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Guns, Culture and Moors

Racial stereotypes and the cultural impact of the Moroccan participation in the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939)

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Guns, Culture and Moors

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During the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939), more than 80,000 Moroccan soldiers fought in Spain, on behalf of the Nationalists led by General Franco, against the Spanish Republic. The Moroccans played a significant role in Franco's eventual victory, often defeating larger enemy forces, and spreading a reputation for brutality against enemy fighters and civilians. However, for a long time only few historians focused on the role of the Moroccans in the Spanish Civil War or the perspective of the Moroccans fighting in this war.

The presence of tens of thousands of Moroccan soldiers in Spain during the Civil War meant an encounter between two culturally and ethnically different peoples, and both the Moroccans and the Spaniards attempted to take control of the situation. This thesis aims to explain to what extent the Moroccan soldiers were able to take control of the affairs, which in turn were influenced by the perceptions the Spaniards had of the otherness of the Moroccan soldiers. It focuses on the effects of this encounter on the daily lives of the Moroccan soldiers in Spain. It brings to light the position the Moroccan soldiers had in the Spanish Army, the role of racial stereotypes in their tactical employment, and how the Nationalists used them as a psychological weapon. Additionally, it explains the relations they had with their Spanish command and the influence they exercised in improving their situation within the army by making demands, protesting and rebelling against perceived injustices, or even deserting.

Despite the cultural barriers between the Spaniards and Moroccans, the prolonged presence of Moroccans in Spain allowed many of them (and many Spaniards too) to overcome those barriers. For example, Moroccans and Spaniards had romantic relationships despite the official policy that tried to prevent this. Moreover, some Moroccans converted to Christianity despite the efforts of General Franco and his army to keep the Moroccans and the Catholic Church separated. Yet, the cultural separation between the two peoples was, in broad terms, maintained through the work of the Spanish Nationalist state and army, Moroccan officials and the Moroccan soldiers themselves. This is why the Moroccans had their own units, distinctive uniforms and emblems, hospitals, cemeteries, cafés, musicians, and even prostitutes.

This thesis uses new archival material and interviews with Moroccan veterans to, for the first time, give the voice of the Moroccans a central place in examining their role in the Spanish conflict. The story of the Moroccan soldiers in Spain is a fascinating one, and the present research analyses all its different facets: official policy, war propaganda, accounts of fighting, cold-blooded brutality, imprisonment, desertion, romance and marriage, and vivid memories of thrill, fear, comradeship, love, hatred, and regrets.