

IN THE SHAQOW OF PARIS

Yann Fouéré, LL.D., L-ès-L, Dip. Pol. SC, Member of the Central Committee of
P.O.B.L (Parti pour l'Organisation d'une Bretagne Libre)

The least which can be said is that, in the shadow of Paris, Brittany is a completely unrecognised nation; or as the Italian author Sergio Salvi puts it a "nazione proibite" a forbidden nation.. That was not always the position of Brittany in history, but only since its forcible annexation to the French State during the French revolution.

During the Roman times Brittany did not exist : it was called Armorica and its territory was populated by Celtic Gaulish tribes. History has kept thanks to Julius Caesar and 'de bello gallico' the names of some of them and especially that of the Veneti or Venetes. The Bretons were at the time in Britain. It is only as from the IVth century A.D onwards to the VIth or VIIth century, that forced away by the pressure of Saxon and Germanic invasions in Britain, they started crossing the channel (Breton Sea) and settled down in Brittany, to which they gave its new name, bringing with them their Christian religion, their loose form of political organisation, their language, the Breton, which was probably not completely different from the Gaulish languages still in use in spite of the Romanisation of the land, and society. In Brittany therefore another Celtic people added up to the Celtic stock of the local inhabitants.

That was not the case in what is now called France, At about the same time as Bretons settled down in Brittany, Germanic tribes started invading Gaul, one of which, the Franks, were going to give its name to France. Violent clashes between Bretons and Franks began to take place as from the 6th century onwards, for the possession of the country. The western part of Brittany however was already safely into the hands of the Bretons and the Frank kings or emperors were never able to impose their authority over them. Brittany was not part of the Carolus Magnus empire and the Emperor had to create the "Marches de Bretagne" on the Eastern borders of Brittany, and to give his nephew the legendary Roland, the task of defending them against Breton incursions.

Thanks to decisive victories over the Frank Emperor Charles the Bald in the middle of the 9th century the Breton prince Nominoë succeeded in unifying the Bretons under his authority and laid down the foundations of an independent Breton state. He was proclaimed king of Brittany and its successors Erispoe and Salomon extended the limits of their state to part of western Gaul. Erispoe called himself Prince of Brittany and of part of Gaul.

Breton independence was threatened by the Norman invasions in the 10th century. Alain Barbe Torte who had to take refuge at first in Britain succeeded in conquering back his kingdom and established Brittany within the territorial limits and borders it has kept ever since : the struggle against the Normans had bound closely together the Breton speaking Bretons.

And the gallo-romans who were living in the eastern parts of Brittany, and did not speak breton. Alain and his successors were called as from now on Royal Dukes of Brittany and ruled over an independent Duché de Bretagne, independent from both France ~~and~~ Normandy ~~and~~ ~~Brittany~~. It is worth mentioning that many Bretons followed William the Conqueror when he invaded England. Historians dispute whether the Breton contingent in his army ^{made} 20 or 30% of its armed forces. From the Doomesday book it can be ascertained that over 10% of William's followers who settled in Britain were of Breton origin: it was for them a homecoming rather than a conquest.

As from the Xth century onwards Brittany led an independent existence under its own sovereigns and little by little a modern state was built up with its own institutions, its own common laws and political organisation, and also with its own language as breton was spoken by the majority of the population. It had been however as from the start a bilingual state, French being spoken in the eastern parts of the country.

Brittany succeeded in maintaining ~~its~~ independence in spite of the fact that France and England wanted to extend their domination over it. The Breton sovereigns played very cleverly on their rivalries, allying some time with one and sometime with the other. They managed thus to remain neutral during the Hundred year war. Peace was of course very ^{important} beneficial to Brittany which became a prosperous small state with an ~~and~~ ~~large~~ merchant navy. Asked to mediate in a law dispute between the King of France and the Duke of Brittany Pope Pius the 2d ruled that "The king of France is emperor in his kingdom: but similarly the Duke of Brittany is King in his dukedom".

France and Brittany developed different systems of political organisation and government. While the French monarchy evolved towards an absolute one and a centralistic system of government and law, the Breton monarchy evolved towards a constitutional monarchy. While in Brittany the powers of the sovereign was always ~~shared~~ shared with the States of Brittany, which represented the nation, and met at regular intervals to vote taxes and give their advice on the ruling of the country, the French kings were dispensing more and more with the ^{advice} of the États Généraux, which practically ceased to meet. In France the will of the king, and the decree of his ministers was deemed to be law and no limit was set to its scope and powers. In Brittany the Duke could not dispense with the advice of the States as politics finances and administration came under their scrutiny. In the 15th century a Court of Justice was put up under the name of Parlement de Bretagne and was to become a kind of constitutional and administrative and judicial High Court. The Loi salique, which prohibited the female heirs of the kings to succeed to the throne, did not exist in Brittany where the eldest child whether male or female was called to succeed the dead sovereign.

