ritchie, *Doing Oral History*.

<sup>11</sup> Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, pp. 1–3.

<sup>12</sup> 'Quel est le statut de la Corse?' *Vie publique*, 4 January 2021, <https://www.vie-publique.fr/fiches/20150-quel-est-le-statut-de-la-corse> [accessed 21 October 2024].

a case where a community uses two languages, one in formal situations, and the other in informal or family contexts. It was not until 1974 that the Corsican language was taught in schools. Moreover, initially, teaching time was limited to an optional hour a week.<sup>13</sup> Although the teaching of Corsican is not compulsory, Corsican is taught in primary schools and schools run by cultural associations.

In the 1970s, the main demands of the nationalist movement included the recognition of the Corsican language, self-determination and the opening of a university on the island as well as environmental concerns. But it should not be assumed that the birth of the nationalist movement dates to the mid-twentieth century. The roots of Corsican nationalism go back to the eighteenth century, when the island experienced a political phase of ‘quasi-independence’ under the leadership of General Pasquale Paoli. In 1729, there was a ‘Corsican revolution’ against the Republic of Genoa, which had ruled the island since 1284 after wresting it from Pisan control. This revolution, which was promoted by a group of upper-class Corsicans, lasted forty years. In 1755, a representative constitution was drawn up and Pasquale Paoli became the ‘general of the Corsican Nation’. The University of Corsica operated from 1765 to 1769. After various events, the Republic of Genoa transferred its sovereignty rights to France. In 1769, the Battle of Ponte Novu put an end to Pasquale Paoli’s government and marked the beginning of French rule over the island.<sup>14</sup> It is also important to remember the intense internal military resistance that followed the French conquest (1769–74), and to a lesser extent, the Resistance based abroad (in Tuscany and Sardinia), backed by England, which conducted military raids on Corsica until the 1780s. With the exception of the Anglo-Corsican Kingdom (1794–96), the island remained under French control despite problems relating to public order and the continuation of practices like the ‘vendetta’.<sup>15</sup> The regionalist movement had already manifested itself in the 1890s with the publication of the newspapers *A Tramuntana* (1896–1914) and *A Cispra* (1914).

In the wake of the First World War, Corsica saw the emergence of a regionalist movement asking for the Corsican language and culture to be safeguarded, for greater autonomy, and for the establishment of a university on the island. This movement, the *Partitu Corsu*

<sup>13</sup> Alain Stromboni, ‘Langue corse: il y a 48 ans, la loi Deixonne reconnaissait le corse’, *franceinfo*, 19 January 2022, <https://france3-regions.francetvinfo.fr/corse/langue-corse-il-y-a-48-ans-la-loi-deixonne-integrait-le-corse-2423974.html> [accessed 21 October 2024].

<sup>14</sup> Deborah Paci, *Between the Seas: Island Identities in the Baltic and Mediterranean Seas* (London, 2023), pp. 170–89.

<sup>15</sup> ‘Vendetta’ (‘blood vengeance’) was a ‘means of social control or system of customary law’: Stephen Wilson, *Feuding, Conflict and Banditry in Nineteenth-Century Corsica* (Cambridge, 2002), p. 16. See also Francis Pomponi, ‘Pouvoir et abus de pouvoir des maires corses au XIXe siècle’, *Etudes rurales*, 63–64 (1976), pp. 153–69; Francis Pomponi, ‘A la recherche d’un “invariant” historique: la structure clanique dans la société corse’, in *Pievi e paesi: Communautés rurales corses* (Paris, 1978), pp. 7–30; Georges Ravis Giordani, *Bergers corses. Les communautés villageoises du Niolu* (Aix-Provence, 1983); José Gil, *La Corse entre la liberté et la terreur* (Paris, 1984); Gérard Lenclud, *En Corse: Une société en mosaïque* (Paris, 2012), pp. 164–215.

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*d'Azione* (Corsican Action Party), eventually subscribed to the Irredentist propaganda promoted by Italian fascism that supported its claims to the island with historical, cultural and linguistic motivations.<sup>16</sup> Nonetheless, this pro-fascist movement was in the minority as most Corsicans opposed the occupation of the island by fascist Italy in 1942. In fact, it is no coincidence that Corsica was the first French department to be liberated in October 1943.<sup>17</sup>

The *Partitu Corsu d'Azione's* support for the Italian fascist cause pushed its autonomist tendencies into the background. It was not until 1955 that there was a timid revival of regionalism with the publication of the bilingual Corsican-French journal *U Muntese* (Mountain Wind) and the birth of the *Mouvement du 29 novembre* (29 November Movement).<sup>18</sup> The latter movement protested the closure of the railway lines and the creation of the Argentella nuclear test site. In the 1960s, the Corsican regionalist movement emerged within the regionalist and Third-Worldist tendency developing in Paris, Bastia and in the rural microregion of Fiumorbo, against the background of a rapidly evolving international political context due to decolonisation.<sup>19</sup> This decade saw the birth of the first nationalist political organisations. Among the groups with the greatest impact on the evolution of Corsican nationalism was the left-wing *Front Régionaliste Corse* (Regionalist Corsican Front, FRC) founded by Charles Santoni in 1966. Despite the small number of militants involved, the FRC was a hothouse of ideas. The *Action Régionaliste Corse* (Corsican Regionalist Action, ARC) emerged in 1967 as an apolitical movement led by brothers Simeoni, Max and Edmond, which affirmed its independence from the island's other parties and swiftly became the Corsica's leading autonomist movement. Women supported some of these early movements, best shown by the involvement of Gisèle Poli. She regularly contributed to *U Muntese*, signing articles under her name or using the pseudonym *A Vespa* ('The Wasp'). In her articles, Poli talked about the 'colonization' of the island, the scourge of emigration of the Corsicans, and the 'francization' of the clergy in Corsica.<sup>20</sup> However, militant women were not prominent at that time.

### III

Corsica's regionalist movement emerged in the 1960s. Young Corsican students on the mainland and freelancers excluded from the clientelist political system used this unstable situation to channel the widespread

<sup>16</sup> Deborah Paci, *Corsica fatale, Malta baluardo di romanità: L'irredentismo fascista nel mare nostrum (1922–1942)* (Florence, 2015).

<sup>17</sup> Sylvain Gregori, '(R)écrire l'histoire de la Résistance corse: de l'enjeu mémoriel à l'essai historiographique', in Julien Blanc and Cécile Vast (eds), *Chercheurs en Résistance: Pistes et outils à l'usage des historiens* (Rennes, 2014), pp. 67–81.

<sup>18</sup> Pierre Dottelonde, *Histoire de la revendication corse (1959–1974)*, p. 64.

<sup>19</sup> Marianne Lefevre, *Géopolitique de la Corse: Le modèle républicain en question* (Paris, 2000), p. 11.

<sup>20</sup> Gisèle Poli, 'Deux jeunes Corses au jour le jour', *Kyrn*, 74 (1977).

discontent by drawing upon Corsican language, history and culture.<sup>21</sup> The Corsican nationalist movement took shape within an international context, distinguished by the excitement of movements seeking to defend minority rights. Between the late 1960s and early 1970s, these minorities organised a series of student strikes and university occupations that led to the creation of countless programmes of African American, Puerto Rican, Asian and Indigenous studies in many American universities.<sup>22</sup> The nationalist movement in Corsica was influenced by this international climate and, in particular, revealed similarities to the movements calling for the protection and promotion of regional languages within France and the French empire, like Occitan and Berber or the Basque language in the Spanish–French borderlands.<sup>23</sup> This idea of ‘internal colonialism’ informed the battles being fought by the Corsican, Basque and Breton nationalists.<sup>24</sup> As will be discussed, the *Fronte di Liberazione Naziunale di a Corsica* (National Liberation Front of Corsica, FLNC) was the leading clandestine movement fighting for Corsican independence, employing terroristic methods in its fight. The Basque *Euskadi Ta Askatasun* (ETA)—a group of radical nationalists using violence as an instrument to re-establish the Basque national identity—and the FLNC shared the anti-colonial ideas in vogue in the 1960s, and both saw themselves as parties in an armed struggle.

Both movements campaigned for the amnesty of political prisoners, for autonomy and for recognition of their languages (Corsican and Basque).<sup>25</sup> However, unlike ETA, which was responsible for homicides, the FLNC directed its attacks at symbolic targets such as state buildings or private property owned by non-Corsicans.<sup>26</sup> Terrorist attacks were also carried out by the *Front de Libération de la Bretagne*, a paramilitary organisation founded in 1963 with the aim of obtaining the independence

<sup>21</sup> Xavier Crettiez, André Fazi and Gérard Lenclud. ‘D’un passé aux possibles. Rencontre avec Gérard Lenclud’, *Vacarme* 64/3 (2013), p. 166.

<sup>22</sup> Ramon Grosfoguel, ‘Les dilemmes des études ethniques aux États-Unis’ *IdeAs* 2 (2012), <http://journals.openedition.org/ideas/240> [accessed 21 October 2024]; Francis Paul Prucha, *The Indians in American Society: From the Revolutionary War to the Present* (Berkeley, 1985), pp. 82–3.

<sup>23</sup> Nadia Berdous, ‘La dénomination “langue kabyle”, un enjeu politique’, *Multilinguales* 17 (2022), <http://journals.openedition.org/multilinguales/8177> [accessed 21 October 2024]; Barbara Loyer, ‘Identités et pouvoir local: le cas de la revendication d’un département Pays basque’ *Hérodote* 110 (2003), pp. 103–28; Chérif Sini, ‘La promotion du berbère en Algérie’ *Cahiers d’études africaines*, 219 (2015), pp. 445–66; James Costa, ‘A materialist take on minoritization, emancipation, and language revitalization: Occitan sociolinguistics since the 1970s’, *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 2023, pp. 1–18.

<sup>24</sup> Alain Alcouffe, ‘Le colonialisme intérieur’, *Working Papers* 2009, <https://hal.science/hal-00848175/> document [accessed 21 October 2024].

