

“NOTRE MICRO THE French ON CASTELLORIZO”

One of the more interesting chapters in the chequered history of Castellorizo is the period during which the island came under French rule both during and after the Great War. Many Castellorizians still recall elderly relatives speaking of those traumatic years, when French authority brought with it the dangers of modern warfare, while endowing the island with the benefits of its first experience of ‘Western’ rule. It is these years that are the subject of this short piece written to coincide with the anniversary of two momentous events which serve as bookends to the French experience - the overthrow of benign, but nevertheless persistent, Turkish rule in 1913; and the handover of the island by the French navy to the Italians in 1921.

The French arrival

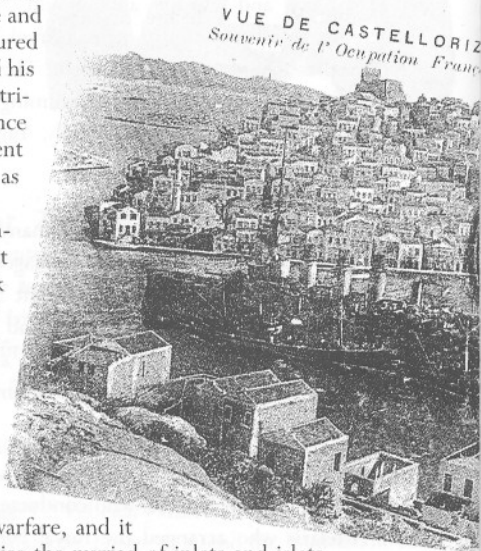
The French navy first arrived on Castellorizo on 28 December 1915, (see photographs of the event), after months of intrigue and manoeuvring, to find a confused population which had endured mixed fortunes since the expulsion of the Turkish *kaimakam* and his garrison almost three years before. The Greek flag had been triumphantly unfurled on 1 March 1913, but an ambivalent stance on the part of the Greek government had led to disenchantment with Athens. Instead, the island had slid into internal strife as factions mirroring the *dichasmos* in Greece developed.

For some, union with Greece was the only alternative after centuries of Turkish rule, despite the economic deprivation that it would entail without access to Anatolia. For others, the Greek government had been a disappointment after the islanders’ bold act of defiance to the Turks, and a place on the side of the Allies, with all its promise of prosperity and security, was hard to refuse in an increasingly hostile region. These irreconcilable views were to underpin much of the factional bickering which marred the brief interlude between Turkish rule and the arrival of the French forces.

French aims were primarily strategic in the early days of the occupation. Submarines were a new and feared weapon of warfare, and it was suspected that the Germans, with Turkish aid, would utilise the myriad of inlets and islets along the southern shores of Turkey as shelters for their squadrons. With its close proximity to Turkey, and its abundant harbour, Castellorizo was an attractive addition to French possessions in the Near East. Local strife made the takeover even easier, as the pro-French faction, led by the energetic Ioannis Lakerdis, engineered events on the island with aplomb.

“The lobster’s claw”

The strategic aims of the occupation were only ever partially fulfilled. Occasional raids on the Turkish coast by militia groups comprising French troops and local *pallikaria* served as an annoyance rather than a calamity for the Turks, while a string of debacles, like the sinking of the British seaplane-carrier, the *HMS Ben-My-Chree*, in the island’s harbour, exposed Entente inexperience in this part of the world. Nevertheless, the French proudly nicknamed the island “la pince du homard” - the lobster’s claw - not only because of its shape, but also because they saw it as snapping away at Turkey’s underbelly.



D-GIBRALTAR”

TELLORIZO 1915-1921

Bombardments and epidemics caused untold misery to the island's residents during 1917. “*Epese katara*” the women cried as they camped huddled on the island's heights during the bleak months of April and May. Many left for Australia during these difficult days, most never to return again. Others persisted, but only to be conscripted for the construction of the famous Navlakas road, a remarkable feat of engineering, that connected the Navlakas ‘fjord’ with the plateau of *Ayio Yiorgi*, to enable the placement of the latest weaponry the French could muster to silence the Turks across the water.

“The pearl of the Levant”

But the war was progressing well for the Allies, and peace returned to the island by the middle of 1918. French minds now turned to a more permanent presence on Castellorizo. Under a newly-installed governor, Raymond Terme, the trappings of French colonialism were introduced. A papier-maché *Arc de Triomphe* was erected in the main square, while pine trees were planted

along the *Mandraki* to lend a *provençale* ambience to the town. Castellorizo was now nicknamed “la perle du Levant” - the pearl of the East, as dreams developed in the French navy of islands like Castellorizo buttressing French interests in Syria and Lebanon.

But a more eager colonial power in Italy, already vested with the Dodecanese since 1912, was not to let this opportunity pass it by. Disinterest in Paris about the island's ultimate fate was enough to cast aside the Navy's hopes about the island's future under France and, on 1 March 1921, the Italian forces arrived with much pomp and ceremony. A confused and beleaguered population watched as one occupying power replaced another.

French rule on Castellorizo was to last only a little less than six years, but its imprint has remained. The island's cemetery still contains the segregated, albeit overgrown, section for French troops killed in action, and the Navlakas road still zigzags its path up the steep incline from the bay below. Most surprisingly, it is in the records the French left for posterity that we find the most enduring and moving testament to the experiences of the local population during those years. Among countless reports and jottings of the French staff, is a bundle of petitions from Castellorizians seeking the governor's permission to leave the island for a better life abroad. For example, we learn that

Polyxeni Kyriakou Manola departed the island in May 1918 for Perth, where

she hoped to rejoin her husband Kyriakos, then operating the ‘London Cafe’ at 148 William Street. Others, like Konstandinos Kalaitis, travelled to Darwin where work opportunities had been reported by earlier eager travellers. Still others journeyed to Alexandria or Port-Said, while a few ventured as far afield, as Djibouti or Malawi.

It is in these pages that the history of Castellorizo comes to life. It remains an ironic but sobering thought that without the fastidious energy of the island's French occupiers these precious records would have been forever lost to us.