The independance of Brittany however was more and more difficult to maintain. England 'influence, territorial poessions and power on the continent were delining. France pursued an expansionist policy and managed to take ppsession, by diplomacy and wars of Toulouse, Langeudoc, Dauphiné, Burgundy. The turn of Brittany was soon to come. In 1488 the breton army was defeated at St Aubin du Cormier and French troops invaded the country. The Young Anne who was to be the last Duchess of Brittany tried to find help against the French by marrying by proxy Maximilien, the Emperor of Austria. This led to renewed hostilities and in the end Anne was constrained to marry the French King Charles the VIIIth, in order to avoid devastation of her country. She thus became Queen of France, while keeping her title of Duchess of Brittany. Upon the death of Charles the VIIIth she married his successor Louis d'Orléans (Louis the XIIth) while ensuring that Brittany would in future remain an independant country. When she died however her daughter Claude married the future French King Francois the Ist. It seemed that Brittany after all was to become part of the French kingdom.

The union with France however could not be complete if the States of Brittany did not agree to it. This they were not very keen to do on account of the differences in laws and government between France and Brittany. Wisely the French monarchy left two decades elapse, during which Brittany could again enjoy peace. Meanwhile negotiations were taking place between the most influential Bretons and the ministers of the French kings. In 1532 the states agreed to the union with France provided Brittany would keep full autonomy, i.e. that finances, vote of taxes, administration, justice ~~would~~ will remain to the hands and responsibility of the States as it was done before under the Duke of Brittany; France would assume responsibility for foreign affairs and defense. The contribution of Brittany to the French budget will be agreed ^{at each of their annual meetings} upon by the States and the King of France will be represented in Brittany by a Governor. Francois I^{er} agreed to these conditions and confirmed them by an official bill. These agreements are known in history as the Treaty of Union between Brittany and France. As from 1532 therefore Brittany became an autonomous Province within the French kingdom: it was to enjoy this "home rule" until the French Revolution, in spite of many conflicts and clashes with the French sovereigns intent on getting more money and more powers. A popular rising in 1675 was ^{harshly} and cruelly crushed by French troops.

The Bretons were not at first hostile to the French revolution: one of the main aims of its promoters was in fact to extend to all France the rule of a constitutional monarchy which Brittany already de facto enjoyed. but it took rapidly a new turn when the French Assembly started to put up a centralised system of administration and government, suppressing all local autonomies that many Provinces still enjoyed within the French kingdom. The States of Brittany were forbidden to meet again and the Breton Parliament, which had refused to accept the violation and the suppression of the rights of the Breton nation, as embodied in the 1532 Treaty, were

Was dissolved and its members put under arrest. A popular rising was soon to take place: it had been prepared by Armand de la Rouerie, called Colonel Armand, a grade he had conquered when fighting with American Insurgents during their war of independence. This rising is known in history as the "Chouannerie" and lasted for several years as from 1793. When peace was restored under the French Emperor Napoleon, Brittany had lost its autonomy; its territory had been divided into five French ~~départements~~// "Départements" ruled by a Prefect, under a highly centralised system of administration. In spite of many changes of political regimes none of them released the grip of the centralised power during the 19th century. Election towards the end of the century of local councils for the communes and the départements, changed little to the system as they were given very limited powers in the administrative and financial fields.

Breton revival, as it happened for all the "minorities" or small nations of Europe which had been ~~annexed~~ merged into bigger states, ~~looked at~~// ~~first~~ was at first, poetical, literary and linguistic. At the very end of the 19th century the first Breton "regionalist" organisations were born. They advocated a general reform of the French state, by which Brittany and other regions would be given a certain amount of autonomy, especially in administrative and cultural matters. Some advocated the granting to Brittany of a special political, financial and administrative "Statut" As nothing was forthcoming the first "separatist" party was born in 1911.

The movement for political autonomy resumed after the 1st world war. Regionalists, as well as autonomists and federalists joined in it. Cultural revendications were in the forefront advocating the teaching of Breton and of Breton history in the schools. Local councils supported the cultural movement. At the eve of the second world war however nothing had been obtained in the field of regional autonomy nor in cultural matters: the teaching of the Breton language which was spoken at the time by about one million native speakers, out of a total population of three millions for the whole of Brittany, was still forbidden in the schools. The policy of "assimilation" was still going on, patiently and relentlessly pursued by all the French successive governments.

