Chapter 4

Madagascar: Revolt and Repression
1947–1948

Madagascar, another prized French possession, was conquered by France in 1885. Its rebellion in 1947 was brutally repressed by the French forces. Situated in the Indian Ocean, the ‘Great Island’ (la grande ile), as called by the French, finally became independent in 1960.¹

Brief Historical Notes

The Malagasy are a mixture of Asians and Africans.² Most immigrants were Malay-Polynesians, who crossed the Indian ocean from Indonesia and South-East Asia, but some came from eastern Africa as well. The island was ‘discovered’ by the Portuguese in 1500. French sailors landed on the island in the 16th and 17th centuries. In 1810, the Malagasy monarch Radama I conquered two-thirds of the territory. With British support, he introduced Christianity, encouraged education and promoted literacy. The British

¹ Madagascar’s area is 587 041 square meters.
signed in 1817 a treaty of friendship with Radama I, recognized as King. In 1869, Protestantism was declared state religion by Queen Ranavolona II.\(^3\)

In 1883, France occupied part of the island and, on 17 December 1885, signed a treaty placing Madagascar under its protection. In 1890, in a typical colonial trade-off, Great Britain recognized the French protectorate in exchange for French recognition of British sovereignty over Zanzibar. On 6 August 1896, Madagascar was declared a French colony. In 1897, the French government sent Madagascar’s Queen Ranavalona III into exile in Algeria, effectively abolishing the monarchy. The rebel nobility were executed. French Governor General Joseph Gallieni (1896–1903) started a development policy, building bridges and roads, a railway, hospitals, a local school of medicine, and elementary schools. British influence in the island came under attack. On the religious front, British Protestant missions were gradually replaced by French Protestant missions, and Catholic missions were introduced. Madagascar remained under French domination when the Vichy régime replaced the Third Republic after France’s defeat by Germany in 1940. British forces invaded the island in 1942, in order to prevent Japan from using Madagascar as an Indian Ocean base. Britain handed it back to the De Gaulle’s Free French in 1943.

In 1946, a political party, the Mouvement démocratique de la rénovation malgache (MDRM, Democratic Movement of the Malagasy Renovation) replaced the Party for Malagasy Independence. It had an electoral majority in the country. Three Malagasy representatives were elected to the French Parliament also in 1946: they proposed a bill for the creation of a ‘Malagasy state having a government, a parliament, an army and its own finances, within the French Union’, which was ignored by the French government.\(^4\)

Distrustful of the MDRM, the French government and the settlers favoured the Party of the Underprivileged of Madagascar (PADESM, Parti des déshérítés de Madagascar), a party based on a minority tribal basis, in an attempt to deflect independance claims.

In 1947, a visitor\(^5\) from France described the local colonial society as expecting to last for ever and being unwilling or unprepared for any change.

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\(^3\) Current estimates give 52 per cent animists, 20.5 Catholics, 20.5 Protestants, 7 Moslems.