<sup>25</sup> Javier Martín-Peña, Alvaro Rodríguez-Carballeira, Jordi Escartín Solanelles, Clara Porrúa García and Frans Willem Winkel, ‘Strategies of psychological terrorism perpetrated by ETA’s network: delimitation and classification’ *Psicothema*, 22 (2010), pp. 112–17; Fernando Molina, ‘The historical dynamics of ethnic conflicts: confrontational nationalisms, democracy and the Basques in contemporary Spain’ *Nations and Nationalism*, 16 (2010), pp. 240–60.

<sup>26</sup> Marcel A. Farinelli, ‘Managing the island territory: A historical perspective on sub-state nationalism in Corsica and Sardinia’ *Small States & Territories*, 3 (2020), p. 144.

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of the region of Brittany.<sup>27</sup> The movement was inspired by the Irish Republican Army, which hoped to annex Ulster to the Republic of Ireland. In Canada, the *Front de libération du Québec*—founded three years before the FLNC—used violent means in order to demand Québécois independence. This was a moment of general agitation.

The Corsican nationalist movement immediately drew attention to the island's need for its own university. The lack of a university meant that young Corsicans wishing to pursue their higher education had to move to the French mainland, making the establishment of a Corsican university a priority for the island's nationalists.<sup>28</sup> For these students, the time spent studying on the mainland was like a gap period, a short-term separation from their true home. Ghjermana De Zerbi, a feminist militant involved in promoting the Corsican language and culture, describes her frame of mind at that time: 'My husband and I felt that our hearts lay in Corsica and our gaze was turned to Corsica. We were in exile. I wrote my thesis on the name of my hometown, Sermano, so as not to lose my ties with the island'.<sup>29</sup>

The *riacquistu* ('reappropriation') movement sprang up in the political and cultural turmoil of the 1970s, inspiring the enthusiasm of a new generation in search of a 'culture that had been lost and rediscovered'.<sup>30</sup> Those young people devoted themselves to seeking an authentic Corsican culture, rejecting the so-called 'enforced "*corsité*" and embracing "*corsitude*" (as a desired state)'.<sup>31</sup> The Corsican writer Rinatu Coti was responsible for distinguishing between these two terms, defining *corsité* as the 'manner of appearing Corsican' and *corsitude* as the 'will to exist as Corsicans'. In 1976, Charles Santoni picked up this distinction in an article for the journal *Les Temps Modernes*. He believed that it represented a major dividing line between Corsicans, suggesting that *corsité* should be attributed to members of the Corsican clans who had always dominated the island's political scene through a relationship of connivance with the central state, while *corsitude* was the distinguishing feature of the nationalist struggle.<sup>32</sup> According to Santoni, the nationalists were aware of the gravity of the political and economic situation on the island and soon realised that the Corsican identity was endangered by the policies of the government in Paris. For this reason, Corsicans mobilised to change

<sup>27</sup> Sébastien Carney, 'Le mouvement breton au miroir de son historiographie' *Annales de Bretagne et des Pays de l'Ouest* 123/2 (2016), <http://journals.openedition.org/abpo/3300> [accessed 21 October 2024].

<sup>28</sup> Desjardins, *La Corse à la dérive*, p. 80.

<sup>29</sup> Ghjermana De Zerbi (teacher, writer, and activist), interview by author, Bastia, Corsica, 22 June 2022. For the thesis in question, see Ghjermana De Zerbi, *Les noms de lieux de la commune de Sermano* (Clermont-Ferrand, 1967).

<sup>30</sup> Antoni, *Corse*, p. 19. On the *riacquistu* movement, see Ottavi, *Des Corses à part entière*, p. 141; Anne Meistersheim, 'Du riacquistu au désenchantement: une société en quête de repères', *Ethnologie française* 38/3 (2008), pp. 407–13.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>32</sup> Charles Santoni, 'Les masques du discours politique en Corse', *Les Temps Modernes*, 357 (1976), pp. 1618–33.



the direction of events. Other Corsicans who had sought relationships with Paris in order to maintain the clan system were indifferent to the dissolution of Corsican identity, preferring to sacrifice the Corsican people in the name of the clan and the French homeland.<sup>33</sup> As Santoni argued, ‘The clan limits itself to *corsité* while nationalists add *corsitude* to this. When the very Corsican identity was threatened by the intensification of the exodus of islanders and the massive influx of foreigners, it became necessary to move from *corsité* to *corsitude*’.<sup>34</sup>

Marie Jeanne Nicoli, militant and granddaughter of the communist partisan Jean Nicoli, recalls those years: ‘it was the period after 1968 and the idea had spread that we needed to “return and live in our country”, beginning at grassroots level and proposing an alternative system’.<sup>35</sup> The main aim of this generation of Corsicans was to fight to safeguard and defend the Corsican language. De Zerbi, the oldest of the women interviewed, focused on the cultural sphere, working tirelessly to collect popular songs. In 1981, she published *Cantu Nustrale* (‘Our Chants’) with the aim of rediscovering ‘an identity never subdued but suffocated like never before’ and ‘a memory ready to come back to life’.<sup>36</sup> Even the youngest of the women interviewed, Vanina Le Bomin, daughter of Yves Le Bomin, drew attention to the fact that the very use of the language was considered a ‘militant act’.<sup>37</sup> However, the demands made by the young Corsicans targeted not just the cultural sphere but also more strictly political spheres. In 1971, FRC militants authored a seminal document for nationalist claims: the *Main basse sur une île* (‘Takeover of an Island’) essay, which denounced the island’s status as a colony, proved ‘eye-opening’ for many of its readers.<sup>38</sup> Rather than being signed by a particular author, it was attributed to a collective linked to the FRC. Therefore, it is not possible to know whether women militants contributed to the essay. However, this text had an enormous impact on the militants. De Zerbi decided to join the FRC after reading the piece.<sup>39</sup>

Nationalists considered the protection of the environment to be an important place to begin making demands. In May 1972, the Italian industrial group Montedison began to dump toxic waste off the coast of Corsica, near Cap Corse, giving rise to the *affaire des boues rouges* (‘red mud affair’).<sup>40</sup> Following a series of popular protests, numerous bombings (even on Italian soil) and a sentence from the Italian court,

<sup>33</sup> The clan system is the practice of favours and clientelism used between members of the same clan.

<sup>34</sup> Santoni, ‘Les masques du discours politique’, p. 1630.

<sup>35</sup> Marie Jeanne Nicoli (activist), interview by author, Ajaccio, Corsica, 4 October 2022.

<sup>36</sup> Ghjermana De Zerbi, *Cantu Nustrale* (Ajaccio, 1981); Ghjermana De Zerbi, ‘Cultura corsa è di civilizzazione’, *Kyrn* 121 (1981), p. 45.

<sup>37</sup> Yves Le Bomin was a militant belonging to ARC. Vanina Le Bomin (activist), interview by author, Bastia, Corsica, 21 June 2022.

<sup>38</sup> Front Régionaliste Corse, *Main basse sur une île* (Paris, 1971); Ghjermana De Zerbi, interview by author.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Antoni, *Corse*, p. 85; Pomponi, *Le Mémorial des Corses*; Paci, ‘La “comunità immaginata” còrsa’, p. 64.

the company ceased this practice. For Jackie Lucchini, the affair provided her with her first experience of nationalist militancy: ‘I became an activist in 1973 in the context of the *affaire des boues rouges*. At that time, we were just embarking upon the construction of a contemporary nationalist movement’.<sup>41</sup> This event left a strong impression on Vanina Le Bomin, who was too young to join the demonstrations at the time, revealing the importance that it had for the population overall: ‘I remember these demands and this fight even though I was very young. In my family, we were very aware of politics’.<sup>42</sup>

The protest in the context of the *affaire des boues rouges* was followed by a commitment to organise a series of encounters offering attendees the opportunity to exchange ideas and plans for the island’s future.<sup>43</sup> In August 1972, the *Ghjurnate corse di Corti* (‘Corsican days in Corte’) took place, the first festival for young people wishing to express autonomist sentiments, placing the political issue of the university at the heart of their political and cultural demands. The initiative was so successful that the following year, from 1 to 11 August, a ‘summer university’ was held in Corte, channelling a broader movement for the revival of minority languages. Among those attending was De Zerbi, who presented a translation and commentary on a text by Giovanni Verga, as well as young students like Marie-José Bellagamba, who would later become an advocate of the nationalists.

These encounters laid the ground for the drafting of an important document titled *A Chjama di u Castellare* (‘The Call of U Castellare’) on 7 January 1973, at Castellare di Casinca, affirming Corsica’s right to decide its own fate and identifying ‘internal autonomy’ as the solution to the Corsican problem.<sup>44</sup> Gisèle Poli was one of its authors. Many of the women playing an active role in the movement to defend and promote the Corsican language did so far from Corsica, in the university cities in mainland France where they were studying. These women militants called for a university to be opened on the island, which could be a base from which to make their cultural and political demands. They did not give up when the government turned a deaf ear to their appeals, organising occasions for students to meet during their summer breaks. Their gaze was always turned to Corsica. So, when the island’s seas and maritime activities were threatened by the dumping of toxic waste, these women militants protested and made their contribution to the safeguarding of the environment.

#### IV

A series of incidents known as ‘the Aleria events’ in 1975 turned the international spotlight back onto the Corsican question as armed protest

<sup>41</sup> Jackie Lucchini (activist and journalist), interview by author, Ajaccio, Corsica, 29 June 2022.

<sup>42</sup> Vanina Le Bomin, interview by author.

<sup>43</sup> Lucia Molinelli-Cancellier, *Boues rouges, la Corse dit non* (Paris, 1995).

