

The Napoleon Series

Buonaparte and the Ajaccio Easter Troubles, 1792: the Verdict of Arthur Chuquet (1853-1925)

By [John Hussey](#)

Buonaparte at this time was a Lieutenant in King Louis XVI's Artillery, absent without authority from his regiment in France, and now living in Corsica as second Lt-Colonel of a battalion of local volunteer national guards. A street argument in Buonaparte's natal town of Ajaccio at Eastertime 1792 turned into a brawl in which shots were fired. Some national guards intervened and two (Rocca Serra and Renucci) were struck down. Officers, among them Buonaparte, were driven off.

With such disorder some reaction was inevitable, but the question is whether that reaction was proportionate or excessive. What Buonaparte did on his own initiative was to move his national guard battalion into some buildings and open fire on the churchgoers on Easter Sunday, killing several civilians. Buonaparte then laid siege to the town. He tried to make the regular garrison in the citadel revolt against its commander and support him in the draconian punishment he sought to inflict. Without any right or permission he used the name of the national hero Paoli as cover in justifying his actions. The affair lasted three days, ending with Buonaparte imposing terms on the town. The incident is not widely known although Correlli Barnett in his interesting character study, *Bonaparte* (1978), 'Prologue', pp.11-14, concludes that Buonaparte's tactics 'could hardly be bettered by any modern political militant, least of all in the unhesitating assertion of the moral initiative by means of loading his opponents with the blame for conflict he himself had provoked'.

The account printed here is by the noted Napoleonic scholar Arthur Chuquet (1853-1925), who with Houssaye, Masson, Sorel and Vandal did much to develop Napoleonic studies in France at the end of the 19th Century.

In his 3-volume study, *La Jeunesse de Napoléon* (Paris, 1898), vol 2, pp.290-92, Chuquet writes as follows of the investigation ordered by the provincial directory [all words in square brackets are by John Hussey]:

The opinions of the provincial directory were suggested to them by Napoleon. The Lt-Colonel of volunteers [Buonaparte], ever ready to take up the pen, had hastened to produce a justificatory report [in Italian]. In this memorial, skilful but long, verbose and with loaded words and phrases, Napoleon accused the population of Ajaccio, which seemed to him "composed of cannibals", to have on 8 April maltreated, vilified, and murdered the volunteers. He insisted that the national guards in pay were forced to defend themselves against people who had for long premeditated their plot, and that it was the Ajaccians who on 9 April had fired first, and that three shots fired at a room in the Seminary [held by the national guards] broke two bottles and damaged a mattress! But he

forbore to say that the volunteers' fusillade had caused deaths and injuries. He concluded that the battalion had not obeyed the demands of the municipality because the latter was in the hands of brigands who placed the audience chamber under siege with their war cries and dictated fanatical resolutions, because the *procureur-syndic* Coti had ordered the national guards to keep their posts, because the first of laws was the safety of the country, and the safety of the country required that the volunteers should stay in their positions while awaiting the arrival of the Departmental commissioners. "In the terrible crisis facing us we needed energy and audacity; we needed a man who – if we asked him after his intervention to swear that he had broken no law – would be in a position to say with Cicero or Mirabeau *'I swear that I have saved the Republic'*".

That man was - or would become – Napoleon. He had no fear in breaking the law to attain his ends, in leading the departmental directory to punish the fanaticism and superstition of the Ajaccians, in slipping his volunteers into the citadel [garrisoned by Colonel Maillard and the monarchy's regular Limousin regiment]. Thus there is something both impressive and tragic about this episode in Napoleon's history. One senses that, carried away by ambition, this young man of 23 will not draw back from anything. To incite the Regiment Limousin to revolt, by his exhortations to make [the abbé] Coti set himself up as head of Police, to call his adversaries brigands, to fire on the population, kill or wound six to eight people, lay siege to the town and terrorise it, deprive it of flour and wood, deliver over its fields to the ravages of shepherds and peasants, and, sword in hand, impose on the town of his birth his own wishes and conditions in a formal treaty – that is what Napoleon did under cover of avenging the death of Lieutenant Rocca Serra and the wounds of Private Renucci! What had become of the sincere youth who, six years earlier, had condemned Turenne and Condé for bringing about civil war [in the 17th Century] and creating disaster? . . .

What indefatigable activity and ability, what resource he deployed in those days of trouble and conflict, adding audacity to ruse, and violence to his speech, seeking to mislead Maillard [commanding the Limousin regulars] and subvert the citadel's garrison, terrifying the citizens, pulling together the news from all quarters, writing to his brother, to Coti, to the town council, to the commandant of the place, drawing after him his colleague Quenza [his senior, first Lt-Colonel commanding the local national guard], and despite his youth holding together, whether well or badly, the mob of volunteers and national guards!

At one place in his memorial he wrote of the municipal officers of Ajaccio that "their souls were too narrow to rise to the height of great affairs", but in so writing he was thinking of himself and the role he had played, the attitude that he had taken, and believed himself to have attained the height of great affairs. But these "great affairs" appeared to most people cruel affairs of "deplorable scenes" and "misfortunes" of which he had been the author and instigator.

Paoli [the acknowledged national hero and 'Father' of Corsica, now a French general], so soon as he heard the first news of the riot, did not hesitate to throw the blame on the departmental Directorate. "When the government", he wrote, "is led by young inexperienced people, *giovani inesperti*, it is not surprising that inexperienced little boys, *ragazzoni inesperti*, are destined to command the national guards". But to disapprove of Napoleon would mean disapproving Quenza, of whom Paoli was fond, and after all, the *Father* was not altogether displeased with the rude lesson that the Ajaccians had received. What did hurt him was the misuse of his name by the two Lt-Colonels [Buonaparte and Quenza]. Had they not, in the letter to the town council demanding the withdrawal of cannons, claimed that they were sticking to their posts by the positive orders of the general himself? Joseph [Buonaparte] wrote to his brother, "I am worried that should that letter become public - and thus prejudice the good name of General Paoli - he will clear himself, and then how will you look?" Ajaccio did not pardon Napoleon for the three days of agony and peril that, in Napoleon's own words, overturned the town and almost ruined it.

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