

## ANDORRA'S AUTONOMY

**A**NDORRA, being a political anomaly, challenges the political geographer to uncover the geographic roots of so exotic a plant. It has more than once been suggested that Andorra's political separation from both its powerful neighbors, France and Spain, derives from isolation. Andorra occupies the tributary valleys of the Segre which are known collectively as the Valira (Fig. 1). These lead into each other via water-level routes and thence continue without barrier into the Segre, which occupies the broadest transverse valley of the central Pyrenees. Therefore it can hardly be thought of as more isolated than other similar Pyrenean valleys, such as the Vall d'Arán—Spanish territory although cut off from the rest of the country by a range of savage mountains, in which the few lofty passes are snow-blocked for half the year. Isolation thus proves a weak environmental reed to lean upon.

One may perhaps abandon geography and ascribe the political separatism to the rugged individualism of the Andorran citizens. Again an undependable support, for the Andorrans comprise but one section of the Catalan people which occupies all the central and eastern Pyrenees as well as their foothills and the plains beyond. Surely the five or six thousand inhabitants of the Valira valleys cannot be assumed to have a greater love for independence than other mountaineers, particularly mountaineers of their own race and language, occupying almost identically similar valleys.

Mutual jealousy between France and Spain is more rarely cited as the explanation of the Andorran political status. Ample proof of such jealousy can be deduced over centuries of history. So also have France and Spain been mutually jealous of other Pyrenean valleys, but in the Treaty of the Pyrenees (1659) they were parceled out between the two countries—all save Andorra.

The political geographer, failing to find the explanation of Andorran separatism either in isolation, in the accidents of

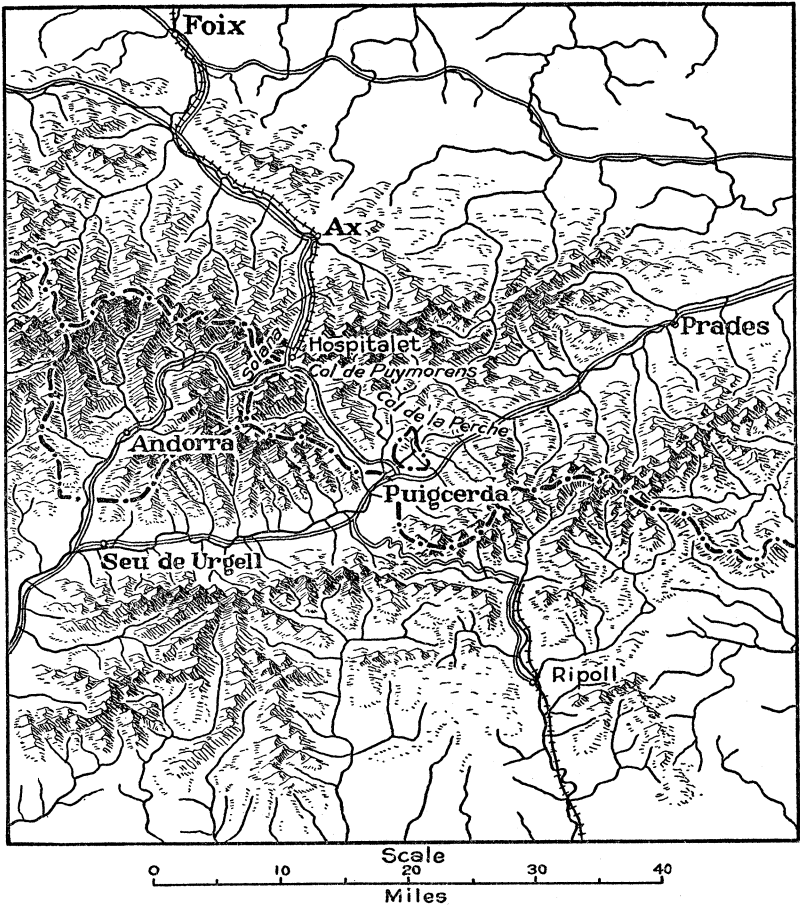


FIG. 1.—ANDORRA AND ITS NEIGHBORS, 1933

To avoid confusion which arises from a crowding of names on a map, the following table is appended. By using the town names as a key, the names of the rivers and the districts, and the outside connections, may readily be traced.