<sup>44</sup> Dottelonde, *Histoire de la revendication corse*, p. 481.

became a ‘means of expression and pressure’.<sup>45</sup> A widespread feeling of injustice resulted in diffused radicalisation affecting both those already involved in the autonomist fight and those who had not yet played an active part in the struggle. On 22 August 1975, the ARC leader, Edmond Simeoni, and a group of autonomists occupied a wine cellar in Aleria that was owned by Henri Depeille, a *pied noir* winemaker accused of involvement in a financial scandal.<sup>46</sup> To a certain extent, ARC leaders were responding to a request from the youthful rank and file, which required them to choose ‘between fishing rod and gun’.<sup>47</sup> The then Minister of the Interior Michel Poniatowski sent about 500 soldiers to the island, fearing that national unity and the authority of the state were at risk. Simeoni was arrested and sentenced to five years in prison.<sup>48</sup> The state’s repressive response caused a wave of collective indignation. Prior to the events in Aleria, attacks on French institutions had focused mainly on the rural microregion of Fiumorbo where farmers resented the policies pursued by the *Société pour la mise en valeur agricole de la Corse* (Society for the Agricultural Development of Corsica), which favoured the settlement of *pièds noirs* in the Eastern Plain.<sup>49</sup> On 5 May 1976, in the wake of these events and the radicalisation of the militants, the FLNC was established.<sup>50</sup> A clandestine movement with a political-military structure fighting for Corsican independence would prove capable of ‘producing emotional incentives for political commitment through spectacularization’.<sup>51</sup>

Starting in 1978, the French government, led by Raymond Barre, introduced a policy of repression targeting the FLNC, as evidenced by the famous *procès des 21* (also known as the ‘*procès d’un peuple*’) in 1979. The trial, which was held on 14 June 1979, was the first trial of the FLNC clandestine militants who were accused of carrying out thirty-six attacks.<sup>52</sup> Yet the government took no steps against the development of the FRANCIA group (from the acronym *Front d’Action Nouvelle Contre l’Indépendance et l’Autonomie*), a clandestine anti-independence group, which was made up of covert police divisions. Marie-José Bellagamba was a member of a lawyers’ collective tasked with defending FLNC members who had been arrested with the charge of having carried out attacks. She was accompanied by Camille Guidicelli, former *résistante* and celebrated

<sup>45</sup> Lefevre, *Géopolitique de la Corse*, p. 11.

<sup>46</sup> Silvani, *Corse des années ardentes*, pp. 199–205; Labro, *La question corse*, pp. 121–23; Delors and Muracciole, *Corse la poudrière*, p. 23; Edmond Simeoni, *Le piège d’Aleria* (Paris, 1976).

<sup>47</sup> Emmanuel Bernabeu-Casanova, *Le nationalisme corse: Genèse, succès et échec* (Paris, 1997), p. 94.

<sup>48</sup> Simeoni, *Le piège d’Aleria*.

<sup>49</sup> Renucci, *Corse traditionnelle et Corse nouvelle*, p. 429; Dressler-Holahan, *Développement économique et mouvement autonomiste*, p. 49.

<sup>50</sup> Pierre Poggioli, *FLNC, années 70* (Ajaccio, 2006); Pierre Poggioli, *Corse et FLNC: une page d’histoire* (Carbuccia, 2018).

<sup>51</sup> Crettiez, Fazi and Lenclud, ‘D’un passé aux possibles’, p. 167.

<sup>52</sup> L. G., ‘Le procès des nationalistes corses s’est ouvert à Paris: une conférence de presse clandestine du F.L.N.C.’, *Le Monde*, 15 June 1979, [https://www.lemonde.fr/archives/article/1979/06/15/le-proces-des-nationalistes-corses-s-est-ouvert-a-paris-une-conference-de-presse-clandestine-du-f-l-n-c\\_3054214\\_1819218.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/archives/article/1979/06/15/le-proces-des-nationalistes-corses-s-est-ouvert-a-paris-une-conference-de-presse-clandestine-du-f-l-n-c_3054214_1819218.html) [accessed 21 October 2024].

criminal lawyer in Marseilles. Guidicelli noted, ‘We were the only two women there. I found myself nominated as solicitor by friends from my student days who had been arrested. Many of the students who became FLNC activists were my friends and I defended them’.<sup>53</sup>

The Aleria events triggered feelings of collective condemnation of the methods used by the State as well as a feeling of solidarity with the nationalist movement. At that time, it felt as though the conditions were being created in which it would be possible to ask the Parisian government for the right to self-determination. The members of the Aleria group and the members of the FLNC were all known to the Corsican youth. The women activists felt that the time had come to engage in supporting the renewed movement as revealed by the role played by Bellagamba in the defence of the FLNC militants at the *procès des 21*.

## V

In 1980, Corsica was shaken by the events of Bastelica Fesch, which reinforced the image of the nationalists as promoters of justice in the face of a state that had entered a relationship of connivance with FRANCIA. Corsican nationalists claimed that the French state secretly supported FRANCIA. A group of autonomists, led by Marcel Lorenzoni, captured three people in Bastelica who were accused of belonging to a covert French police division planning to make an attempt on the life of one of the autonomists. The police forces reacted with a massive operation and the nationalist collective fled to Ajaccio, where they took hostage the clients at the Hotel Fesch, just a few hundred yards from the Prefecture and police station, in a move to draw attention to the presence of these covert police divisions in Corsica. There was a huge outcry both in Corsica and among Corsicans abroad, all the more noticeable given the silence from government quarters.<sup>54</sup> At the end of long negotiations, the hostages were freed, but a general strike was called in a climate of great tension. This would be the first trial in which Marie-Hélène Mattei, a militant and partner of FLNC member François Santoni, would participate as a lawyer.<sup>55</sup>

The *Cunsulta di i Cunitati Naziunalisti* (Council of the Nationalist Committees, CCN) was founded on 8 March 1980, merging the nationalist committees that had sprung up locally in Luri, Cap Corse, Fiumorbo and other locations, with the aim of supporting the imprisoned militants who had taken part in the Hotel Fesch incident. The CCN ended up becoming the public face of the Corsican liberation struggle and the legal front of the FLNC. On 1 April 1981, the FLNC, which had previously printed its ‘little green book’ *A libertà o a morte* (‘To Liberty or Death’), published its ‘white book’ with the title *Per a Corsica nazione: A*

<sup>53</sup> Marie-José Bellagamba (lawyer and activist), interview by author, Bastia, Corsica, 21 June 2022.

<sup>54</sup> Lefevre, *Géopolitique de la Corse*, pp. 25–6.

<sup>55</sup> Marie-Hélène Mattei (lawyer and activist), interview by author, Bastia, Corsica, June 22, 2022.

*populu fattu bisogna marchjà* ('For the Corsican Nation: The People Must March'), laying out its strategy and objectives: the recognition of national rights and the right and exercise of self-determination in the framework of the so-called *Lutte de libération nationale* ('national liberation struggle', LLN). During the 1980s, the affirmation of the LLN would result in the birth of 'counter-powers' in a revolutionary context, like the *Sindicatu di travagliatori corsi* (Corsican Workers Union, STC).<sup>56</sup> In the wake of Aleria, the events of Bastelica Fesch contributed to worsening the climate, which became increasingly tense. Women activists such as Mattei, who was a lawyer, placed their skills at the service of the movement to further the nationalist cause. It should be pointed out that Mattei never dealt with the issues of women's rights or experiences because she was only arguing for Corsican national autonomy.

## VI

In 1971, Elisabeth Salvaresi filmed a news report from her hometown Nonza for a national TV channel, in which she described women's subjugation to men. The adoption of the *Programme d'Action régionale* (Regional Action Programme) in 1957 had helped to kickstart the emancipation of women who began to work in the tourism sector.<sup>57</sup> Moreover, more women were attending educational institutions in Bastia and Ajaccio, which were experiencing a demographic boom at that time, and then enrolling at universities on the mainland. Yet it would be impossible to ignore the overall female condition in France.<sup>58</sup>

The evolution of French legislation regarding the recognition of gender rights dates from the mid-1960s onwards. It was not until 1965 that wives obtained the right to work or open a bank account without their husband's consent. Two years later, the Neuwirth Law legalised the sale of contraceptives. In 1972, a law established the principle of equal pay for men and women. In 1975, the Veil Law decriminalised abortion and a law was passed that authorised divorce by mutual consent. In the 1980s, other, equally significant laws were passed: in 1980, rape was classified as a crime; in 1984, equality between spouses was extended to the management of family property; in 1987, a law established the joint exercise of parental authority, regardless of whether the parents concerned were married or not.<sup>59</sup> These changes in laws around gender played out differently in Corsica, where the entrenched patriarchal system could not easily be supplanted by an egalitarian system, at least in terms of gender.

In March 1974, the Corsican Studies Centre of the University of Provence held a conference in Bastia on 'the Corsican woman'. The aim

<sup>56</sup> Christophe Canioni, *Dictionnaire de la politique corse contemporaine de 1975 à nos jours* (Bastia, 2009), p. 207.

<sup>57</sup> Didier Rey, *Jalons pour une histoire de la Corse de 1755 à 2018* (Ajaccio, 2018), p. 387.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 391.

<sup>59</sup> Claude Zaidman, 'Les "acquis" des femmes en France dans une perspective européenne', *L'Homme et la société*, 99–100 (1991), pp. 147–57.

was to set up a comparative study in the Mediterranean to explore the evolution of the role of Corsican women in a social, cultural, political and economic context that was being transformed by modernisation.<sup>60</sup> The following year, in 1975, the first attempt was made to found a Corsican feminist movement, *E Calze Rosse* ('Red Stockings'), which was set up in Paris by Corsican women living on the continent and with links to the *Mouvement de libération des femmes* (Women's Liberation Movement, MLF) and to the feminist group *Psych et po* (from the abbreviation of '*psychanalyse et politique*').<sup>61</sup> Born in 1970, the MLF was an independent feminist movement that rejected the model of patriarchal society and demanded the right for women to make decisions about their own bodies.<sup>62</sup> On 26 August 1970, ten women placed a wreath of flowers in memory of 'the Wife of the Unknown Soldier'. Formed in the wake of the May 1968 movement, the MLF did not purport to represent women but instead offered a space where they could meet. In fact, leaflets were usually signed by 'some activists' or 'MLF activists'. *Psych et po*, the group founded by Antoinette Fouque, sought to bring out the uniqueness of women through psychoanalysis and work on the self.<sup>63</sup> Nicoli was very close to the MLF and its developments:

without actually being an MLF activist, I went to demonstrations because I was against the idea that only men could make decisions. I was interested in the question of abortion. I was shocked by the fact that I was the only woman in a movement like the PPCA, and, in particular, in think tanks like *Sambucuccio di Alando*. I could see the difference with Paris where things seemed far more advanced in terms of women's presence in the public space.<sup>64</sup>

However, *E Calze Rosse* did not find fertile soil on the island. According to De Zerbi, it failed to take root because of frequent criticisms from autonomist and regionalist groups, who accused it of being a bearer of Parisian ideologies and of therefore having nothing to contribute to the development of critical thinking among the Corsicans.<sup>65</sup> Lucchini also mentions that *E Calze Rosse* had an 'ephemeral life' and that some of the women who militated in *E Calze Rosse* such as Catherine Albertini rejoined *Donni Corsi*.<sup>66</sup> Corsica's feminist movement finally took off in February 1980, adopting the name *Donni Corsi* (in Ajaccio) and *Donne*

<sup>60</sup> 'Femmes corses et femmes méditerranéennes, actes du colloque de Bastia des 24–26 mars 1974', *Etudes corses*, no. 6–7 (1976).

