LA FRANCE AU BORD DE L’AMERIQUE
(FRANCE ON THE EDGE OF AMERICA)
SAINT PIERRE AND MIQUELON
IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

A THESIS IN
History

Presented to the Faculty of the University of Missouri-Kansas City in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

MASTER OF ARTS

By
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B.A. Washington University in St. Louis, 2010

Kansas City, Missouri
2019
ABSTRACT

Historians of Empire have overwhelmingly turned their attention to the study of peoples who, once oppressed by their imperial ruler, have achieved emancipation. Rarely do they examine the peoples who did not demand independence but, rather, willingly chose to remain linked to the ‘metropole.’ Saint Pierre et Miquelon provides a particular example of the later. Saint Pierre and Miquelon is a unique community, one of a handful of territories in the world where a small settler population is still under the control of a former colonial power. It is also the only French territory of this type. Better known ones include the British territories of the Falkland Islands or St Helena.

Through a thorough investigation of historical currents and their impact on the people Saint Pierre et Miquelon, this study examines on how a transplanted group of people can develop a sense of national identity without having a nation state and how they can maintain an attachment to a 'metropole' that has long ago ceased to be a 'homeland.' It draws out the sources of this loyalty and underscores the challenges of balancing local and national identities in a territory that, despite its small size and far-flung position, did not remain unaffected by world events.
The faculty listed below, appointed by the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, have examined a thesis titled “La France au bord de l’Amérique (France on the edge of America): Saint Pierre and Miquelon in the Twentieth Century,” presented by Jean-Charles Foyer, candidate for the Master of Arts degree, and certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would first like to thank my advisor, Dr. Dennis Merrill, for guiding me, helping me, and putting up with me during the process that was getting this degree and writing this thesis. He helped me hone my subject, despite being slightly outside of his expertise, and always answered my many, many questions with precision and kindness despite occasional exasperation at me, and gave me extensive and invaluable constructive criticism on my writing as I’ve crafted this thesis. This would not have been possible without him.

I would also like to thank all the faculty at UMKC, especially my committee members, Drs. Mutti-Burke, Frehner and Khelouz, all of whom I have had as teachers and who have helped me along the way in my writing and my learning, and have always been of great assistance and support to me. Furthermore, I would like to thank Dr. Payne, who was instrumental in creating the first, foundational draft of this work, and was very kind and encouraging throughout the process.

Finally, I want to thank my family, especially my mother Julie and my sister Emilie, both of whom have read, and thoroughly commented upon, the various drafts of this thesis. I am also grateful to my friends, especially Sam, Alainna, Katie, Nikki, Rachel, Quinby, Leah, Sarah, and too many others to list, who not only served as extra pairs of eyes catching my occasional mistakes and acted as sounding boards, but also kept me sane and calmed me during my moments of panic. You are all wonderful.
Introduction

Figure 1: Location of Saint Pierre and Miquelon

Twenty miles off the coast of Newfoundland, Canada, lie a pair of small islands. With few resources and a sparse population of roughly 6000 people, they are relatively unremarkable other than for one thing: they belong to a country 4000 km away, France. St Pierre and Miquelon are a French Overseas Collectivity, one of the many territories France retains outside of Europe, however they are the only ones to remain from their original American holdings. Sole remnant of the once vast territory of New France, which encompassed much of Eastern Canada, they have stayed nearly constantly in French hands since the mid eighteenth century, throughout wars, economic woes, and the wider decolonization effort that swept the world in the mid twentieth century. In this last century, there have been many events that shook the territory. Despite this, the islanders have maintained an allegiance to France, while retaining their own distinct identity, what they

call a “St Pierrais character”, French people with an insular and self-reliant streak, with the inhabitants fighting for France in wars, cheering for it in athletics, enjoying croissants with their breakfast and baguette with their lunch. And yet, never forgetting that they are on a different continent, and thus feeling that they are their own special kind of French people, on the frontier of France, a last outpost of sorts, able to handle itself. In the words of resident Jean-Pierre Jezequel: “We’re French but far away, and we have our own ideas.”

This can lead to the question of why they have chosen to maintain these ties, how they have done so while retaining their own identity, and the evidence that they continued to do so despite certain movements of contestation and outside forces. Major events in the twentieth century have shown the islanders’ desire that St Pierre and Miquelon remain, on their own terms, French.

The twentieth century was a relatively eventful one for such small and isolated islands. While a small number of general histories of the islands have been written, several of which I sample and cite here, most fail to explore the local feelings towards France, concentrating instead on a description of important political and economic events as they happened, without digging deeper into how they impacted and were affected by the territory’s French character. Furthermore, because of a dearth of publications in recent years, these works do not take recent events and trends into account, such as recent maritime territorial disputes between France and Canada, or the further decline of the fishing industry and the territory’s refocus on tourism. In this work I examine several developments which either changed –or had the potential to change—the status and life in this territory in radical ways. The century began with a series of protests and contestation movements starting in 1903 that rocked the islands and for the first time in a century called into question French rule in St. Pierre and Miquelon. Certain minorities called for annexation by the United

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States or by Canada. These were exacerbated by new treaties in 1904 over fishing rights - part of the Entente Cordiale, a series of agreements between the United Kingdom and France designed to improve relations between the two old rival nations- which caused vast economic woes in the territory, woes which were not resolved until the prohibition on the production and importation of alcohol in the United States during the 1920s, when a thriving black market used the islands as a base to smuggle French spirits into the United States. They also received help in the form of subsidies from the French government to help industries survive or reestablish themselves on the islands. These subsidies were mostly in the form of financial aid grants that could be applied for, and they were very rarely rejected. These grants were paid to the business owners from tax revenue throughout France, and helped offset their losses. These subsidies continued throughout the twentieth century until the present day.

Possibly the most momentous point of the islands’ modern history was World War II. As a part of France, their allegiance was officially to Vichy France upon the country’s surrender to Germany, when it became part of a puppet state to the Axis. However, fearing potential action by Canada, the leader of Free France Charles de Gaulle sent a small task force to rally the islands to his cause, making them among the first French territories to be liberated during that conflict, with overwhelming support from the locals. This led to strain with the other Allies however, which I explore briefly. The next moment I explore is the late 1950s and early 60s, when France granted independence to the vast majority of its colonial empire, retaining only small parts, mostly islands. St. Pierre and Miquelon were such islands and a visit by then President de Gaulle during this period demonstrates the continuing loyalty the population had towards the French President and the French nation.

The final two events to be examined are less momentous in their world implications, but extremely important for the territory, for they concern changes in administrative status.
Considered a colony (in all but name after the 1960s) of France for most of its history, in 1975 the territory became an Overseas Department, as much a part of France as Paris. This rapprochement showed the desire for integration that the islands wished, and the closeness they felt with the metropole. However, this only lasted ten years, for full departmental status proved to be impractical for such a small territory with such a small population, and too locally unpopular. In 1985, they reverted to the slightly more autonomous Territorial Collectivity, a status they retain to this day.

By looking at these moments in St. Pierre and Miquelon’s history, this study explains how the people of St. Pierre and Miquelon forged a distinct and proud identity that featured a sense of belonging to the French Nation, yet also allowed them to lay claim to “Frenchness” on their own terms. To place the events of the twentieth century in context, I begin with an examination of the islands’ early colonial experience as a relatively isolated outpost of a French-based fishing industry inhabited by a transient, male French population. It then traces the gradual establishment and growth of a permanent population – a population of French descent but far less directly connected to the homeland. I argue that the great distance from the metropole enabled the islanders to create a French identity of their own making.

In his book *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, renowned sociologist Benedict Anderson defines a nation as a social construct, an “imagined community”, that embraces a sense of commonality. Anderson argues about that the notion of a country "is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion".³ While the islands

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under study here never became sovereign nations in a legal or geopolitical sense, their people nonetheless managed to forge a distinct identity. The notion of an imagined belonging is interesting in this particular case, as the imagined community is twofold: the small island community of “Saint Pierre” (as established by the “Saint Pierrais character), and the community belonging to the French nation, several thousand kilometers away.