Roads, railroads, and international boundaries are indicated by the conventional symbols.

The enclave in the extreme Upper Cerdagne (above Puigcerda) is Spanish territory cut off by the all-French route from Foix to Prades.

Chief Town	District	River	Connections
Seu de Urgell . . . . .	Cerdagne	Segre	{ To Spain—downstream To Foix via the Col de Puymorens To Conflent via the Col de la Perche
Foix . . . . .	Foix	Ariège	{ To France—downstream To the Cerdagne via the Col de Puymorens To Conflent via the cols de Puymorens and la Perche
Prades . . . . .	Conflent	Tet	{ To Roussillon—downstream To the Cerdagne via the Col de la Perche To Foix via the cols de la Perche and Puymorens
Andorra . . . . .	Andorra	Valira	{ To the Cerdagne—downstream To Foix via the Solana

political history, or in the social traits of the inhabitants, must set up some other hypothesis. Ideally, he may hope to find support for it both in the natural environment<sup>1</sup> and in the political conditions of the changing centuries.

But before hypotheses—facts. The legal status of Andorra rests upon a document of 1278, known as an “Acte de Paréage,” a form often drawn up during feudal days to define conflicting powers of suzerains. Since this agreement has not been altered (except in minor details), Andorra must be looked upon in law as a survival of the period of history which antedated the national state. This Acte de Paréage of 1278 was not intended as a charter of liberty for Andorra. It was an arrangement between two outside powers, settling issues between them which happened to concern Andorra among other disputed territories.<sup>2</sup> The Acte was signed in order to adjust disputes “whereof much serious damage has resulted on both sides, to wit: the slaughter of men, the destruction of castles, the mutilation of men’s bodies, and many other atrocities and almost unspeakable evils.”<sup>3</sup> The parties to the agreement were the “Count of Foix and Viscount of Castellbo . . . . on the one hand, and the . . . . Bishop of Urgel . . . . on the other hand.”<sup>4</sup>

The counts of Foix maintained their capital in the town of Foix (Fig. 1) at the northern base of the mountains, and their county comprised all the valley of the upper and middle Ariège. Interlocked with the headwaters of the Ariège are the little torrents which form the Segre, the upper valley of which is called the Cerdagne. Most of this came to be ruled by the bishops of Urgell, whose seat (Seu de Urgell) stands in the considerable vale formed by the confluence of the Segre and the Valira. The lands of the two parties to the Acte were in close contact by way of the easy Col de Puymorens (6,232 feet). It seems rea-

<sup>1</sup> By “natural environment” is meant the complex of earth conditions and earth resources which make up the sum total of the human habitat.

<sup>2</sup> These were the Valley of St. John, the Castle of Ahos, the Valley of Cabaho, the Castle of Ayguetebia.

<sup>3</sup> Translation by Russell W. Leary in Lewis G. Leary, *Andorra, the hidden republic* (New York, 1912), p. 176.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

sonable to suppose that much of the strife referred to in the document had occurred in the Cerdagne, especially since its upper end leads not only to Foix but also to Roussillon, via the Col de la Perche (5,320 feet) and Conflent, the valley of the upper Tet. History confirms this inference. Fertile Roussillon, lying at the Mediterranean end of the forked eastern Pyrenees, and traditionally in dispute between French and Spanish claimants, could be reached from France more easily by the Ariège-Segre-Tet route than by any other, owing to a wide barrier of lagoon and marsh which abutted the northern tongue of mountains and rendered a coastal route impracticable. Moreover, the mountain route was the most direct way between Toulouse, the geo-political focus of Aquitaine, and Perpignan, the capital of Roussillon. Since this route could be kept open only by holding the upper end of the Cerdagne itself, it became the duty of the counts of Foix to dominate that vital link. So well was the work done that to this day the Spanish border crosses the upper Segre just short of the line of easiest travel between the passes Puy-morens and Perche. (Fig. 1. The road follows this natural line of travel.) This necessity, added to territorial propinquity, led naturally enough to enterprising marriages between lords of Foix and heiresses in the Cerdagne, which brought them lands and suzerainty under the very nose of the bishops. Even the right to "reversion" of the Count of Urgell fell to the Count of Foix. The lands held by the counts of Foix in the lower Cerdagne and in tributary valleys such as Andorra must have been important pawns in the struggle for this major line of communication through the upper end of the valley.