<sup>61</sup> Antoinette Fouque and Christophe Bourseiller, *Qui êtes-vous, Antoinette Fouque?: entretiens avec Christophe Bourseiller* (Paris, 2021).

<sup>62</sup> Christine Delphy, 'Les origines du Mouvement de libération des femmes en France' *Nouvelles Questions Féministes*, 16–18 (1991), pp. 137–48.

<sup>63</sup> Françoise Picq, 'MLF: 1970, année zéro' *Libération*, 7 October 2008, [https://www.liberation.fr/societe/2008/10/07/mlf-1970-annee-zero\\_112802/](https://www.liberation.fr/societe/2008/10/07/mlf-1970-annee-zero_112802/) [accessed 21 October 2024].

<sup>64</sup> Marie Jeanne Nicoli, interview by author.

<sup>65</sup> Ghjermana De Zerbi, 'Arpiu di ghjumenta un tomba cavallu ou De la difficulté d'une voie/voix féministe corse', *Peuples méditerranéens*, no. 38–39 (1987), p. 218.

<sup>66</sup> Jackie Lucchini, interview by author.

*Corse* (in Bastia). The variation between the names *Donni Corsi* and *Donne Corse* reflects the polymorphic nature of the Corsican language. The trigger for its creation was the imprisonment of two nationalist militants—Jackie Lucchini and Laetitia Gasperi—in Fleury-Mérogis, in the wake of the Bastelica Fesch incident. The *Donni Corsi* movement demanded their release. Marie-Paule Gambini D’Orazio, a militant with an administrative role at the regional department of cultural affairs in Corsica, was among those participating in the movement: ‘I remember our first action, which was the occupation of the FR3 headquarters to demand the release of the political prisoners involved in the Affaire Bastelica Fesch, among them two women’.<sup>67</sup>

This movement, which mainly comprised women involved in nationalist activism and had a feminist orientation, fought for a two-fold emancipation: that of women and that of the Corsican people. Jackie Lucchini describes the events of the period: ‘I spent one and a half months in the Fleury-Mérogis prison. Several arrests had been made, including two women, Letizia Gasperi and me. This was the first time that autonomist and nationalist women had been arrested and imprisoned (in fact, Letizia was an autonomist and I was a nationalist)’.<sup>68</sup> According to Lucchini, the feminist movement in Corsica had a number of important similarities to the movement that grew up in Algeria in the early 1900s and which had joined the *Union française pour le suffrage des femmes* (French Union for Women’s Suffrage), which had no Muslims among its members, just French women. According to her, in the *Conseil national des femmes françaises* (National Council of French Women), Corsican women identifying as feminists found a reformist feminist movement bringing together upper-middle-class women who had no idea about the conditions of women on the island and about how to intervene effectively. She compares this type of feminism to Algerian feminism because it started from the assumption that the French Republic was the only path to emancipation. This vision was linked to an ‘internalized colonialism that took absolutely no account of Corsica’s specificity’.<sup>69</sup> She believes that the initially autonomist and subsequently nationalist movement provided a fertile terrain for feminism to express itself in Corsica: ‘forms of feminist expression, *Calzi Rossi* [...] and *Donni Corsi*, in particular, developed in the wake of this [autonomist] movement, which made a spectacular leap forwards in 1975 with Aleria’.<sup>70</sup>

*Donni Corsi* immediately aroused a mixture of mistrust and sarcasm, not just from men but also from many of the nationalist women who either failed to see the urgency of the feminist struggle or regarded it as a direct emanation of the associations for families of political prisoners, first and

<sup>67</sup> Marie-Paule Gambini D’Orazio, interview by author.

<sup>68</sup> Jackie Lucchini, interview by author.

<sup>69</sup> Jackie Lucchini, interview by author.

<sup>70</sup> Didier Rey, *Jalons pour une histoire de la Corse*, p. 394.

foremost of which *A Riscossa* (The Redemption).<sup>71</sup> It is no coincidence that a number of these women—wives, mothers, sisters and partners of imprisoned nationalist militants—joined the *Donni Corsi* movement. Marie-Jeanne Nicoli herself played an active role at *A Riscossa* after the arrest of her cousin Jean Nicoli in 1978: ‘I was the leader within *A Riscossa* and played an important role in meetings’.<sup>72</sup>

The debates during the initial meetings, aimed at establishing its orientation, soon became very heated. Some members of the movement saw women’s contribution to the nationalist struggle as their priority, while others were more interested in carefully exploring the reasons for the oppression of women in Corsica in order to create the tools to combat it.<sup>73</sup> Detractors saw this movement as an ‘iconoclastic wave’, a serious threat to the survival of Corsica’s traditional values that would have led to the complete disappearance of community feeling and family already being sorely tried by processes of modernisation.<sup>74</sup> According to Nicoli, who was a member of the Ajaccio section of *Donni Corsi*:

In Ajaccio, the movement was more feminist in the continental sense. In fact, they called us ‘donne pinzute’ [a derogatory term for someone from the continent], and called me ‘inpinzuita’ [a woman, who has acquired the manners of a continental French woman] implying that there was nothing Corsican about me. There were those in the Bastia section who believed that the priority was obtaining the recognition of the Corsican people. But we in Ajaccio didn’t agree. We only had to look at the liberation movement in Algeria: Algerian women played a dominant role in the liberation movement but afterwards, everything went back to the way it was before, with women being subjected to men. Our idea was to bring together all of these struggles for equality so that there would be no need to establish priorities.<sup>75</sup>

Some of the Algerian women militants were zone leaders for the *Front de libération nationale* (National Liberation Front) during the Battle of Algiers. Nonetheless, after 1962, in post-independence Algeria, these same women were literally excluded from the political panorama. Given that the political scene was almost exclusively male, the social hierarchy was immediately re-established. These conditions increased their marginalisation and made it impossible for them to continue being activists.<sup>76</sup> After independence, the regime gradually institutionalised gender inequalities based on its interpretation of Islamic jurisprudence. The 1984 Family Code is evidence of this: women were obliged to obey

<sup>71</sup> Gustavo Buratti, ‘Corsica: il dramma della colonizzazione’ *Etnie*, 1 January 1985, <https://www.rivistaetnie.com/corsica-dramma-colonizzazione/> [accessed 21 October 2024].

<sup>72</sup> Marie Jeanne Nicoli, interview by author.

<sup>73</sup> De Zerbi, ‘Arpiu di ghjumenta un tomba cavallu’, p. 219.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 220.

<sup>75</sup> Marie Jeanne Nicoli, interview by author.

<sup>76</sup> Jean-Pierre Filiu, *Algérie, la nouvelle indépendance* (Paris, 2021), p. 82.



their husbands, and the law introduced repudiation and polygamy for men as well as limiting the reasons for which women could divorce.<sup>77</sup>

While aware of the challenges faced by Algerian women, *Donni Corsi* established its orientation, which was feminist, nationalist, and socialist. This means that the struggle was founded on women's right to equality and on the political and identity-based struggle of Corsican men and women from a socialist perspective. According to De Zerbi, Corsican women were the 'most oppressed among the oppressed': in a traditional society such as Corsica, which was highly coercive towards women—even if there are still some who insist upon calling it matriarchal—women existed in a state of economic and political alienation.<sup>78</sup> They were economically dependent upon their husbands and men in their birth families—to a far greater extent than women on the continent—and they lacked political representation. Compared to men, they had fewer opportunities to continue their studies because of their family duties.

The female militants belonging to *Donni Corsi* distributed pamphlets and statements 'against anything harming the dignity of women or dignity in general'.<sup>79</sup> They also organised demonstrations against various matters including the plans for the revival of the Bastia Festival, which was to include the *fiera degli scapoli* ('bachelors' fair'), where 'women would be put on show like products or livestock to be ogled and bargained for',<sup>80</sup> and which would also feature 'the election of Miss Bastia and pageants with the "imperial majorettes" of Ajaccio (doubly "imperial" given that they helped to enhance the lustre of the celebrations for the coronation of Emperor Bokassa)'.<sup>81</sup>

De Zerbi notes that the Corsican editions of *Nice Matin* and *Le Provençal* had paradoxically stigmatised these initiatives, claiming they hindered attempts to bring about a cultural renewal on the island. In August 1981, *Donni Corsi* participated in the international Corte festival, known as *Ghjurnate Internaziunale di Corti* ('International Days in Corte'), at which there were lively debates, and which inspired the foundation of the *Aio Surelle* magazine. Organised by the CCN and first held on 1 August, the *Ghjurnate Internaziunale di Corti* allowed the comparison of Corsican nationalist methods with those of other nationalist groups engaged in similar, both violent and non-violent, struggles against foreign governments. It is no coincidence that the guest list included Irish, Catalan and Basque delegations.

Looking back at those days, Gambini D'Orazio recalls, 'another important event was the *Donne di un Populu* day during the international

<sup>77</sup> Natalya Vince, 'Looking for "the woman question" in Algeria and Tunisia: ideas, political language, and female actors before and after independence', in Jens Hanssen and Max Weiss (eds), *Arabic Thought against the Authoritarian Age: Towards an Intellectual History of the Present* (Cambridge, 2018), pp. 203–32.