It is noteworthy that Anderson traces the origins of modern nationalism to the late colonial era in the Western Hemisphere, and its strengthening to period of the Industrial Revolution. Over this stretch of time the spreading of literacy in vernacular language, the emergence of print media, and the displacement of religion spurred the rise of national consciousness throughout the Western world. Saint Pierre and Miquelon sit at an interesting intersection of all these definitions. Originally little more than a French fishing outpost, the islands slowly attracted a permanent population who in time built their own hybrid Franco-North American identity at exactly the moment when Anderson describes the formation of such communities across the Atlantic World. By the twentieth century, boasting a population of just 5,500 and 500 for Saint Pierre and Miquelon respectively, major events reinforced the hybrid identity and solidified the independent “Saint Pierrais character”, the “own ideas” mentioned by Jean-Pierre Jezequel. However, the island’s inhabitants never abandoned their sense of belonging –real or imagined – to the French nation.

Historians of Empire have overwhelmingly turned their attention to the study of peoples who, once oppressed by their imperial ruler, have achieved emancipation. Rarely do they examine the peoples who did not demand independence but, rather, willingly chose to remain linked to the ‘metropole.’ Saint Pierre and Miquelon is an aberrant community, one of a handful of territories in the world where a small settler population is still under the control of a former colonial power. It is also the only French territory of this type. Better

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4 Anderson emphasizes later South American movements led by transplanted Spanish creoles.
known ones include the British territories of the Falkland Islands or St Helena. It shows that a transplanted population can develop its own identity, balancing it with an attachment to a “Metropole” that long ago ceased to be a “homeland”. The case of St. Pierre and Miquelon shows how a former territory considered a “colony” can transition, without violence or upheaval, into a state of integration with the ruling country. How a national identity can emerge and prosper, rising above the colonial mindset of dependent population to that of distinct community, and how decolonization does not necessarily imply independence. How one can challenge the traditional concept of Empire.

Scholars and laypeople alike have long regarded “Empire,” in the colonial context, as a fairly fixed and straightforward structure of dominance that generates various forms of political, military, and economic dependence. In the post-Colonial era, it has typically been regarded as a system of oppression of a group by a controlling power, of exploitation of its resources, human or natural. Short of outright rebellion, it is often thought to produce an unchanging and asymmetrical relationship, with power vested on one side, and the other being left with no other option but to endure. It is only through the traumatic process of decolonization and emancipation that colonies can regain any power, any agency over their own fates. But Overseas France, and St. Pierre et Miquelon in particular, illustrate that this structure, and the process of breaking from it, are nowhere near that simple.

The history of Saint Pierre and Miquelon demonstrates that despite the lopsided power arrangements inherent to imperial relationships, empire is in fact a much more complex and changing entity. Rather than a fixed system of simple one-way relations, it is an ever-evolving, process; fluid, malleable, and under the right conditions negotiable. These characteristics become particularly apparent when cultural constructions of identity are subjected to close analysis. Imagined communities, after all, are dreamed up through on-going cultural discourses – a web of crisscrossing, societal conversations that touch on
matters of race, political status, economic development, and a host of other identity defining concerns. By their very nature, discourses constantly remain subject to contestation, come under review, and emerge reshaped in tone and substance. How a community imagines itself therefore varies upon its perceived interests and aspirations, prioritized by those who wield social, political, and economic clout at any particular historical moment.\(^5\)

Empires, as the historian Paul Kramer has observed, are about connections – connections between colonizer and colonized, between imperial rivals, among fellow colonies, and the circuitry of actors associated with the global grid of capitalism.\(^6\) Underlying the ebb and flow of twentieth century world history lay the ability of the residents of St. Pierre and Miquelon to evolve and negotiate their sense of “St. Pierrais” and to continuously renegotiate connecting points with France, often with a view toward neighboring nations and fellow colonials. Whether the issue at hand centered on imperial economic relations, wartime loyalties, or postwar political status, the islanders enjoyed a degree of historical agency, even as they remained a part of the empire. Indeed, in recent decades they even learned to manipulate France’s determination to retain its territories long after their economic or resource usefulness had passed.


\(^6\) ibid 1352-55

*Figure 2: 16th Century Mappa Mundi, one of the first to show the islands*
Background

The islands later known as St. Pierre and Miquelon were first noted to Europeans in a *Mappa Mundi* drawn up by Spanish explorer Juan de la Cosa. He referred to them as the Illa de la Trinitat. There is little evidence of habitation prior to the European voyages of discovery, though artifacts found there do speak of visits by native North American peoples. It is possible that the islands comprised part of a larger indigenous domain that served some seasonal economic or strategic and military purpose. The scholar Mary Louise Pratt has eloquently explained how the European colonizing project often featured the colonization of knowledge as well as the taking of territory, a process that often erased the history of native peoples. The names of the islands early in their history changed many times based upon the whims of the explorers that visited them. The name Saint Pierre appears for the first time in an account by Jacques Cartier, in 1536. These early accounts relay that the islands were visited by fishermen from Western France, though at this time little importance was given to them.

France eventually laid claim to vast expanses of land in what is now Canada, a territory then known as New France (Nouvelle France), centered on the city of Quebec. Rivalries existed with England, who had established colonies of their own in Newfoundland and along the eastern coast of the continent, the future United States. These rivalries came to a head in North America during the Seven Years War (which lasted from 1756 to 1763), with the fall of Quebec and Montréal into British hands, and the loss of all French territories in Canada. In the meantime, the islands had been ceded to the Colony of Newfoundland,

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and renamed “Bourgway.” As a part of the Treaty of Paris in 1763, by which France relinquished its North American claims, the French were granted fishing rights along the shores of Newfoundland, and as part of the treaty the islands of St. Pierre and Miquelon were restituted to France to serve as a base, refuge and resting point for French fishing boats. The American and French Revolutions, along with the Napoleonic Wars, kept the question of French sovereignty over the islands uncertain, but by the mid-nineteenth centuries international disturbances had stabilized and French fishing interests had come to dominate the territory.

Figure 3: Fragment of an 18th century map showing “St Peter’s” and “Maguelon”, before the islands were transferred to the French

This began a turbulent period for the islands, which were caught in the middle of greater conflicts between the two colonial powers. In 1778 during the American War of Independence, in which France took sides with the Americans against the British, the islands were evacuated and the settlements razed by English forces. The inhabitants

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returned in 1783, only to be captured in 1793 during the French Revolutionary wars, when the British invaded once more. The islands remained deserted until the end of the Napoleonic wars, when they were restituted to France and the colonists reoccupied them, ending a five-decade long period of turmoil.\textsuperscript{11} From this point on the islands would remain French, and the inhabitants managed to build a small but vibrant colony, catering to thousands of fishermen who came to from the Western Coast of France to fish off the “French Coast.”

The identity of Saint Pierre and Miquelon’s inhabitants differed from that of the inhabitants of other French overseas territories, a legacy of their rather unique evolution and status in French colonial history. Most of the colonies retained from the First French Colonial Empire, several of which still remain French, consisted of plantation colonies in the tropics. In many of these outposts, with Haiti perhaps the best known in the Western Hemisphere, the colonizing power decimated indigenous populations through enslavement, disease, and warfare. Wealthy white landowners in turn typically imported massive numbers of African slaves to serve as a labor force to drive lucrative, export-based colonial economies. Thus, the contemporary population is of mostly Black or mixed ancestry, with a mixed Franco-African culture. Even the previously uninhabited Réunion, an Indian Ocean island off the eastern coast of Madagascar has a mostly mixed population, and the heavily settled New Caledonia located just east of Australia in the South Pacific has nonetheless a native Kanak majority.\textsuperscript{12}

Saint Pierre and Miquelon contrasts with this in that it has an overwhelmingly white, metropolitan French-descended population, originating mostly in a founder population

\textsuperscript{11} De la Rüe, \textit{Saint Pierre et Miquelon}. pp 187-189.

early in its history. A way station for French fishermen after the loss of Canada, it became one of France’s few settler colonies. The only other colonies with a comparable history of settlement by mainland French people were Quebec and Algeria. In its early imperial days, as opposed to England or Spain, France had relatively little emigration to its colonies. This can be attributed to several factors, including the harsh conditions encountered in many colonial areas, such as the cold of Canada or the disease-ridden swamps of Louisiana. Few if any French citizens felt compelled to emigrate to escape religious persecution, as French authorities limited colonial emigration during the seventeenth century to members of the state-backed Roman Catholic Church. Finally, many of those who did go, like the early inhabitants of St. Pierre and Miquelon, were temporary colonists, intent on eventually returning to France. Thus French colonial populations were small to begin with compared to their rivals in the New World.