The rivals were evenly matched. The prince-bishops of Urgell were powerful, even for prelates of the middle ages. They inherited from Carolingian times the tradition of being a bulwark against the Saracen, and their domain bestrode the easiest route across the Pyrenees between the Col du Perthus and the pass of Roncesvalles. Their fortified cathedral, built in the early twelfth century, by its military architecture eloquently attests the militant character of the bishopric. A succession of ambi-

tious bishops would leave no stone unturned to bring under control the little valley of the Valira, the easily entered border of which crossed the river hardly two hours on muleback from the episcopal seat.

Foix, the seat of the counts, in contrast, lies some forty miles from the Andorran border, which moreover presents a bleak and hostile mountain wall toward France. The lowest pass, nothing more than a slight sag in the range (the Solana, Fig. 1), stands 8,000 feet above the sea. Nevertheless, this and other passes a bit higher could be used, as postern gates to castles were used, for entry into the Cerdagne when the main gate via the Col de Puymorens was closed. The counts of Foix never obtained extensive holdings, and never rose to great power, as French feudal nobility went. Yet their long valley was agriculturally productive and its prosperity was enhanced by the trade route which traversed it. The valley walls limited expansion, concentrated the population along the stream, and consolidated political life. When annexed to France in 1607 Foix retained its individuality as a separate province although it was smaller in area and in population than any other. Previous to that date it had long been a unified and moderately powerful feudatory, generally at peace, except for the endless intermittent quarrel with the bishops of Urgell. These bishops and counts for generations, during the height of the middle ages, proved to be excellently matched antagonists.

Andorra was not a wholly passive pawn in the greater affairs of state in the eastern Pyrenees. As in all the upper valleys of those mountains, the economic life, while lived in part in valley villages, extends to the wide, rolling uplands, which in summer are covered with succulent grass, furnishing pasturage to thousands of sheep and goats and smaller numbers of cattle. This pasturage everywhere exceeds the complement of winter feed which the high valleys can provide. Hence, animals from the foothills and even from nearby plains are to be found on all the high uplands throughout the summer. The income thus derived from the alpine pastures enables the dwellers in the high

valleys to purchase winter pasturage for their own flocks in the lower and warmer lands, and to obtain wheat and other necessities into the bargain. Relations such as these have existed from time immemorial between occupants of the Valira valleys and their neighbors on both flanks of the mountains.

In the middle ages, the loose and small-scale organization of political and economic units permitted working agreements among groups of people occupying geographically reciprocal locations; such arrangements made them politically reciprocal as well without sacrificing their independence. The agreements usually defined grazing and fishing rights, delimited boundaries, and provided for the joint use of trails. Alongside these always existed the feudal authority of the suzerain, which was in no way diminished by the renewable working agreements. The men of Andorra had such arrangements with their neighbors on both sides of the Pyrenees.

In practice, the poverty of the mountains, unproductive and hence uninteresting to overlords, often leagued with the self-reliant spirit (bred by isolation and the hardships engendered by a harsh natural environment) of the mountaineer to give him whatever degree of political independence he chose to exercise. The inhabitants of this or that valley wrested from a harassed suzerain exemptions from feudal obligations, in some instances even the right to bear arms in defense of their special privileges. Some privileges of this sort the Andorrans were formally granted, both by counts and by bishops, in the struggle waged by these two for supremacy in the Cerdagne.