<sup>78</sup> Ghjermana De Zerbi, interview by author.

<sup>79</sup> 'Interview avec Ghjermana De Zerbi' *Kyrn*, no. 243 (1989), p. 21.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>81</sup> De Zerbi, 'Arpiu di ghjumenta un tomba cavallu', p. 220.

Corte festival in the summer of 1980'.<sup>82</sup> According to De Zerbi, the discovery of feminism took place alongside the emergence of a socialist, rather than regionalist and nationalist, consciousness: 'how can we dissociate these three struggles for human dignity?'<sup>83</sup> She believes that the women leaving the movement were non-socialists, ARC militants or non-nationalists. In her opinion, the latter were continental French women, mostly teachers who had embraced the cause of feminism but not that of Corsican nationalism. Similarly, ARC militants were very resistant to the idea of feminism: 'they considered MLF to be a movement for the liberation of French women (not of women)! They believed that feminism was aligned with French women'.<sup>84</sup> Gambini D'Orazio also remembers this period as being full of opportunities for reflection, exchanges of ideas, and encounters:

for me, the political farsightedness and will to act of Victoire Canale Demailly and of the other sisters like Marie-Jeanne, Josette, Nicole, Marie-Claude, Cathy, Marie-Angèle ... made them an example to follow. Together we were stronger, and we were able to act, given that men often had a dominant role in the movement and, above all, in the clandestine organization.<sup>85</sup>

According to Gambini D'Orazio, the watershed moment was a meeting in Ajaccio, at the invitation of Victoire Canale, with Antoinette Fouque, a leading exponent of MLF. Marie-Paule found the strength of her political arguments and her lucidity eye-opening.<sup>86</sup> Jackie Lucchini saw things differently, noting that Fouque, the daughter of an Italian woman and a Corsican who had emigrated to Marseilles was 'certainly someone with a Mediterranean sensibility but she had never actually lived in Corsica' and was not familiar with the dynamics of Corsican society.<sup>87</sup>

From the nationalist perspective, women were first and foremost mothers, wives, daughters and sisters, and their social power lay in that role. Therefore, feminism could only be frowned upon because it critiqued the patriarchy and unequal relations within Corsican society. Moreover, nationalist militants believed that instead of scattering their forces, they needed to channel all their energies into the nationalist fight. Fabienne Maestracci, a militant and Marcel Lorenzoni's partner, was critical of feminism:

my mother, Marie-Louise Maestracci, was in the *Donne Corse* movement right at the beginning. Marcel was at Bastelica. And I was on the continent for my studies. Later there was a kind of feminist tendency that was slightly exaggerated. It's ridiculous to get annoyed by Petru Guelfucci for singing 'Catalinetta', instead of laughing at him. I'm not interested in feminism.

<sup>82</sup> Gambini D'Orazio, interview by author.

<sup>83</sup> 'Interview avec Ghjermana De Zerbi', p. 20.

<sup>84</sup> Ghjermana De Zerbi, interview by author.

<sup>85</sup> Marie-Paule Gambini D'Orazio, interview by author.

<sup>86</sup> Gambini D'Orazio, interview by author.

<sup>87</sup> Jackie Lucchini, interview by author.

I've never experienced these problems. I was in the Niolo section: the people were very tough there but they treated me and the other women as equals.<sup>88</sup>

The two militant lawyers, Mattei and Bellagamba, both stigmatised the feminist movement. According to Mattei:

the feminists were stuck inside a cliché. If a woman wants to enter politics, no man will stop her. There are women who stop themselves from entering politics because they don't assert themselves enough. That depends on them: you can't wait for someone else to decide that it is necessary to create a balance of power at the level of political representation even if there are women lacking the necessary competencies.<sup>89</sup>

Bellagamba, overall, considers that there was an equal relationship between the two genders: 'I can confirm that this was the case within the MPA where I had total freedom of expression. We experienced our feminism in our day-to-day existence; we practised female emancipation in our daily lives'.<sup>90</sup> Bellagamba chose not to become a member of the *Donni Corsi* movement because she felt that it was extremely critical of the nationalist movement: 'I did not participate in the Donni Corsi movement nor did I feel the need to do so'.<sup>91</sup>

De Zerbi identifies three reasons for the movement's failure: the decline of the island's society, which made it impossible to pursue original struggles; the Corsicans' tendency to retreat into themselves, due to repeated attacks from outside, leading to a complete refusal of anything perceived as an 'imported ideology'; last, the omnipotence of the family based on a deeply male-chauvinistic value system.<sup>92</sup> According to De Zerbi, 'the feminist struggle is seen in a very negative light in Corsica [...] it is essentially criticized for two things: on the one hand, for having an imported approach and ideology, and on the other, for threatening to destabilize traditional Corsican society'.<sup>93</sup>

The nationalistic battle and subsequent fratricidal war within the movement in the 1990s wore down the impetus of the *Donni Corsi* movement, eventually causing it to disappear from the island's political scene. When asked for the reasons for the disappearance of the movement, Nicolli replied, 'Why did the Donni Corsi come to an end? Our memory is selective. I really don't know. Maybe we were completely invested in the political movement at that time'.<sup>94</sup> According to Gambini D'Orazio, who came from an extremely leftist, Maoist tradition, the decline of *Donni*

<sup>88</sup> Fabienne Maestracci (entrepreneur and activist), interview by author, Bonifacio, Corsica, 23 June 2022.

<sup>89</sup> Marie-Hélène Mattei, interview by author.

<sup>90</sup> Marie-José Bellagamba, interview by author.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Paule Santarelli and Mylène Serra, 'Où sont les féministes?', *Kyrn*, no. 243 (1989), p. 18.

<sup>93</sup> 'Interview avec Ghjermana De Zerbi', pp. 20–21.

<sup>94</sup> Marie Jeanne Nicolli, interview by author.

*Corsi* coincided with ‘a move to the right by the nationalist movement in the 1982–83 period’.<sup>95</sup>

Lucchini suggests that the *Donni Corsi* movement disappeared because it was incapable of resisting its contradictions, divided between those who place nationalism before feminism:

I can remember a speech by Victoire Canale who had a very negative vision of the Corsican culture. She believed that Corsican culture was patriarchal. According to her, the reason why Corsican women abandoned the Corsican language more than men was because this language is linked to the patriarchy. This vision is one very distant from the vision that Ghjermana and I had.<sup>96</sup>

Although *Donni Corsi* had run out of steam, a number of the women from the movement continued to meet up to discuss matters. For example, Gambini D’Orazio recalls that ‘in 1989, together with Victoire Canale Demailly, we spoke of the need for women to enter the political arena during the elections, especially at the local level where women were extremely under-represented’.<sup>97</sup> In 1994, there was an information centre on women’s and family rights in Bastia that set up a free helpline for women who were victims of violence.<sup>98</sup>

## VII

When the socialist left gained power in France in 1981, there were hopes that this would mark the start of a period of politics ending the seemingly inexorable cycle of violence on the island. In 1981–2, an amnesty was introduced for all political and social offences taking place in Corsica prior to 23 December 1980.

The election of François Mitterrand to President of the Republic on 10 May 1981 gave rise to a phase of regionalisation: in 1981, the University of Corsica opened its doors in Corte, and in 1982, the island was given a special status known as a ‘statut particulier’.<sup>99</sup> The new presidency sought to promote a policy of accommodation and mediation with regard to Corsica: ‘it was necessary to turn the page on the conflict, on the attacks with explosives and repression, promoting a moderate political pathway’.<sup>100</sup> The 1982 statute attempted to meet the expectations of the nationalists by setting up a political body, the Assembly of Corsica, elected by universal suffrage and proportional representation. While the *Unione di u Populu Corsu* (Union of the Corsican People),

<sup>95</sup> Marie-Paule Gambini D’Orazio, interview by author.

<sup>96</sup> Jackie Lucchini, interview by author.

<sup>97</sup> Marie-Paule Gambini D’Orazio, interview by author.

<sup>98</sup> Rey, *Jalons pour une histoire de la Corse*, p. 396.

<sup>99</sup> Pomponi, *Le Mémorial des Corses*; John Loughlin, *The Corsican Statut Particulier: A Response to the Problème Corse* (Florence, 1985).

<sup>100</sup> André Fazi, ‘La specialità nello statuto della Corsica: l’inizio di una nuova stagione’ *Presente e Futuro* 29 (2018), pp. 29–40.

ARC's successor, asked to participate in the 1982 regional elections, FLCNC supporters forming the CCN 'repudiated the "trap" and opted for abstention'.<sup>101</sup>

On 5 January 1983, the FLNC was dissolved, leading to a series of arrests that, however, did not halt to the movement's activities: in that same month, the movement formalised its 'revolutionary tax', which was a form of protection money extorted from non-Corsican small businesses and particularly aimed to support the families of imprisoned militants. On 3 October 1983, *Il Muvimentu Corsu per l'Autodeterminazione* (Corsican Movement for Self-Determination, MCA) was established as the legal front of the FLNC, following the dissolution of the CCN on 27 September 1983. The CCN had been dissolved by the government following the assassination of the secretary general of the Département dell'Haute-Corse, Pierre-Jean Massimi, on 13 September 1983. Massimi's murder was linked to the disappearance and murder, three months earlier, of Guy Orsoni, the brother of Alain Orsoni. On 21 September, the FLNC claimed responsibility for the murder of Massimi in retaliation for the abduction of Guy Orsoni, which the group believed had taken place on the orders of the State. According to the FLNC, Massimi had received a huge sum of money from Joseph Franceschi, secretary of State for public safety, to pay Orsoni's killers. After being dissolved by the Council of Ministers on 22 January 1987, the MCA was replaced by the *Cuncolta Naziunalista* (Nationalist Group) on 28 January 1987.