But Saint Pierre and Miquelon was at first not a colony at all. The vast majority of the people who visited the islands, perhaps numbering at most a few thousand, were itinerant fishermen, stopping to resupply or dry their catch. These fishermen, on whom the industry of the islands relied for over a century, concentrated their efforts on the extensive banks of cod north of the island of Newfoundland. The men who made the islands their temporary home consisted mostly of Acadian, Breton and Norman *hivernants*, or “winterers.” They could hardly be considered a stable population. Most of the summer population were seasonal sailors, all men, recruited from Brittany, Normandy and the Basque Country, setting sail at the end of winter in larger ships, often to take possession of smaller skiffs once they had reached Saint Pierre, and set off towards the French Shore.

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Indeed, the fishnets, hooks, and boats associated with trawling, and the rich harvest of the fish itself, gave Saint Pierre its strategic importance. Fishermen caught cod, the main catch, but also herring, squid, and other fish, and hauled them ashore in small goëlettes, or skiffs, each winter in Saint Pierre. The fishermen returned to Saint Pierre every few weeks with their salted catch, sometimes to dry it upon the rocks there, or to smoke it, or to further salt it before being loaded into the long-haul boats that brought it back to the markets in Europe. Without this outpost near the fishing banks, the small ships would not be able to venture far out near the bountiful Canadian fish stocks, and the fishermen would not be able to preserve their catch for the long, pre-refrigeration journey back to France. They would also have nowhere to resupply, so as to extend their season without having to make the long transatlantic journey, and they would have nowhere to shelter in case of bad weather. In short, even though small, these islands provided a vital base for a large industry that employed thousands of men. However, it still made it an industrial colony, entirely devoted to the industry, without a true character or culture of its own, a seasonal base more comparable to modern Antarctic stations than a community.\textsuperscript{15}

A true community needs a permanent, self-sustaining, self-maintaining population. In the early days of settlement, the island’s population of itinerant workers did not, could not, truly develop their own identity. However, as the industry grew, more settlers arrived in search of a livelihood and the settlement began to truly establish itself, with families and women coming, allowing for a self-sustaining population. The culture, however, remained heavily influenced by the mainland fishermen, which made it slowly divert in character from the rest of Francophone Canada, a territory inhabited by the descendants of French colonizers but now cut off from France itself. In \textit{Colonial Identity in the Atlantic World}, the authors argue that in some sense the distinct identities formed by colonial populations,

\textsuperscript{15} Described as underdeveloped and “morose”, with the few women spending the winter tending to fishing equipment by François René de Châteaubriand. \textit{Mémoires D’outre-Tombe.} (1848), I, vi, 5.
in particular the French community in the Americas, arose from the “exile” and the disconnect between the population and the “homeland”.\textsuperscript{16} In the case of St. Pierre and Miquelon, the constant flow of itinerant fishermen and the proportionately modest number of permanent settlers during the early colonial stages kept the colony culturally attached to France.

The population also distinguished itself from other French island colonies by the fact that it did not include African or Mulatto inhabitants. In part, this might have been a byproduct of the island’s fishing economy which, unlike plantation agriculture, did not lend itself to coerced African labor. In addition, by the time a permanent population started to form after Napoleon’s fall, the slave trade had been abolished by French authorities which meant that no slaves could be brought to the islands as workers.\textsuperscript{17} Whereas African slaves constituted the main workforce of the other French territories in Martinique, Guadeloupe or Réunion, the population of St. Pierre and Miquelon was and remains today nearly exclusively white. In the racially charged society that was colonial France, this led the inhabitants to regard themselves less as “colonials” and more as “Frenchmen”, simply ones who lived slightly further from the homeland than others. In their appearance and speech, they were indistinguishable from the fishermen that visited them, or the Bretons and Normans from which they were descended.

By the late nineteenth century Saint Pierre and Miquelon had finally emerged as a permanent settlement. Its population of French descendants, supplemented by migratory French fishermen, however, still thought of themselves as French men and women who happened to dwell far from home in the North Atlantic adjacent to the Americas. During


\textsuperscript{17} The slave trade was abolished in 1818. Slavery itself it would be formally abolished in all French colonies in 1848
the next several decades, set off by the political and economic machinations of the French
government, the islander’s sense of French-ness shifted as they confronted the reality that
their connections to France might leave them at a distinct disadvantage when it came to
shaping their own future. Theirs would be a hybrid identity that remained unstable
throughout the tumultuous twentieth century, at times threatening to undermine France’s
sovereignty and at other times reinforcing the imperial bond.

**The troubles of the Early Twentieth Century and Appearance of Annexationist
Movements**

Once a dependent territory begins truly developing an identity, it then begins to wish
to assert the desires this identity creates, to assert some agency over its own fate. By the
turn of the Twentieth century, Saint Pierre and Miquelon had been French for close to 140
years and had been inhabited without disruption for over eighty. Historical records show
that this is the time that the blended Saint-Pierra is/French identity of the territory began to
solidify. Several generations of settled inhabitants had passed, and had formed a community
with a common, different imagined identity that that of simple transient French people, that
of native Saint Pierrais. With this, when France began interfering with established traditions
and values, for the first time they began to truly push back, in this case against educational
reforms the government wished to push through.

As it turned out, the islander’s attachment to France would never be severed either
politically or culturally. But the origins of a hybrid island-French identity appears to have
found expression in the 1890s and early 1900s after a series of measures by the French
government angered the islanders, who at the time numbered slightly over 6,800. In the
latter decades of the nineteenth century, important educational reforms were taking place
in France. The Loi Jules Ferry, named after the French education minister, were changing
the way schools were run, by making schooling compulsory and nonreligious. This had
profound impact on schooling in the Metropole. It took longer however to gain approval in the colonies where instruction had traditionally been conducted by members of the clergy in small private institutions. St. Pierre and Miquelon were no exception.

Small Catholic “collèges” were established to cope with the steadily increasing population of the islands over the course of the century, and were run mostly by priests and monks for the boys’ schools, and nuns for the girls. The government had allowed them to take charge of education and left them mostly to their own devices; even then, the proportion of formally educated students was low. This arrangement remained in place even after the Ferry laws, though the colonial authorities began to try and implement reforms in the last years of the 1890s. However, all this changed in 1899, with the implementation of a nonreligious primary school, which would directly compete with the congregational ones.

In 1903, the laicization of all colonial schools, in line with Metropolitan France, was decreed, and in May of that year, all boys’ schools in St. Pierre and Miquelon were to be separated from their religious affiliations, and the Frères de Ploërml, who had been running many, were to cease their association with them at the end of the school year. In an effort to ease into the transition, the girls’ schools were not yet converted, being dissociated from the nuns running them two years later, in 1905. This forceful reorganization of education amongst an insular, rather conservative population created tensions between the population and an administration seen as “completely disinterested in

the fate of our unfortunate country”, as one inhabitant wrote. This issue, combined with an economic blow, rattled the territory.