Toward the end of the thirteenth century the contest reached one of its periods of stalemate, and count and bishop in 1278 drew up the *Acte de Paréage* which is still in force in so far as it concerns Andorra. It determined that each of the parties to the *Acte* should receive taxes in alternate years, that each should be entitled to appoint an officer to administer justice jointly with his colleague, and that each might make a levy of soldiery. Both parties agreed to cease warring within Andorran territory,

and certain ancient rights and duties of the inhabitants were confirmed.<sup>5</sup> The bishop was adjudged overlord of the district, and to him the count must do homage for his share in its revenues. To offset this legal inferiority, the count was allowed to have the lion's share of taxes and other moneys paid by Andorrans in return for protection.

As feudalism waned and was replaced by national states, the successors of the original suzerains kept pace in their growth of power. Urgell was merged into Catalonia, then into Spain, while Foix became first a part of Béarn, later of France. With the widening of outlook, the relative importance of Andorra to its suzerains dwindled. The *Acte de Paréage* provided machinery which ran smoothly enough, since there was little political grist to be ground. On the rare occasions when their autonomy was threatened, Andorrans learned the art of playing off their joint suzerains against each other. When the Treaty of the Pyrenees in 1659 demarked the line between France and Spain, the status of Andorra was untouched. Apparently neither side cared to risk losing one of the more important territories or passways along the range for the sake of a remote, poor valley which could never, in days before motor transport and tourism, become either a source of wealth or a strategic highway.

Until today the actual autonomy of Andorra seems to have been compounded of the isolation and the insignificance of the district plus the evenly matched power of the only two neighbors which had physical and legal access to it, and whose interests elsewhere along their mutual boundary far transcended the importance of Andorra. This autonomy never became political independence in law, a matter of no moment in the middle ages when political lines were loosely drawn and frequently altered. When overtaken by the political system of the national state this lax arrangement continued to work because the district possessed no valuable resources and was therefore not worth quarreling over. So the status has stood for more than 250 years.

<sup>5</sup> Leary, pp. 177-84.

Only twice since 1278 has the autonomy of Andorra been in jeopardy. When the French Revolution anathematized all matters feudal, the French authorities refused to remain a party to Andorra's feudal status. Andorra's leaders were justly alarmed, fearing absorption by Spain. Fortunately, after a few years they were able to persuade the practical Napoleon to accept an annual tribute once more and to resume the traditional joint suzerainty.

The second perilous moment is the present. During the past half-century, attempts, at first sporadic and inconsequent, but lately directed and effective, have been made to break down Andorra's isolation. The change has been instigated and effected by the world-wide tautening of the bonds which integrate adjacent lands. As early as 1880 a long unused resource, hot springs at Escaldes near the center of population of the district, led to the proposal to make of that village a health resort; to this it was planned to add a gaming center, favored by the exemption of Andorra from both French and Spanish law. This scheme, scotched by the mutual jealousy of French and Spanish authorities, has repeatedly lifted its head, and has become the motive for many of the changes which are just now coming to fruition. In 1933 a motor road through the country will be opened. With it the isolation of the valleys, which has been diminishing during the past two decades in the face of road construction from either border into the country but not through it, will be replaced by intimate contact with both France and Spain. The ancient unimportance of the district will give way to significance and value as a highway and as a tourist center.

When the road is opened the political balance which has endured for 650 years is sure to be altered. Whether a new equilibrium can be established depends upon the concurrence of the forces. France is favored by a railway skirting the Andorran border (Fig. 1), by the nearness of the tourist and bathing center of Ax-les-Thermes, by a popular habit of "tourism," and by a practiced ability to absorb peripheral lands, both culturally and economically. Spain can find allies in the physical proximity



of Andorra to the Cerdagne, in the integrity of Catalan life, now finding expression in Spain politically as well as socially, and in the attraction for Spaniards of accessible summer resorts in the cool, green Pyrenees.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> In the interval between the preparation of this manuscript (March, 1933) and its publication, the affairs of Andorra have several times interjected themselves into the newspapers and the weekly reviews of current events. Whether the items tell of clamor by interested parties for permission to licence gaming at Escaldes, insistence by the governing council that a unified postal system replace the existent dual one, or demands of the young men for extension of the suffrage, the issue is single: viz., reorganization of the life of the people to take advantage of the new opportunities which the through highway has created. As usual, a profound change in geography has precipitated a political crisis.