In the meantime, civil society was becoming more organised. The *STC* was the first nationalist union set up on 1 May 1984, and it belonged to the wider process of the beginnings of the LLN: within the union, nationalists were encouraged to become involved in all areas of the struggle, giving rise to forms of alternative power. On the occasion of the first *STC* congress in June 1985, Marie-France Giovannangeli was elected as a member of the executive, becoming general secretary from 1988 until the third congress in June 1991. Giovannangeli was a leading figure in the nationalist trade union movement, and, as pointed out by various female militants, she was a symbol of the militant woman with decision-making powers. As she herself recalls, she became a nationalist militant following her brother's arrest:

in 1984, a week after my return to Corsica, my brother, who was 19, two years younger than me, was arrested because he was preparing to place plastic explosives in a shop belonging to one of the people involved in the abduction of Guy Orsoni. This affair resulted in a series of executions being carried out by an FLNC commando in the Ajaccio prison.<sup>102</sup>

<sup>101</sup> Luis De la Calle and André Fazi, 'Making nationalists out of Frenchmen? Substate nationalism in Corsica', *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, 16 (2010), p. 400.

<sup>102</sup> Danielle Rouard, 'Plusieurs nationalistes corses répondent de l'exécution des responsables présumés de la disparition de Guy Orsoni : De la passion à l'indifférence' *Le Monde*, 17 July 1985, [https://www.lemonde.fr/archives/article/1985/07/17/plusieurs-nationalistes-corses-repondent-de-l-execution-des-responsables-presumes-de-la-disparition-de-guy-orsoni-de-la-passion-a-l-indifference\\_3046647\\_1819218.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/archives/article/1985/07/17/plusieurs-nationalistes-corses-repondent-de-l-execution-des-responsables-presumes-de-la-disparition-de-guy-orsoni-de-la-passion-a-l-indifference_3046647_1819218.html) [accessed 21 October 2024].

The commando managed to break into the prison with the intention of retaliating for Guy Orsoni's disappearance. They killed the men they held to be responsible for Guy's death. I became involved because of my brother's arrest and attended the prisoners' support group together with my sister. My parents were devastated by this unexpected arrest. Through the *A Riscossa* association, I met Marie-Hélène Mattei and Marie-José Bellagamba as well as Frédérique Campana, who was Alain Orsoni's partner. In this way I got more directly involved with nationalist militancy. Maybe if my brother had not been arrested for political reasons, I would have remained a mere sympathizer.<sup>103</sup>

Giovannangeli immediately realised that the nationalist movement was not just getting organised to defend prisoners, or on a political and electoral terrain, but also on a social and trade-union terrain. In the early 1980s, female activists played an important role in associations, first and foremost, '*A Riscossa*', which supported the families of political prisoners, but also, and above all, in the field of the unions as revealed by Marie-France Giovannangeli's story.

### VIII

Until the assassination of Prefect Claude Erignac, a large part of Corsican society considered the political violence perpetrated by the FLNC to be legitimate to the extent that it protected Corsican interests.<sup>104</sup> The judgement expressed by Mattei sums up an opinion that was widespread among most Corsicans at that time:

The FLNC came into being because the young people who created it believed that the democratic debate with the state had broken down. You have to understand what the context was at that time, who the elected were, know about the clans, and clientelism. The youth, to which I also belonged, didn't believe you could discuss things with the state. (...) Of course, there were weapons. If you want to talk about violence you have to remember that we were subjected to violence first. And the response to this violence could take many different forms. It may be violence, a political struggle, democratic battle through elections. For most of my life, I made the decision to defend people who had decided to respond to the violence imposed upon Corsica with violence. I defended them professionally but I also shared their ideas. When you have the same dreams for Corsica, you tend to become closer and you can understand the exasperation that led some of them to commit violent actions that must be seen in the context of ongoing violence.<sup>105</sup>

Between 1989 and November 1991, the FLNC experienced a phase of internal divisions that caused it to split into three political entities: *Cuncolta Naziunalista*/FLNC *Canal Historique* (Nationalist

<sup>103</sup> Marie-France Giovannangeli (syndicalist and activist), interview by author, Bastia, Corsica, 22 June 2022.

<sup>104</sup> Dominici, 'Le nationalisme dans la Corse contemporaine', p. 101.

<sup>105</sup> Marie-Hélène Mattei, interview by author.

Group/FLNC Historical Channel); *Mouvement pour l'Autodétermination* (MPA)/FLNC *Habituel* (Movement for Self-Determination/Habitual FLNC); and *Accolta Naziunalista Corsal/Resistenza* (Corsican Nationalist Welcome/Resistance). To simplify, it could be said that the MPA hoped for an expansion of autonomy in a European framework while *Cuncolta Naziunalista* wanted independence, although not necessarily in a European setting. *Accolta Naziunalista Corsal/Resistenza*, led by Pierre Poggioli, had slightly more moderate tendencies.

The two lawyers took different paths. Mattei became an activist with *Cuncolta*, serving on its executive.<sup>106</sup> Bellagamba joined the MPA list as ‘an opening candidate’, having not yet formally joined the movement and became ‘the first nationalist woman to be elected to the Corsican Assembly, from 1992 until 1998’. She explains her decision partly in terms of her ‘impression that the movement that was coming into existence had a more open approach to society, that it was bringing a freer message that would not be subjugated within an armed structure’.<sup>107</sup>

When the infighting was at its height, Bellagamba went from being the lawyer of the militants to defending the widows of murdered nationalists:

I was no longer the lawyer of the militants but of the widows. I was the lawyer of Letizia Sozzi, whose partner Robert was killed in 1993. I was the lawyer of Edith Muzzi, whose husband was murdered in 1994. I was also the lawyer of Pierre Albertini’s family. I moved to the side of the victims. Psychologically, this is not something that can leave you unmoved.<sup>108</sup>

Bellagamba made people realise the direction nationalism was going in when the infighting began, working within the MPA to draw attention to the issue of violence and to the transformation that their ‘island homeland’ was undergoing and that risked turning it into a ‘tomb’.<sup>109</sup> According to Bellagamba, ‘the demilitarization of the FLNC was becoming increasingly urgent. I introduced this idea within the MPA through an article published in *Libération*. At that moment, I wanted to underline my difference both as a woman and as a militant’.<sup>110</sup> Giovannangeli also found the resurgence of violence unbearable: ‘with the benefit of hindsight I’d say that a clandestine action of that kind should never have been justified; by then it had gone out of control’.<sup>111</sup> She cites the killing of Robert Sozzi, a nationalist militant, for which the *Cuncolta*

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Marie-José Bellagamba, interview by author.

<sup>108</sup> Marie-José Bellagamba, interview by author. On the individuals named here, see Julien, ‘Les drames de Furiani’, *U10*, 5 May 2020, <http://ultimodiez.fr/2020/05/05/les-drames-de-furiani/>; Guy Benhamou, ‘“Aucune affaire significative n’a été élucidée”’, *Libération*, 10 February 1996, [https://www.liberation.fr/evenement/1996/02/10/aucune-affaire-significative-n-a-ete-elucidée\\_163277/](https://www.liberation.fr/evenement/1996/02/10/aucune-affaire-significative-n-a-ete-elucidée_163277/) [both accessed 21 October 2024].

<sup>109</sup> Marie-José Bellagamba, ‘Tombeau pour la Corse’ *Libération*, 13 October 1995, [https://www.liberation.fr/tribune/1995/10/13/tombeau-pour-la-corse\\_147110/](https://www.liberation.fr/tribune/1995/10/13/tombeau-pour-la-corse_147110/) [accessed 21 October 2024].

<sup>110</sup> Marie-José Bellagamba, interview by author.

<sup>111</sup> Marie-France Giovannangeli, interview by author.

claimed responsibility for Sozzi's death as an indication that 'things had gone beyond the point of no-return'.<sup>112</sup>

In January 1996, François Santoni, who had narrowly escaped a murder attempt in May 1995, was elected the national secretary of *Cuncolta*, but already by the end of 1996, he was accused, together with his partner, Mattei, of being involved in the extortion of funds from Jacques Dewez, a promoter, commercial agent and owner of the Spérone golf course. While in prison, Mattei decided to write a book, which she dedicated to her daughter, a child at the time:<sup>113</sup>

I was arrested in late 1996. In early 1997, I was at Fleury-Mérogis and I wanted to use this book to talk to my daughter who was nine years old at the time, to my family and friends. When you find yourself being hated by people, the time has come to speak, to say what you think. I didn't explain everything in this book, also because the trial was still ongoing. Although everything I wrote was true, it's only part of the truth. There were things that it would not have been useful to say. I spoke about my resentment, about the life I was leading in prison and the reasons why I was there and that had nothing to do with the presumed extortion racket. I was released, allocated to a residence in Paris and I continued to write. I wrote for two or three years and then the book came out in 2001. Not many copies were distributed because some people would have preferred that certain aspects of the trial did not come out. So, after a first print run, it wasn't reprinted.<sup>114</sup>

Mattei mentions her complex relationship with Santoni, which was 'simply difficult because it took place during a terrible period, the period of the clash between nationalists', and how many nationalists 'took advantage of my arrest to cut me loose'.<sup>115</sup> For this reason, Mattei withdrew from politics in 1998 to focus on her defence:

It took three years for me to be cleared of the charge of extortion, which I considered to be the most shameful thing. But I still received a symbolic sentence from the Court of Appeals for belonging to the FLNC. Because if I was defending FLNC militants I must have been one in turn. I would have had to go to the Court of Cassation to defend myself from this charge of supposed membership. In three years, no lawyer or magistrate ever asked me whether I belonged to the FLNC or not. Maybe they took it for granted. Who knows.<sup>116</sup>

In September 1998, Santoni issued a statement from prison announcing his resignation from *Cuncolta*.<sup>117</sup> While he was in prison, Charles Pieri, *Cuncolta*'s national secretary for the Haute Corse, and Marie-Hélène

<sup>112</sup> Marie-France Giovannangeli, interview by author.

<sup>113</sup> Marie-Hélène Mattei, *Le prix du silence* (Neuilly-sur-Seine, 2000).