While the education issue ruffled colonial relations, a decline in the islands’ economy generated a sense of crisis. The core problem arose from the efforts of the United Kingdom and France to negotiate a series of agreements, known as the Entente Cordiale, to improve their bilateral relations, create alliances and end centuries of rivalry. In North America the rapprochement in 1904 ended the exclusive rights of French and islander fishermen to the French Shore, creating a decline in the number of ships who used St. Pierre and Miquelon as a supply base, who had served as the bedrock of St. Pierre and Miquelon’s economy. More Canadian fishermen could now trawl the shore leading to smaller catches, and thus reduced the profitability for itinerant workers from France, who began to seek fortunes in other waters, neglecting the territory and with their absence removing much of the business and revenue of Saint Pierre. This led to the emigration of up to 2000 of the islands nearly 7000 inhabitants to the more prosperous United States, as related by inhabitants –most of these were young workers in search of greater opportunities. Two small island colonies at one time connected solely to France now had established economic and migratory connections to a neighboring nation that would in time emerge as the world’s leading power.


All these events coincided to create a movement among the islanders that sought to reject French sovereignty which some now viewed as inefficient and unconcerned with their wishes. In the middle of an economic slump, the government imposed new laws disbanding beloved religious institutions on the islands, which local inhabitants considered essential. This led to an overflow of resentment towards the colonial government in 1906, and demonstrations soon followed.

A subset of the population took this even further. At this time, the United States was seen as a symbol of liberty from tyrannical government as well as of prosperity. The mayor of Saint Pierre, Auguste Norgeot, once noted during a demonstration that “the people […] want to show that they desire freedom. […] they acclaim, at the American consulate, the representative of a people that know and respect liberty.” Supporters of the religious institutions therefore saw the United States as a possible ally in their plight, and even more, thought that annexation by the United States could solve their problems. Indeed, reports emerged that some protesters on the islands even flew an American flag as part of their demonstration. The New York Times reported on these protests, citing the religious dissatisfaction and failing cod seasons as their main cause, and speculating on their use to the United States, saying “The Pierrons have two grievances now, religious and commercial; and they have stirred these excitable colonists to their profoundest depths.” and that “for the United States the group [of islands] would be invaluable in these days when sea power depends so much on widely scattered and conveniently situated coaling stations.”

23 La situation à Saint Pierre et Miquelon, Le Monde Illustré, (26 Décembre 1908)


This view was echoed in a letter sent in 1906 by a local, Amédée Berthier, a particularly vocal critic of French rule, to the consul of the United States. Berthier expressed the grievances that he held against the colonial French government, accusing it of indifference, of contempt for the feelings and emotions of the inhabitants. He reproached “the indifference of the Metropole itself, that did not know how to, during the transfer of the French Shore to the government of his Britannic Majesty, salvage the interests of our main industry, cod fishing.” He also related rumors of “negotiations having been started for [the territory]’s transfer to Newfoundland, with which it has no common ways, morals and especially no sympathy”\textsuperscript{26}. He concluded by asking if the United States government would see acquiring the islands with a favorable eye. \textsuperscript{27}

\textit{Figure 4: Letter requesting annexation by the United States}

\textsuperscript{26} Note: all translations in this work from French to English are done by the author.

\textsuperscript{27} http://grandcolombier.com/2017/01/29/1906-un-commercant-sollicite-le-soutien-des-etats-unis/
This turn to the United States nonetheless registered as a minority view, held in earnest by some, but mostly a way of attracting the metropole’s attention. The inhabitants of the territory had never truly questioned their “Frenchness”. Even Amédée Berthier referred to Saint Pierre as France’s “oldest and Frenchest of colonies.” However, as insular people, they had begun to acquire and act upon a fiercely independent streak, and resented having such matters imposed on them by faraway bureaucrats. In the end, the consul’s response was one of polite interest, but expressing doubt at the wider popularity of such a project. Less than a year later the annexationist movement had died down, and it appears that its leaders feared it had been taken too far.

Despite the limited appeal of annexation, a territorial election in 1903 for the islands’ representative in Paris demonstrated how far the dissatisfaction had spread when annexationist Alcide Delmont was beaten by a small margin by the incumbent loyalist Louis Legasse. By 1907, as reported by the American consul, the situation had stabilized. When a rumor arose in 1906 about roping President Theodore Roosevelt, a well-known proponent of American expansion, as a write-in candidate into the election on behalf of the annexationists, the opposition accused the incumbents of a smear to “make them sound like anti-patriots.” They also made sure to forcefully reject any possibility of association with Newfoundland as well as the United States, echoing Berthier’s words by saying they’d always been in “incompatibility of moods” with the British Dominion. They simply wanted the best for the islands and would never act without a referendum on the subject.

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30 RESULT OF ELECTION AT ST. PIERRE AND MIQUELON, Candidate Favoring Annexation to the United States Beaten by Only a Few Votes, The San Francisco Call, December 29, 1903 (Delmont’s name misspelled as “Fremont”)

31 Le réveil Saint-Pierrais. N°11 – 22 décembre 1906
French governor Pierre Didelot maintained that talk of annexation to the United States or any other nearby state had been raised simply to bring attention to the economic plight of the islands.\textsuperscript{32} In some ways, the protests achieved that aim as St. Pierre and Miquelon, a French colonial backwater at the best of times, gained coverage in the \textit{Toronto Star}, \textit{the New York Times}, and the \textit{Washington Post}.\textsuperscript{33}

Headlines did of course not resolve either the economic or education issues. Activists in Saint Pierre nonetheless continued to defend their sense of identity as islanders. In 1908, after another clash with authorities over the status of schooling in the colony, a group of protesters once again hung an American flag outside the governor’s residence to protest his fining of administrators of a private religious school. While it might be tempting to dismiss the flag waving moment as inconsequential, the U.S. flag stood as a symbol, a public announcement that the islanders admired the notion of independence associated with a former British colony that had long since set out on its own. They successfully accomplished the recall of the governor, but the United States government protested the use of its flag in an action against the French government, which it considered an ally. Accounts relate that the new governor informed the American authorities that this was not a sign of a desire to become American, but rather as a view of the United States as a symbol of freedom and to emulate the authorization of free schools there.\textsuperscript{34}

\textsuperscript{32}http://grandcolombier.com/2017/02/12/1908-laffaire-du-drapeau-americain-vu-par-les-etats-unis-damerique/

\textsuperscript{33}RESULT OF ELECTION AT ST. PIERRE AND MIQUELON, Candidate Favoring Annexation to the United States Beaten by Only a Few Votes, The San Francisco Call, December 29, 1903 ; \textit{Pierrons Favor Annexation: Last Remnant of French Empire in America Anxious to Become a Part of the United States -- The Two Principal Reasons for Dissatisfaction"}. The New York Times. 23 August 1903. p. 28. ; \textit{Miquelon Islands Scare}, Toronto Star, December 5 1903

\textsuperscript{34}http://grandcolombier.com/2017/02/12/1908-laffaire-du-drapeau-americain-vu-par-les-etats-unis-damerique/ National Archives Identifier: 19355383 ;Container Identifier: Box 7, M862 Roll 273.;Creator: Department of State.
In the last analysis, economic and educational controversies in many ways reflected deeper differences in identity that separated French authorities and the local population rather than an outright political rebellion. Just a few years later, the islanders sent over a thousand soldiers to fight beside their French and colonial comrades in the trenches of WWI. One hundred and ten gave their lives to the cause. This out of a total population of
approximately 4,000. In the decade that followed the war, economic prosperity returned thanks to the islands role as a base for smuggling operations that transported alcoholic beverages to thirsty Americans during the US prohibition. Yet the feeling of that the islands interests might not always coincide with those of the metropole never completely dissipated. Nor did feeling that while the residents of Saint Pierre remained a part of France, they also remained apart, different in spite of their sameness. In the greater context of the French Empire, it showed that even this “Frenchest of colonies” wanted, while remaining a within the nation, to have its voice heard, and were willing to use geopolitical interactions and the threat of joining another country to be seen, to assert its power. And despite the highly asymmetric nature of power relations, for the first time for these islands, the discourse of power ever so slightly reversed, as even though the reforms still went through, these small islands were talked about throughout the world.