~~On~~ Two days before the second world war broke out two of the leaders of the Breton national Party fled to Germany, in the hope of obtaining, in case of a French defeat, independence for Brittany. Their hopes were frustrated when, after the collapse of France and the armistice ~~concluded~~// signed by Marshal Pétain, a policy of collaboration was inaugurated between the French government of Vichy and Germany. No support being forthcoming from ~~the Germans~~ nazi Germany the only thing the Breton national party could do was to resume its fight for independence, with no hope of immediate success as long as franco-german collaboration was going on.

Faced with this opposition the Vichy government decided to accept some of the demands put forward by the regionalists. Teaching of Breton history and of the Breton language in the schools were authorized, not without some restrictions and inadequacies however. A Breton regional assembly was

created under the name Comité Consultatif de Bretagne, its members were named partly by the Prefect, partly by the Breton regionalist bodies. But it had only consultative powers in the cultural field. In spite of this it obtained some practical results. But all of these were wiped out after the Liberation of France when the new governments engaged in a policy of hard repression against the Breton national movement and its activists. Many of them were imprisoned in concentration camps. An international enquiry led by the Welsh national Eistedfodd came to the conclusion that having had a Breton activity during the German occupation was enough to be put into custody. Many activists were forbidden to live in Brittany and had to go into exile in Paris or in foreign countries. Some who had openly sided with the Germans were harshly sentenced ~~and some executed~~.

Political activity being rendered more or less impossible the Breton movement concentrated at first in the defence of economic and cultural interests. The CELIB (Comité d'études et de liaison des intérêts bretons) was put up in 1951 and the creation in 1957 of the Mouvement pour l'Organisation de la Bretagne marked a return to some political regionalist and federalist action.

The policy of strong centralisation of the successive French governments had been very detrimental to Brittany. ~~XX~~ It was this policy which was responsible for the ruin of the industrial fabric of Brittany during the 19th century and of its merchant navy during the 19th century. Within the limits of a French continental state and market Breton agriculture could not ~~prosper~~ prosper nor develop. Emigration was for many Bretons the only solution. At the beginning of the 19th century, and over a territory very similar in size, Holland and Brittany had about the same population. At the present moment Holland has ~~about~~ over three times the population of Brittany.

While, after the second war and the beginning of the common market, France came to be more and more conscious of the necessities of regional devolution, it still refuses to consider that the measures of regional autonomy ~~should be~~ and the extent of local powers should be wider for "Regions" which are in fact small nations like Brittany, Corsica, Alsace, than for ordinary French regions which have for instance no language of their own and no strong specific interests to defend. The Regions with special Statutes like they exist in Italy, on account of their different languages or geographical position, are completely adverse to the traditional centralist and uniformised conceptions of the French as regards administration and government. They are inspired more with theoretical ideas than with realities. If therefore some administrative or cultural autonomy is to be granted to the regions it should be the same for all of them; Thus the Regions they created have divided the Breton territory, leaving the most prosperous of the départements that of Loire Atlantique outside the administrative region Bretagne. They similarly divided Normandy Corsica alone previously divided into two départements in spite of its small size was granted the privilege of being considered one region.

It is true to say that the ^{coming into power} advent of a socialiste government in 1981 in France, marked some progress towards decentralisation and devolution of power. The President elected of departmental (counties) Councils were granted some executive powers which were formerly concentrated into the Prefect(ships). Such became the case also ^{for} of the Presidents of the Regional Councils. Election of regional assemblies by universal suffrage was promised: but this promise was not put into effect before the 1st Regional elections which were held on the same day as the general elections for the French Parliament, thus depriving them of their full meaning.

In cultural matters some concessions were obtained towards the teaching of breton in the schools and some help given to voluntary elementary and primary schools put up by the Breton association Diwan. All this however remain very insufficient: the policy of education is still completely centralised by the French Ministry of Education and no significant decisions can be taken at local level. The place occupied by the breton language in the mass medias, radio and television is still ridiculously ~~low~~ small. And Brittany remains divided into two regions the "departement" of Loire Atlantique ~~is~~ still being part of a french region.

Somebody has said that France is the only dictatorship elected by universal suffrage. The least which can be said is that as far as regionalism and devolution of power is concerned France is left far behind by Germany, Italy and Spain, to mention only the biggest of the old nation states of Europe.

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