<sup>114</sup> Marie-Hélène Mattei, interview by author.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> Michel Codaccioni, 'La démission de François Santoni d'A Cuncolta témoigne des divisions des nationalistes corses', *Le Monde*, 16 Sept. 1998, [https://www.lemonde.fr/archives/article/1998/09/16/la-demission-de-francois-santoni-d-a-cuncolta-temoigne-des-divisions-des-nationalistes-corses\\_3667165\\_1819218.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/archives/article/1998/09/16/la-demission-de-francois-santoni-d-a-cuncolta-temoigne-des-divisions-des-nationalistes-corses_3667165_1819218.html) [accessed 21 October 2024].



Mattei, the spokesperson for the organisation, joined forces without his knowledge. Moreover, the movement changed its name to *Cuncolta independentista* (Independence Group), expressing a wish for Corsican independence that Santoni did not share.

The experiences of Marie-Hélène Mattei and Marie-José Bellagamba also show the infighting within the nationalist movement as the two lawyers became politically divided: the former took part in a violent struggle extending to attacks on the state system, while the latter committed to defending the families of militants who had been killed. In this climate of extreme tension, the themes of feminism were completely abandoned given that the priority had become the nationalist struggle.

## IX

In February 1995, in the face of rising violence, women from different political backgrounds came together to draw up the *Manifeste pour la vie* ('Manifesto for Life'), which sought to help end the violence in Corsica. The women signing the manifesto were for the rule of law, for life, and against the rule of arms.<sup>118</sup> Their aim was to follow the advice of Jean-Paul Sartre: 'We are responsible for everything we do not attempt to prevent'.<sup>119</sup> This movement included members of the *Union des Femmes Françaises* (Union of French Women), MPA militants, representatives from unions and other associations and other citizens.<sup>120</sup> The manifesto's signatories declared their intention to break down the wall of silence and end the spiral of violence. They rejected a priori the possibility that the state could make decisions about the island's future through compromises with armed groups. The document demanded the law be applied in all sectors of social and political life and that justice be administered in a peaceful climate with transparent mechanisms for political decision-making and for the management of public affairs.

Giovannangeli was one of the first signatories of a manifesto that 'was not an attack on nationalists but the expression of a Corsican society against the rule of arms'.<sup>121</sup> Her memories of this period are as follows:

I did not draw up the manifesto but I was one of the first to sign it. I was invited to do so by Antoinette Serra and Pauline Salimbeni. I took part in the demonstration against the rule of arms that was organized afterwards. Sadly, the movement did not last long and both the Right and the Left attempted to manipulate it. The nationalists criticized this

<sup>118</sup> Jackie Lucchini, 'Femmes corses, la longue marche', in Philippe Franchini (ed.), *Une dramaturgie corse* (Paris, 2002), pp. 134–5.

<sup>119</sup> Lefevre, *Géopolitique de la Corse*, p. 57.

<sup>120</sup> Corsica sera. "'Le manifeste pour la vie'": manifestation des femmes contre la violence', *Ina*, 11 February 1995, <https://www.ina.fr/ina-eclair-actu/video/ba00000042012/le-manifeste-pour-la-vie-manifestation-des-femmes-contre-la-violence> [accessed 21 October 2024].

<sup>121</sup> Marie-France Giovannangeli, interview by author.

manifesto because it was hard to be introspective and to call oneself into question.<sup>122</sup>

The nationalist press of *Cuncolta* criticised this movement very strongly and many of the signatories received death threats. Jean-Michel Rossi attacked Victoire Canale and Marie-Jeanne Nicoli in the pages of the magazine *Ribombu*.<sup>123</sup> According to Nicoli, their conviction ‘that the nationalist movement had to be situated in a democratic public space’ made them ‘an object of hate for what is now Corsica Libera and the separatist movements’.<sup>124</sup> Bellagamba preferred not to talk about this initiative, whose contours she considered to be rather unclear: ‘as the lawyer for the Muzzi and Sozzi families, it would not have been appropriate for me to get involved in this matter’. She also argued that ‘Some men attempted to politicize’ the manifesto, noting communist involvement in particular.<sup>125</sup>

Initially, De Zerbi felt drawn to the movement around the manifesto, but she soon changed her mind, because, like Bellagamba, she felt it was being manipulated by those disparaging nationalism and that it was also failing to respect the fundamentals of the feminist struggle: ‘I spontaneously signed the *Manifeste pour la vie*: it was impossible not to agree with the motto “For life, against the rule of arms”’. However, she then ‘took a step back after the demonstration when I saw women from the leading clan, the Zuccarellis, taking part’ and when it no longer seemed to her to be ‘a movement for life but an anti-nationalist movement’.<sup>126</sup> According to De Zerbi, the self-representation of these women as daughters, sisters, wives and mothers was a return to the past in comparison to the struggle of Donni Corsi: ‘and then the fact that they said “we daughters, wives and mothers and sisters” seemed like a step backwards to me so I lost interest’.<sup>127</sup> Gambini D’Orazio who did sign the manifesto as well as taking part in initiatives, was also critical of this definition: ‘to me, to define myself merely as a mother, sister, or wife felt as if I was amputating an essential part of my identity’.<sup>128</sup> Jackie Lucchini refused to sign the manifesto, which she considered to be anti-nationalist and distant from the feminist struggle: ‘Marie Jeanne Nicoli and Victoire Canale joined the *Manifeste pour la vie*, which many saw as a feminist movement but it was anything but that: they spoke about us as mothers, wives, daughters, and sisters. And this all evoked the patriarchy. There was

<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

<sup>123</sup> Catherine Simon, ‘Victoire Canale, ennemie de la violence armée et de la clandestinité’, *Le Monde*, 25 August 2001, [https://www.lemonde.fr/archives/article/2001/08/25/victoire-canale-ennemie-de-la-violence-armee-et-de-la-clandestinite\\_3544443\\_1819218.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/archives/article/2001/08/25/victoire-canale-ennemie-de-la-violence-armee-et-de-la-clandestinite_3544443_1819218.html) [accessed 21 October 2024].

<sup>124</sup> Marie-Jeanne Nicoli, interview by author.

<sup>125</sup> Marie-José Bellagamba, interview by author. On Marie Stefanini, see Charles Monti, ‘Bastia: Marie Stefanini n’est plus’, *Corse net infos*, 19 March 2016, [https://www.corsenetinfos.corsica/Bastia-Marie-Stefanini-n-est-plus\\_a20236.html](https://www.corsenetinfos.corsica/Bastia-Marie-Stefanini-n-est-plus_a20236.html) [accessed 21 October 2024].

<sup>126</sup> Ghjermana De Zerbi, interview by author.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

<sup>128</sup> Marie-Paule Gambini D’Orazio, interview by author.

a clear contradiction. I did not sign this manifesto, which was clearly being manipulated by the anti-nationalists. The Bastia clan of the Zuccarellis took over this movement'.<sup>129</sup>

Marie Jeanne Nicoli—who together with Victoire Canale was at the forefront of this initiative—remembers that the Bastia group had the idea of drawing up a manifesto and that the text was subsequently sent to her and Canale. She recalls her shock at the definition 'we, daughters, wives, sisters, and mothers', which was at odds with the struggle undertaken by the *Donni Corsi* movement. Nonetheless, both Nicoli and Canale believed that the priority at that time was to overcome divisions and to allow the voice of civil society to be heard: 'Victoire and I were astonished that we were talking about women, sisters, and mothers again: we discussed it and then we realized that it was important. Maybe that stance following the path of tradition would have been received and perceived more widely by society at large. And so we signed the manifesto'.<sup>130</sup>

Many of the nationalist militants, like Vanina Le Bomin, chose not to participate because they considered the manifesto to be an explicit attack on the nationalist movement whereas violence was tolerated at that time. As Le Bomin recalls:

the situation was very tense; many women felt they were being called upon to take part but I did not participate. At that time, we felt the FLNC was indispensable. It was the only way to fight against a state that had every means at its disposal to impose whatever it wanted. I mean the overbuilding of the coasts and the presence of continental functionaries in Corsica. We thought—and I am being honest—that violence was useful at that time. Unfortunately, things slipped away from us and with the benefit of hindsight we realized that some things could have been avoided.<sup>131</sup>

Mattei was of the same opinion, suggesting

this was a reflection of violence, of all forms of violence, but Cuncolta militants felt as if they had been judged and found wanting. At the time, we were too naive to understand the ramifications of this war; later, with the benefit of hindsight, we would realize that it had been constructed in a Machiavellian manner by the services of the state. This internal conflict within the nationalist movement was fuelled by the state. The state exploited this split within the nationalist movement to play one side against the other (...). Some left but I remained trapped in the workings and did not have the necessary far-sightedness or courage. I did not react as I should have done.<sup>132</sup>

Fabienne Maestracci, who did not participate either, stigmatised the initiative: 'running off to draw up a manifesto because you hear pistol shots in front of your house doesn't make sense'. At the same time, she

<sup>129</sup> Jackie Lucchini, interview by author.

<sup>130</sup> Marie Jeanne Nicoli, interview by author.

<sup>131</sup> Vanina Le Bomin, interview by author.

<sup>132</sup> Marie-Hélène Mattei, interview by author.

noted that ‘among those participating were people like Pauline Salimbeni, Victoire Canale, who was a friend of mine, Marie-Jeanne Nicoli who is my cousin and who I got on with very well’.<sup>133</sup>

On 8 June 1996, 4000 people demonstrated in Ajaccio and the manifesto collected 5000 signatures, which were brought to the attention of the prefect. Their battle received both national and international coverage thanks to *La mort dans l'âme: paroles de femmes Corses* (‘Death within the Soul: Speeches by Corsican Women’), a documentary made by Milka Assaf for the Arte TV channel broadcast on 17 May 1997. The murder of Claude Erignac, the regional prefect, in Ajaccio on 6 February 1998, represented both the pinnacle of violence as well as a rejection of it. Five days later, the *Manifeste pour la vie* movement organised a demonstration at Bastia and Ajaccio, which was attended by 40,000 people.<sup>134</sup> They decided to organise an *Isula morta* (‘Dead Island’) day, whereby all activities would be interrupted for one day.