Figure 7: St Pierrais soldiers during WWI

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35 Sanguin, p. 18
World War II and the Christmas Liberation

If the decline of the fishing industry and the spat over secular education demonstrated how identity politics might shake the islands ties to France, the Second World War demonstrated how firm the Saint Perrais’s French identity remained. It also showed how the loyalty of this colonial outpost was dependent on more than the simple overlordship of a more powerful entity, but of a shared identity with an ideal. The Saint Pierrais were not simply a passive part of an imperial structure, simply following the policy of the official government, but one that identified more with the Free French republican ideal. The events of WWII afforded them the chance to show this allegiance, when given the chance, by rejecting one French sovereignty in exchange for another, still French, that better fit their own conception of themselves.

After a rapid invasion and defeat of its forces by Nazi Germany, France signed an armistice at Compiegne on June 22 1940, officially surrendering to the German forces. Under the leadership of Marshal Philippe Pétain, a new government was formed, based in Vichy, earning the state the name “Vichy France.” With over half of its territory occupied by Germany, the new state was little more than a Nazi puppet, at the mercy of Hitler’s bidding, with limited autonomy of its own. It did, however, retain authority over the governance of the French Colonial Empire, which included St. Pierre and Miquelon. Thus, while Axis troops never set foot on the islands, they officially became an outpost of the pro-Nazi collaborationist Vichy government. The island’s governor, Gilbert de Bournat, cemented the attachment when he determined to remain loyal to the Vichy government, despite the rapid formation of a Gaullist opposition after the “Appel du 18 Juin” from his exile in London. 36

36 Sanguin, p.20
These developments placed the British government, which controlled Newfoundland, in a difficult situation, having so near to its colony an outpost of a country occupied by an enemy. Britain recognized de Gaulle’s Free French Forces as the legitimate French government in exile, while the United States, a neutral force at the time, recognized Vichy France. Thus, the islands of Saint Pierre and Miquelon occupied an extremely precarious position as external trade remained suspended. The islanders were in fact threatened with famine until the governor managed to negotiate the unfreezing of funds from the US government, which had frozen all French accounts.  

The neighboring Allied countries uneasiness about the French presence in the islands still grew however, largely because of the presence of a large radio transmitter in the territory on the hills next to the capital of the islands. It had been installed shortly after WWI for communication with the fishing fleet as well as broadcasts of French programs. But now the station was used to spread pro-Vichy (and by extension, pro-Axis) propaganda to the neighboring North American territories. It could also be used as a relay station to give signals to U Boats active in the North Atlantic. This made it a direct threat to Allied operations. As a consequence, the Allied leaders began to consider directly intervening in order to remove the threat present there, to be undertaken by Canadian and British forces.

These events prompted action by the Free French government, based in London, which had become weary of British or Canadian annexation of the islands under the pretext

37 The territory had been dependent on subsidies from France itself, so renouncing Vichy France would cut them off completely and leave them in penury.  

38 Andrieux, p49.  

of liberation. The Free French could take solace in the fact that a majority of the islanders, emulating numerous other French colonies, such as Tahiti, Congo, Cameroon and many others, were sympathetic to Free France, despite being officially under the control of Vichy France. This further demonstrated the complicated nature of empire, even in colonies that better fit the “traditional” definition mentioned in the beginning. With the colonial power overrun and split into two factions, even colonies with less firm ties to the metropole than St. Pierre could still express sympathy towards it. The cause raised passions particularly amongst the veterans of WWI. The United States, however, even after its own declaration of war upon the Axis powers in December 1941, was opposed to any action in the islands without its express approval. It based this opposition upon the principles of the Monroe Doctrine, and thus communicated its disapproval of any plans.

All this came to a head on Christmas Eve, 1941. Led by Free French admiral Emile Muselier, one of de Gaulle’s officers, three corvettes, the Alysse, the Mimosa, and the Aconit, as well as the submarine Surcouf arrived at the archipelago. Muselier had been in negotiations with Canadian and British authorities to allow armed action in the territory, but strongly doubted he would receive permission. In a telegram, de Gaulle responded that he was to proceed to take St. Pierre “by his own methods” and that de Gaulle would take full responsibility. Thus the die was cast, and the ships docked into the port of St. Pierre, troops disembarked, and within twenty minutes, without a drop of bloodshed, the islands fell under the control of the Free French. The Governor, who refused to remain as a Free

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41 Rannie, p 87


French administrator, was arrested and eventually deported back to France, and Muselier named Captain Alain Savary as interim governor.\textsuperscript{44}

The troops were welcomed with cries of “Vive de Gaulle”, and enthusiastic manifestations of joy. Muselier himself recognized this, welcoming what he called the “oldest of the overseas territories” into the rank of the Allies.\textsuperscript{45} One inhabitant, Mireille Andrieux, later recalled “‘There was no trouble. Some people clapped. A girl kissed the first sailor who came ashore and later married him.’\textsuperscript{46} This enthusiasm was further confirmed in a consultation that was organized the next day, in which all men over the age of 18 were invited to participate. The results were overwhelmingly in favor of the Gaullists, with 783 votes in favor of Free France, 11 in favor of Collaboration with the axis, and 215 blank votes (presumed to have been in favor of a middle ground). \textsuperscript{47}

\begin{figure}[h]
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\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure8.png}
\caption{Admiral Muselier (in uniform, on left)}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{44} Sanguin, p. 23

\textsuperscript{45} R. Aghion, Epopée de la France combattante, (New York, 1943), 166-167.

\textsuperscript{46} Wre, Christopher S., \textit{A Bit of France off the Coast of Canada}, The New York Times, July 27 1986

\textsuperscript{47} http://www.cheminsdememoire.gouv.fr/fr/ralliement-st-pierre-et-miquelon-la-france-libre
This was a great coup for the Allies, being the first French territory to officially be liberated by Free France. Despite this, it received a great negative reaction from Cordell Hull, the American Secretary of State, a reaction welcomed by the Vichy government. Hull went so far as to label the troops the “so called Free French,” and raised the possibility of deploying U.S. Marines to oust them from the territory, a position which shocked nearly all those who read about it. However, the American public was enthused by this blow to Axis forces, and Hull’s position was condemned by newspapers such as the New York Times. The complex geopolitical reasons for Hull’s opposition were inconsequential to the general public, and would most likely have been unpopular amongst the populace of the island, which had so enthusiastically welcomed Muselier, according to Rannie. The diplomatic spat it caused was briefly severe, inflaming Allied authorities against de Gaulle, but the symbolism was powerful and the message the St Pierrais gave was clear: they had

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49 Natalia Starosina. Between Memory and Mythology, the construction of Memory of Modern Wars. (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015). p.6

50 Rannie Pp. 94-96
chosen Free France over Vichy France, a decision deeply symbolic in their view of their Frenchness.

Ira Wolfert, a journalist who had embarked on the *Surcouf* to report on the liberation, commented later that as opposed to the bitterness he later saw in France in 1944, “both sides recognized that the political argument was over and they could be Frenchmen together.”

This quick reunion of previously acrimonious and bitter opponents can be surmised to be the product of a population that had not actively been occupied by the Germans, as opposed to metropolitan France, and an insular population that had too much in common and was too small to be truly at odds with itself. However, the common thread that distinguished them from the surrounding Allies and that made them feel as a true community was their being French. They had been liberated by French troops, and were rejoining what they considered to be the true French government, an action which is significant in its demonstration of their feelings of belonging to the nation. Accounts relate that an old man could be heard walking down the streets shouting “Pétain, the damned pig, the old goat”, and as the troops arrived “Vive de Gaulle, at last I can say it, Vive de Gaulle!” Wolfert himself recalls cries of “Vive de Gaulle.”

