

The Archipelago of La Maddalena, Sardinia (Italy)

Before the Berlusconi administration decided to relocate it to the city of L'Aquila, the 35th meeting of the G8 group scheduled for July 2009, was originally planned to be held in the Archipelago of La Maddalena, located offshore the northeastern corner of Sardinia. For two years, hundreds of construction workers labored to restore the vast area of a decommissioned Italian Navy arsenal for the meeting. The massive restoration project was part of a larger re-conversion plan through which the Region of Sardinia and the Italian government intended to revitalize the economy of the archipelago after the decommissioning of the Italian Navy arsenal in 1994 and then a base for nuclear submarines installed by the U.S. Navy in 1972.

Today La Maddalena is host to one of Italy's largest marine preservation parks and is marketed as a prime tourist destination in a "pristine" and "wild" corner of the Mediterranean Sea. This marketing narrative, however, belies the archipelago's historical role as a strategic platform for military-industrial projects of the Italian state before and during the Cold War.

Before the occupation of the Piedmontese army on October 1767, the islands between Sardinia and Corsica were populated by small nuclei of families clustered in two communities living in the internal areas of La Maddalena and Caprera, protected from the incursions of pirates who often stationed inside the coves of the archipelago, hiding from other ships and shielding against the strong winds blowing through the strait of Bonifacio. The families were originally from the inland areas around the town of Bonifacio, on the southwestern coast of Corsica.

Since the beginning of the 19th century, the presence of the Sabaudian troops and the relocation of the Sabaudian Navy headquarters to the archipelago from La Spezia, then occupied by Napoleon's army, introduced major social, cultural, and economic changes. Many Maddalenini left their original occupations and enrolled into the Navy, and later started their careers as either commercial patrons or entrepreneurs who exploited local resources, such as the extraction of granite, which until WWII they exploited on an industrial scale and exported internationally. This process of transformation culminated towards the end of the nineteenth century, when the Italian Navy established one of the most strategic naval bases of the country (the other three being at La Spezia, Livorno, and Taranto).

The establishment of the naval base and the arsenal not only created a heavy economic dependence on the military-industrial sector but also allowed linguistically, culturally, and economically divided groups, who arrived through several waves of migration, to generate a unifying sense of collective identity, which still holds today, despite the dramatic down-sizing of the Italian Navy presence. The local dialect, the *isulanu*, reflects the blending of different identities (Corsican, Genovese, Gallurese, and Pontina), all amalgamated through Italian, the official language imposed by the Navy both on board its ships and inside the military arsenal.

In 1972, the Italian government and the U.S. administration undersigned a secret bilateral agreement to host a base for the repair and refit of nuclear submarines. The official mission of the U.S. Navy was to monitor the activities of Soviet submarines in the Mediterranean area, and after the Cold War the base served as strategic node for launching missions into the Persian Gulf. In February 2008, following a major

reassessment of its global basing strategy, the Bush Administration decided to close the installation.

Until the mid-1990s the Italian Navy directly employed over 30% of the local labor force and the arrival of the U.S. Navy in the mid-1970s augmented even more the importance of the military economy, directly through the employment of local labor on the base, and indirectly through house rentals, services, and local consumption.

Both the downsizing of the Italian Navy presence and the departure of the U.S. Navy dramatically impoverished the local economy, leaving many Maddalenini without a source of income. Despite attempts to reconvert the archipelago into a tourist-oriented economy, the transition encountered numerous obstacles, while local and regional authorities got involved into legal litigations with Italian environmental authorities for the delays in the environmental restoration of areas of the archipelago formerly occupied by the Italian Navy arsenal.

The economic and the cultural crisis following the de-militarization of La Maddalena entailed a collective struggle to reassess the sense of identity forged over the past two centuries. The disappearance of the symbolic and economic center of gravity of the local community exacerbated debates over the future of the islands, where the impressive constraints posed by the regulatory prerogatives of national authorities (military, environmental, and political) leave the local administration with almost no room and resources for self-determination. In this context a group of local historians founded a committee for the study of the archipelago's past, which has produced an extraordinary number of books and journal articles, almost all published by a local publishing house. The massive effort of local historical production reflects the struggle of the community along the way to its slow and uncertain path to reconversion. Despite the innumerable difficulties related to the insularity of the archipelago and the cut of important services operated by the Region of Sardinia and the state, new initiatives are creating the premises for the development of a blue economy, centered on the preservation and the exploration of the natural marvels included in the national park. Today private entrepreneurs and university researchers are investing in eco-tourism activities such as whale watching, diving, and hiking through the numerous trails connecting the old military forts blended with the granitic rocks of the islands.

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