Just three days after Erignac’s murder, the police arrested Marcel Lorenzoni, after large calibre guns, dynamite and detonators had been found in his home. About two months later, they arrested Fabienne Maestracci and Marcel’s brother, Maurice Lorenzoni, as accessories. Looking back at those days, Fabienne remembers:

They left me free, following me for two months, then one day they came to pick me up, doing the same thing to Marcel’s brother Maurice, who I now live with. (...) They told me that Maurice and I were under arrest not for Erignac’s murder but for all the rest. My lawyer told me that if I gave them some information to use against Marcel, they would have let me go home and I would have slept in my own bed that night. That wasn’t the case at all. They used the same technique with Maurice. I ended up staying there for thirteen months. My first book was called *Vita Corsa* and it is the story of my arrival in Corsica and I wrote it in prison. When I left prison, I wrote *Les murs de vos prisons*.<sup>135</sup> When I was released together with Maurice, the prefect Bonnet turned up with his little smile; it was unbearable. Seeing him get into the Gendarmerie car was so satisfying.<sup>136</sup> We hit the car, shouting ‘French killers!’. Prison turned me into a militant. When you see the prisons, the brutality of this whole context is indescribable.<sup>137</sup>

By the end of the 1990s, the nationalist movement was so fractured by infighting that it comprised fifteen political groups. According to Maestracci, it was then that ‘the state took advantage of the situation to

<sup>133</sup> Fabienne Maestracci, interview by author.

<sup>134</sup> France2, ‘Manifestation après le décès du préfet Claude Erignac en Corse’, *Ina*, 11 February 1998, <https://www.ina.fr/ina-eclairage-actu/video/cab98006322/manifestation-apres-le-deces-du-prefet-claude-erignac-en-corse> [accessed 21 October 2024].

<sup>135</sup> Fabienne Maestracci, *Les murs de vos prisons: récit* (Ajaccio, 2001).

<sup>136</sup> Laurent Chabrun, Eric Conan, Fabrice L’homme and Jean-Marie Pontaut, ‘Crise d’Etat’, *L’Express*, 6 May 1999, [https://archive.wikiwix.com/cache/index2.php?url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.lexpress.fr%2Factualite%2Fsociete%2Fcrise-d-etat\\_493533.html#federation=archive.wikiwix.com&tab=url](https://archive.wikiwix.com/cache/index2.php?url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.lexpress.fr%2Factualite%2Fsociete%2Fcrise-d-etat_493533.html#federation=archive.wikiwix.com&tab=url) [accessed 21 October 2024].

<sup>137</sup> Fabienne Maestracci, interview by author.

bring all militants out into the open and get rid of them. We became part of the “society of intendants” who took power and failed to return it’.<sup>138</sup>

After Lorenzoni’s release, Yvan Colonna, a separatist militant, became France’s most wanted man when he went on the run on 22 May 1999. Colonna was arrested on 4 July 2003, in a shepherd’s hut near the village of Olmeto, in south-west Corsica. On that same day, the then Minister of the Interior, Nicolas Sarkozy, stated, ‘We have arrested the murderer of the prefect’.<sup>139</sup> The *Donni Corsi* movement exhausted its energies shortly after its birth due to internal divisions and the fact that for some of the women, nationalism and feminism were incompatible within the Corsican context, which was shaped by a traditional vision of roles within the family. Divisions also took place among the women activists who created the *Manifeste pour la vie*, relating less to themes regarding women’s rights than to those concerning violence within the nationalist movement. In fact, staunch feminists like Victoire Canale and Marie Jeanne Nicoli had to reluctantly accept the use of the expression ‘daughters, sisters, wives and mothers’ in the manifesto.

## X

In the Corsican collective imaginary, the role of women is interpreted according to a tradition portrayed by Mérimée.<sup>140</sup> The Corsican woman is typically ‘Colomba’, the protagonist of the novella by Prosper Mérimée: she is the custodian of tradition, a heroic, maternal figure who is always a step behind men, whether her father, brother or husband, but who never fails to contribute to the community.<sup>141</sup>

From the early 1970s onwards, with the acceleration of modernisation processes on the island, Corsica saw the emergence of feminist demands whose reception was conditioned by the fact that the island was slowly emptying due to a mass exodus of Corsicans towards the mainland and because it was opening up to the modern world. As Janine Renucci has pointed out, this led to a bipartition within the island: the traditional Corsica remained perched in mountain villages, while the new Corsica took shape in the coastal cities, which experienced rapid growth, Bastia and Ajaccio, most of all.<sup>142</sup>

From the nationalist viewpoint, women were legitimately part of the Corsican people, but they had to stay in their ‘natural’ role as mothers, sisters, wives and daughters and act as guardians of tradition. Within a clandestine movement like FLNC, women could provide logistical support or even play a hands-on role in third-sector activities, beginning

<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

<sup>139</sup> Deborah Paci, ‘La testa mora su TikTok’, *Il Mulino*, 19 March 2022, <https://www.rivistailmulino.it/a/la-testa-mora-su-tiktok> [accessed 21 October 2024]. See also Laurette Roland, *Yvan Colonna: l’innocence qui dérange* (Paris, 2011).

<sup>140</sup> Prosper Mérimée, *Colomba* (Paris, 1997).

<sup>141</sup> Robert Colonna d’Istria, *Femmes corses* (Paris, 2024).

<sup>142</sup> Janine Renucci, *Corse traditionnelle et Corse nouvelle*.

with associations for the support of families of political prisoners. As Frédéric Sawicki and Johanna Siméant have noted, activist women fall into two categories: on the one hand, those who participate in associations linked to families, schools, parishes or charities, within which activism is a kind of extension of the role traditionally attributed to them by society; on the other, there are those who decide to become involved in trade union activities or politics.<sup>143</sup> Both Nicoli and Giovannangeli were involved in the *A Riscossa* association. But there were many other occasions in which female nationalist militants were called upon to serve the cause by collecting funds for the families of political prisoners. For example, Maestracci, who, as it was noted, had no great sympathy for the feminist movements, mentions only one situation in which she had the sensation that being a woman was something that distinguished her from the male universe. This occurred during a fundraising event on behalf of political prisoners when the women were asked to serve in a food stand to prevent arguments from breaking out between those attending. Describing the event, Maestracci recalls,

the only time I ever felt different to men was on the occasion of the ‘Santa di u Niolu’, a rural fair held every year at the beginning of September in Casamaccioli. It is a religious festival where shepherds drink and play cards for three days and nights. We had decided to set up a stand to collect the money from the sale of products during the fair for the political prisoner fund, which was organized by my cousin Jean-Marie Poli. Basically, the men decided that the women would staff the stand at night so as not to have any problems. Drunken men would not have caused any problems for women while things would have been different if there had been other men around. This was the only time in which they told me: you are a woman and you have to do this.<sup>144</sup>

According to some of the interviewees, including Le Bomin, Mattei, Bellagamba and Maestracci, women’s involvement in organising household affairs meant that they were better equipped than men to deal with conflictual situations and better able to adopt strategies of compromise.

While aspects of these dynamics were unique to Corsica, Corsican activists were often aware of parallels to the roles and experiences of women in other nationalist movements. Mariana Miggiolaro Chaguri and Flávia X. M. Paniz have drawn attention to the way in which the association between the domestic and public spheres became unavoidable for both Vietnamese and Kurdish women militants, observing how ‘fighting, producing and caring turn to be interconnected parts of the same responsibility that women had in relation to the nation’.<sup>145</sup> In this

<sup>143</sup> Frédéric Sawicki and Johanna Siméant, ‘Décloisonner la sociologie de l’engagement militant : note critique sur quelques tendances récentes des travaux français’, *Sociologie du travail*, 51/1 (2009), pp. 97–125.

<sup>144</sup> Fabienne Maestracci, interview by author.

<sup>145</sup> Chaguri Miggiolaro and Paniz, ‘Women’s war’, p. 908.

sense, the militancy of the Kurds must be interpreted as a commitment to national freedom that could not have come about without the freedom of women. It is possible to see an exaltation of the female role typical of rural societies where women stand out for their family management skills. For this reason, the nationalist movement promoted a representation of women as daughters, sisters, mothers and wives, an essential part of the so-called natural family that was the root of the Corsican social order and nation. On the other hand, a differing model of what it meant to be a woman emerges from the testimony of other interviewees—De Zerbi, Gambini D’Orazio, Giovannangeli, Lucchini, and Nicoli—who sought to escape from this representation and brought the issue of female emancipation to the debate within the nationalist movement. De Zerbi and Lucchini are undoubtedly at the forefront among these interviewees because they made the effort to bring together tradition, as emerges from their contribution to promoting the Corsican language and culture, and modernity in gender relations, revealed by their reflection on the trio of feminism, nationalism and socialism.

At the same time, Nicoli, like Canale—significantly described as ‘*impinzute*’ (a derogatory term for Corsican women acting French)—promoted a feminism unacceptable to the nationalists because they saw it as something imported from abroad that was alien to the reality of the island. Giovannangeli, through her commitment in a specific, circumscribed segment of society—that of trade unionism—had the opportunity to occupy a leading role and earn the respect of many people. For example, in order to back up their claim that there was no need for feminist demands in Corsica, both Vanina Le Bomin and Bellagamba mentioned the case of Marie France Giovannangeli. According to Le Bomin: ‘If we look at the lists of the period, there were only very few women’s names. Maybe this was also due to the fact that women did not want to assume roles of responsibility. Nonetheless, the few women who did hold a position had important roles, like Marie-France Giovannangeli’.<sup>146</sup>

Leaving aside the differing viewpoints of the Bastia and Ajaccio groups, the nationalist group (which was dominated by male figures) believed that the priority was the emancipation of the Corsican people. Donni Corsi burned out because Zerbi’s longed-for trio of feminism, nationalism and socialism could not represent a priority aim for the nationalists, at a time when arms did the talking. Therefore, in 1995, when the *Manifeste pour la vie* was drawn up, there was such a climate of conflict and such a need to end the rule of arms that they opted for the traditional representation of women as wives, mothers, daughters and sisters to ensure that their message reached the largest audience possible. Nonetheless, this did not help them curry favour with the movement, which saw this manifesto as an explicit attack on nationalism.

<sup>146</sup> Vanina Le Bomin, interview by author; Marie-José Bellagamba, interview by author.

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