The Saint Pierrais’s attachment to Free France, itself a government in exile whose claimed territory was mostly occupied by an enemy force, shows a loyalty to an ideal of France, not simply to a governing body that happened to be in control of their territory, and not a surrounding force that was itself already free of all occupation and actively fighting these enemy forces, as related through the BBC and American radio outlets. The United States, the previous object of annexationist ambitions, had remained neutral for a long period but was now actively engaged against Germany, and, if Cordell Hull is to be

51 Rannie p. 97
52 Richard Doody, *Over by Christmas, the Liberation of Saint Pierre and Miquelon*, http://worldatwar.net/article/miquelon/
believed, would have welcomed a move to occupy this last colony of France, indeed had set in motion plans to occupy it militarily. However, the population sided overwhelmingly through a plebiscite to declare its loyalty to de Gaulle, the man who sought to expel the Nazi forces from France and restore it to its former status.\textsuperscript{53}

At the same time, the immediate reconciliation mentioned by author William Rannie speaks to a solidarity or social cohesion that their distant insular status had bestowed upon them. They all identified as French, granted, but all also St Pierrais (or, for the small settlement there, Miquelonais). The absence on the islands of any true occupying forces, unlike the reality of the German occupation of France proper, denied the local population any temptation to collaborate. The Axis represented a theoretical entity, a nebulous enemy that should be opposed on principle, but not a reality of day-to-day life. Thus, the removal of Vichy rule on the islands came without the fierce reprisals against the \textit{collaborateurs} that unfolded in metropolitan France. It also removed the potential, or at least theoretical prospect of annexation undertaken in the name of liberation by either Canada or the United States.

The whole saga of World War II was quickly over in St. Pierre and Miquelon, the “fight” lasting a single day, and liberation occurring two and a half years before the rest of France. In their actions and reactions to the Free French troops, the islanders demonstrated an obvious loyalty to the French nation, not the Nazi puppet state, but instead Charles de Gaulle’s independent France. As will be covered shortly, they would later be congratulated for their loyalty. The rest of the war was relatively uneventful for the islands. It did however give the territory a chance to shine, and to earn a place in French history, and French hearts, that one might not expect from such a small and remote outpost. Once again it asserted its agency, and its identity within greater France, and were listened to – albeit sometimes

\textsuperscript{53} Loyalty to him in other colonies such as Algeria would be a contentious point in the decades following the war.
begrudgingly – by major allied world powers. They would next demonstrate the desires they had for their destiny a decade and a half later, in the years of decolonization of the late 50s and early 60s.

Figure 10: Admiral Muselier, seen on the right of the image 54

Changing Times and the end of the Colonial Empire

Following WWII, a growing sentiment spread around the world, that the rights of people to self-determination should be respected. Weakened by the conflict on their home territories, the colonial powers had trouble in many cases reestablishing or maintaining control over their colonial empires. The seeds of decolonization had been planted. Independence movements, many of which had been gathering momentum for decades, began to blossom throughout colonial empires, sometimes yielding the establishment of new nations and other times forcing colonial powers to modify imperial practices by granting varying degrees of autonomy. Traditional historiography often paints a portrait of imperial binaries – defined by colonial uprising and imperial resistance – in which either liberation or tyranny triumphed. Saint Pierre and Miquelon provides a small but existing example, amongst others in the French Empire, that other outcomes were possible, with the consent of the people in the territory.

In 1946, in order to attempt to “update”, and thereby maintain its colonial empire, France created the French Union, an ostensible federation of states under its rule, abolishing the “indigenous” label in many of its colonies, and granting them a form of representation. Four of the oldest colonies—French Guiana, Martinique, Guadeloupe, and Réunion—became Overseas Departments, fully integrated into the French Republic. A number of others, such as Indochina, remained Protectorates. The vast majority of the rest became Overseas Territories, entities still subject to French sovereignty, but with a local autonomous governmental apparatus. Saint Pierre and Miquelon fell under that status.

The Union lasted barely over a decade, before being replaced, upon the initiative of General de Gaulle, by the French Community in 1958. Upon his election as president, he instituted a new constitution for France, ushering in the Vth Republic.55 This new constitutional regime changed many aspects of the French government, and it contained a provision pertaining to all overseas territories, known as Article 76. This article allowed each territory three main status options to be decided by popular referendum: choose to be an overseas department (fully integrate into the French Republic), choose to maintain the status quo, or elect to become a member state of the Community (thereby gaining more autonomy). 56

In Saint Pierre and Miquelon, the new constitution easily won approval, garnering 98% of votes cast. 57 Through Article 76, the islands choose to keep their status of “Overseas Territory”, reasoning that the autonomy it granted was sufficient to cater to their local affairs while assuring that they remained a part of France.58 The arrangement also

55 Loi constitutionnelle du 3 juin 1958 portant dérogation transitoire aux dispositions de l'article 90 de la Constitution
56 Article 76 de la constitution du 4 Octobre 1958
57 https://www.sudd.ch/event.php?lang=en&id=fr011958
provided for the maintenance of financial subsidies from France, a vital consideration given the struggling nature of the fishing industry. Since its decline, the French government had been providing financial aid, through grants or tax breaks, to local industries in order to boost their chances of survival. Many of the other colonies chose to become States within the community, which led to the independence of the vast majority of them during the course of 1960, and the de facto demise of the French community. Territories, including St. Pierre and Miquelon, lived under a “General Council”, a form of government adopted by many departments of metropolitan France that enjoyed larger powers and leeway than its Mainland equivalents. At the same time, Saint Pierre and Miquelon, and subsequently other Overseas territories, also gained representation in the French parliament.\footnote{Olivier Guyotjeannin. Saint-Pierre et Miquelon. p70} These arrangements would not be without challenges in the eventful years of the 1960s.

I have stated before that while feeling unquestioningly French, the inhabitants of St. Pierre and Miquelon nonetheless possessed a streak of independence that sometimes caused friction with the centralized government in Paris. One such source of worry in the late 50s and early 60s was that of military service. St. Pierre and Miquelon had long been exempt from any form of conscription practiced in the Metropole, due to the small and precarious nature of the population on the distant islands. While many Saint Pierrais served in the French military, especially during WWII, all had done so as volunteers and none were called up like the rest of the French population. Thus, when conscription was reestablished in 1961 due to the anti-colonial war in Algeria, massive demonstrations erupted in St. Pierre.\footnote{France Ends Exemptions, New York Times, New York, N.Y. 13 Aug 1961} This was the first time in decades that France had sent conscripts to war, and the St Pierrais did not want to participate in what they felt was not their concern. Racial identity as well as military traditions played a role in the drama. As one older inhabitant colorfully,
and rather insensitively, termed the other French colonies, most of which had just been
granted independence, they were “colonies of Negroes and savaged that [government
employees] had to go civilize”, implying that they themselves were civilized Frenchmen.\textsuperscript{61}
This was a prelude to troubles that caused the mass resignations of several local
governments in protest during the 1960s.

Popular discontent with the Metropole was exacerbated by labor unrest: a
construction worker’s strike in 1964 and most importantly during a strike by dock workers
in 1965.\textsuperscript{62} These workers were essential to the handling of fish from the local fishing fleet,
which, despite having suffered hard times since the beginning of the century, was still very
active. In order to maintain peace, the governor arranged for riot control and law
enforcement to be sent from the Metropole in order to contain the population and avoid
demonstrations getting out of hand. They sent seventy gendarmes and a cruiser shocking
the local inhabitants by their surprise arrival.\textsuperscript{63}

The sudden appearance of French forces in fact flew in the face of a St. Perrais
identity that at the same time embraced Frenchness and island autonomy. In the words of
Saint Pierre’s mayor, who sent a telegram of protest to the Overseas Ministry, the dispatch
French forces qualified as a gross overreaction by the governor to legitimate protest. It
amounted to no less than an “invasion”, and “nothing justified it”. Emphasizing the island’s
Frenchness, the mayor pleaded that the territory had “always been faithful, for over three
centuries”, and that it “did not deserve this sanction.”\textsuperscript{64} This reaction demonstrates the

\textsuperscript{61} Amérique Française, Nov. 10 2017, \textit{Saint Pierre et Miquelon, La France sur un Caillou (1961)}, retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OteYR5t4vFY
\textsuperscript{62} Sanguin, p. 25-26
\textsuperscript{63} Ephémérides du 25 Avril 1965. \textit{éphémérides de St-Pierre et Miquelon}. Impr. du gouvernement, St-Pierre.
\textsuperscript{64} Text quoted in Sanguin, p.26
feelings of loyalty that the population felt towards France, a country whose home population was no stranger to demonstrations and protests itself. St. Pierre felt that it was making its voice heard and was profoundly vexed by the reaction of metropolitan authorities, prompting the islands to launch a general three-day strike, leading to parleys with the governor and a new local election. 65 This election put back into office most of the former councilors who had resigned, and who pledged to rid the island of what they qualified as incompetent metropolitan appointees. The people of the islands wished to be part of France, but on their own terms, led locally by people who understood their needs, wants and concerns, something they felt that the previous governors had failed to do. This led to the election of the first St Pierrais deputy to the National Assembly after its change in status, and a cooling down of tensions.

The identity pendulum soon swung back in the direction of unity with France. On July 20th, 1967, Charles de Gaulle became the first French leader to visit the islands when he stopped on his way to a state visit in Canada. During this voyage he infamously exclaimed “long live free Quebec”, angering Canadian authorities. This was seen by some, such as the Montréal Gazette, as possibly a reaction to pro-Quebec sentiments widespread in France, or possibly as retribution for slow Canadian recognition of De Gaulle two decades earlier during WWII.66 On the islands, however, the name de Gaulle raised no qualms. As one of the first territories to rally to his cause of Free France over twenty years previously, the general enjoyed a particular affection from the inhabitants. A sign of the lessening of the tensions that had existed in the previous half decade, news reports of the

65 Andrieux, p51
time estimated that of St. Pierre’s 5000 inhabitants, over 3000 came to greet the president. The mood perceived in the newsreels shows one of effusion, of emotion, and of joy.

De Gaulle himself was no less effusive in his praise for the islands during his official speech, qualifying them as “proof of France’s independence”, “France on the edge of America” and stating that “France loves you.” “You are here at the edge of America,” he told an adoring audience, “… and given that, even though the islands are not large, even though the population is not numerous, you are witnesses and artisans. France loves you and must take care of you!” This sentiment of reconciliation, indeed that the love had never

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been lost, simply strained for a time, found grassroots support on the islands. As William Rannie wrote in his 1968 book *Saint Pierre and Miquelon*: “throughout the years [the people of the islands] have proved their loyalty and willingness to play a full role in their country’s great national needs.” Yet in recognition of the islands independent spirit, Rannie iterated: “though they are indisputably French through and through, there exists a ‘St. Pierre mentality’ that oftentimes brings the people into sharp conflict with official policy.”

These words captured the essence of St. Pierre and Miquelon’s relationship with France, and the essence of the Saint Perrais identity. From the early 1900s, throughout the turmoil of the Second World War, and even in the midst of global decolonization in the 1960s, the island’s people have never had any true doubt about their belonging to France, yet they wished to do it their own way, conscious of the fact that they lived distant from the center of power in Paris, and that they ranked as only a small community. Their identity was one that acknowledged their overseas status, and that they had been at times unfairly dictated to. However they also embraced their Frenchness, as they never saw themselves as, indeed never had been, anything other than French since the colony’s founding. In their mind, they were little different from any relatively insular French settlement, with the exception that they remained simply further removed from the decision making places than most, and felt, probably rightfully, that they deserved to be a special case.

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69 Rannie, pp 138-139
A Reluctant Overseas Department

As noted previously, the overseas possessions of France had been divided into two main categories since the end of WWII: Overseas Territory and Overseas Department

The vast majority of France’s colonial empire had become Overseas Territories, which granted them a certain autonomy of status, and allowed France to apply specific laws to them, separate from general French legislation. Saint Pierre and Miquelon fell under this category. The second category applied to four overseas possessions: French Guiana, Martinique, Guadeloupe and Réunion. These four, some of the oldest of French overseas lands, were made Overseas Departments in 1946. This meant that they were, legally and politically, fully integrated into the framework of the French Republic to the same degree as the Metropole. They benefit from the same social and financial aids, such as social security, healthcare, unemployment or retirement benefits, but are also held to the same legal standards as any metropolitan subdivision. This gave France absolute control over these departments, however they were also considered to have been decolonized by the United Nations, as they were no longer subservient to the colonial power, but fully integrated into it.

These various power arrangements illustrate the uneven nature of the decolonization process, whereby former colonies might be integrated into and made a part of the controlling state. At times, these issues of status were even determined by local referendum. The relationship remained asymmetrical, certainly, but no more so than with any other subdivision in the country, even in European France. It also often reversed the flow of funds, with supporting infrastructure and population costing more than France received in return. However, as St. Pierre and Miquelon show in the 70s, the resulting power sharing fell far short of perfect. In fact, on occasion the French government tried to impose its views with less regard to local issues than it should have, and forced the territory to assert itself once more in a quest for a more reciprocal distribution of power.

71 https://www.insee.fr/fr/metadonnees/definition/c2031
The status of Overseas Department was proposed for St. Pierre and Miquelon by the minister for the outre mer, Olivier Stirn, in 1976. Many commentators viewed the proposed change of status as a mechanism for solidifying France’s position in the region in the face of the “Cod Wars” that arose once more between France and Canada. The Canadian government wished to restrict the amount of fishing off of its own shores, especially that by French vessels based in Saint Pierre, which had been allowed in the region since the accord of 1904 with the United Kingdom. Furthermore, the two countries had entered into a debate over the extent of their respective territorial waters. In 1972, they reached an agreement, whereby France relinquished its special rights in exchange for territorial recognition and the right to fish part of the year, but this still left certain territories in limbo, such as the Ile Verte, a small rocky island on the maritime border whose sovereignty France and Canada dispute. France therefore wished to unambiguously assert its rights in the region, and decided that fully integrating the territory into the republic was the solution.

The problem, predictable enough in light of history, was that the initiative was not fully welcomed on the islands themselves. The mayors of the settlements on Saint Pierre and on Miquelon organized an unofficial consultation of the population, asking them to express their opinions on the territory’s departmentalization. This referendum was disavowed by metropolitan authorities, and suffered great levels of abstentions, but offered three possibilities on the question of accepting Department status: “yes”, “no”, “yes under duress” (“Oui constraint et forcé”). 1515 people voted, of which 926 chose “yes under...

72 Guyotjeannin. Saint-Pierre et Miquelon. p71

duress”. 74 Both the lack of participation and the response of the voters show the lack of popularity for the idea on the island. In their imagination, the Saint Pierrais wanted recognition of their specific character, one that this change in status did not acknowledge. The “under duress” specificity of the referendum shows the last remnants of colonial power relations, one where the agency and initiative of the local people are not taken into account. Rather, through the threat of diminished benefits, their will is forced in the favor of the controlling power.

Beyond the fears of loss of their specific character, the “St Pierrais” nature of their society so treasured, more concrete fears abounded. There was a concern that there would be a flood of government officials from the metropole, which would glut the bureaucracy and, through their increased salaries, cause an inflation of local prices. One inhabitant commented at the time: “I wonder how the departmental structure would be able to adapt to our territory?”75 They also regretted the sentimental loss of such things as local stamps (local currency had been harmonized with France since the 60s), as well as the fear of floods of European fishing trawlers allowed thanks to the European accords.76

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74 Sanguin, p93
75 https://www.ina.fr/video/CAA7601845801/saint-pierre-et-miquelon-video.html
76 Guyotjeannin. Saint-Pierre et Miquelon. p71
Despite all these worries and protests, on July 19, 1976, the French parliament promulgated a law stating that “the Overseas Territory of Saint Pierre and Miquelon is erected as Overseas Department.” While a buffer period of a little under a year was granted, the territory was now expected to conform fully to metropolitan law, and the local government was to be modeled on that of the metropolitan departments, as well as the other four overseas ones. This immediately created problems, for the islands’ population at the time was barely 6000. In comparison, the next smallest population in an Overseas Department was in French Guiana which had ten times more inhabitants. This meant that the governmental apparatus was disproportionate to the population of the territory.

The new administrative regime also relied more than before on transplanted fonctionnaires (government officials) from mainland France, whose higher salaries and seeming detachment from local politics created a rift in the government with the native officials. The former General Council of the territory, moreover, enjoyed far greater powers of decision over its jurisdiction than the metropolitan equivalents, and thus had to redefine how it governed the archipelago. Perhaps most jarring, new status reduced the islands’ fiscal autonomy, which was previously mostly decided by the local assemblies but now had to be harmonized with metropolitan norms, despite the economic woes that the islands had been suffering, such as competition from outside fishing fleets and the decrease in fish stocks.

The situation was rather untenable, and was quickly streamlined in 1978 by regrouping certain competences, such as education regulation and inspection into single

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77 Loi n° 76-664 du 19 juillet 1976 relative à l’organisation de Saint-Pierre-et-Miquelon
78 Sanguin p.94
79 Idem
branches, where they would be separate in Metropolitan France. This combination allowed the decluttering to some extent, of the bureaucracy of the administration, but they were still, according to Sanguin, “very developed.”80 On the whole, departmentalization was a bad move on the part of France, who, hoping to solidify its grasp on this distant territory, mostly succeeded in annoying its population.

It has been shown that the St Pierraïs as a general rule, did not question their loyalty to France, loyalty they had demonstrated thirty-five years before during the Second World War, and then twenty years later during decolonization. As Joseph Lehuenen, a former mayor of Saint Pierre, said during the time of Britain’s Falklands War with Argentina, "I suppose the people of the Falklands want to remain English. Well, the people of St. Pierre want to stay French."81 However, one defining trait of this small community is their dislike of being dictated to as if their opinion did not matter. Author Aubert de la Rüe, had described the character of the islands as having a tendency to “exaggerate the importance of their islands”, even before the events of WWII. 82 This integration, “under duress”, into the French administration, in many ways eroded their capacity to distinguish themselves without leaving their mother country.

A series of local petitions calling on the reestablishment of autonomy, or “specificity” as islanders termed it, followed. Perhaps borne out of this insular, rebellious character, that they are the ultimate outpost of France before a largely Anglophone, and historically British, continent, they felt like they were not receiving the gratitude that they deserved. Much like when the Gardes Mobiles were sent in the previous decade, this loyal community was being told it could not be fully trusted, that it had to be kept under a closer

80 Sanguin, P 95


82 Aubert de la Rüe. *Saint Pierre et Miquelon*. p. 200
watch lest it slip away, that its economic prosperity was inexorably linked to its proximity to France. Marc Plantegenest, one of the representatives of the islands at the time, summarized local sentiment: "We are always afraid of deals made over our heads. They may be at our expense."\(^{83}\)

Figure 15: Fishing harbor of St. Pierre\(^{84}\)

After many years of discontent over the departmental status, as well as the administrative difficulties and inefficiencies that governing such a small territory with the same regime as a full metropolitan subdivision, the islands were granted a new status, that of “territorial collectivity with special status”, on June 11, 1985.\(^{85}\) This new status was not a reversion to the previous Overseas Territory. Rather, it represented something in between, which was believed to fit much better the particular nature of the islands, and was a compromise between the desires of the French government and the inhabitants. While conserving the benefits of being a department, in terms of representation and financial

\(^{83}\) Giniger, *Falklands Impasse*

\(^{84}\) [https://www.afd.fr/fr/page-region-pays/saint-pierre-et-miquelon](https://www.afd.fr/fr/page-region-pays/saint-pierre-et-miquelon)

\(^{85}\) loi no 85-595 du 11 juin 1985
subsidies, it most importantly recognized the specificity of the islands in character and nature. Most importantly, it returned to the territory powers of decision over local taxation, as well as a direct say in international dealings with its neighbor, without automatically having to submit to metropolitan law. Furthermore, it restored local authority to the head of the territorial council, who took on the rank of Prefect.86

Guyotjeannin wrote shortly after the “de-departmentalization”, as he termed it, was taking place, and therefore concluded that the consequences of such a change were not yet apparent, whether good or bad. However, the years that followed saw little to no contestation against public policies, demonstrating that the move was in the right direction. It allowed the “St Pierrais” character, so dear to the islanders, to be officially recognized while making the inhabitants feel that they were truly a part of France, not subjects but endowed with all the same benefits. This relatively small territory, with only 6000 inhabitants, had once again managed to be heard, to define its own place within the nation, one that fit its own image of itself, rejecting the imposed status of the controlling power. These islands would remain under this specific regime until 2003, when a new law regulating overseas France made them an “overseas collectivity” (Collectivité d’outre-mer), which changed little in the administration of the islands other than the terminology. They retain a small degree of autonomy to this day -they operate outside the European Union for example- yet are fully French (and by extension European) citizens, like all inhabitants of the Overseas possessions, have representatives in French parliament, and can vote for the French president. They are a remnant of Empire, no longer a colony but still a possession, a part of the French Republic. They are a remnant of empire but no longer a colony, who distinguish themselves both from metropolitan France and the rest of the

86 Guyotjeannin. Saint-Pierre et Miquelon. p72
overseas possessions, yet whose distinct identity is still anchored in this “St Pierrais Frenchness.”

Figure 16: View of the town of St. Pierre today

Figure 17: View of the Modern-day town of Miquelon-Langlade

Conclusion

Saint Pierre and Miquelon appear on the surface to have been geopolitical oddities, small islands, sparsely populated, on the doorstep of North America, ruled for 350 years by a nation 4000 kilometers away. They nonetheless demonstrate how messy empires always have been and how diffuse and malleable imperial connections can become.

Through the twentieth century the islanders resisted France’s imperial overreach, protested unwanted educational reforms, participated in two world wars but often on their own terms, and shaped and reshaped their political status with the homeland. Yet they have always retained an indisputable Frenchness to their character. They have never doubted that they belonged to France, that they are Frenchmen and women. They have transitioned from the status of being a colonial outpost to that of being a part of the nation—from French colony to French community like any other, and yet unlike any other.

The imagined community of St. Pierrais produced in fact a hybridized identity, part colonial and part autonomous, part French and part of French America. An examination of the complications that accompanied this cultural odyssey, illustrates that discourse between a power and its overseas possessions is not as simple, straightforward, and immutable as that of the traditional “colonizer-colonized” relationship. As early as the 1940s, Aubert de la Rüe described the “special ambiance on the islands.” He described them as independent and anti-authoritarian, and that the governors have sometimes found them “difficult to administer.”88 Guyotjeannin credits them with founding, without any plan or goal, a “preserved and original civilization”, a steadfast stubborn desire to remain, to endure.89 This is the very definition of the formation of a community, what Anderson termed an “imagined community.”

88 Aubert de la Rüe. Saint Pierre et Miquelon .pp 200-201
89 Guyotjeannin, Saint Pierre et Miquelon p. 128
I believe this to be a fair description of the islanders, who have survived so much yet have prevailed. While these islands remain much connected to other communities: the French homeland, other French territories, and migratory destinations in the nearby United States, they are also a community apart. Their identity is that of the last French outpost on a faraway continent, separate from their Anglophone Canadian neighbors, culturally distinct from the further francophone Quebecois, a small part of Europe in North America, with their own character that they constructed over centuries, a self-image of a distinct people of France. As colonists they bucked the trend toward independence that was so often the norm in the age of decolonization. This is the St. Pierre and Miquelon attitude that prevailed throughout the events of the twentieth century that have been recounted, and this is the attitude that they still embrace to this day, cheering the French team to the soccer World Cup, dancing under tricolor banners and flags on Bastille Day, enjoying wine and baguette at the nearest café, playing pétanque in the town square, all in all simply being French.\textsuperscript{90} In short, despite being far away from Paris, isolated and small, they remain, as Charles de Gaulle called them during his address on the island, \textit{la France au bord de l’Amérique}, France on the edge of America.

\begin{figure}[h]
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\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{Figure18.jpg}
\caption{A Bastille Day party in St. Pierre in 2016}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{90} Official W5, Sept. 29 2018, \textit{W5: France’s best-kept secret in North America I}, retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p2gMCuYY4rk
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After college, he worked for two years in the external affairs department of the St. Louis Symphony, and then for two further years as a research assistant at the Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum at Washington University.

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