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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Conclusions

When El Hussein ben Abdesselam, the veteran I met in 2011 in Zaouiat Sidi Ibrahim in Ceuta, was wounded during the war, he was transferred to the Salamanca military hospital where he was treated and then given 24 days leave upon recovering. After spending the leave in Ceuta, he requested returning to his Tabor where he, on a doctor's orders, was to carry out only non-combat duties. It did not matter, as the war had ended when El Hussein reached his Tabor. Having been discharged from the army, his Tabor commander arranged a job 'for me with his father in law who was a retired military man in Ceuta. I used to carry milk and helped with ironing the clothes and then I helped the lady in the kitchen and that became my job'.[1] With that, El Hussein who originated in French Morocco, became a resident of Ceuta and later a Spanish subject. The family he later established consisted of Spanish Muslim citizens, and that thanks to the Spanish Civil War. Not all the veterans became Spanish subjects or residents of the Spanish African enclaves. Some of them continued serving in the Spanish Army (deployed to different parts of Morocco, the Sahara, or even Equatorial Guinea) until Moroccan independence when they were transferred to the Moroccan Royal Army; some continued to serve as soldiers for Spain years beyond the independence and then retired and remained in Morocco; and some retired and later emigrated to Europe. The post-war lives of these soldiers took different directions, but they were united by the experience of the encounter with Spain within a context of war, an experience that has left traces visible even today.

Now that the journey with the Moroccan soldiers of the Spanish Civil War and their encounter with Spain has come to an end, what about the question: to what extent was the Spanish-Moroccan encounter influenced by both the perception of the *Otherness* of the Moroccan soldiers' presence in Spain (i.e. their different racial and cultural background as African Muslims in a European 'Catholic' country) and by the agency of the Moroccan soldiers? The short answer is: the perception of *Otherness* determined the development of this encounter in almost every aspect, and the Moroccan soldiers did exercise significant agency within this encounter. In fact, both parts of the answer go hand in hand.

The perceptions of race, culture and religion determined to a large extent the participation of Moroccan soldiers in the Spanish Civil War, their presence in Spain, and their treatment by both the Nationalists and the Republicans. The value of the Moroccan troops in the Spanish army was based on Spanish racial views of the Moroccans as natural born warriors and views on the influence of Islam and geography on the warlike capabilities of the Moroccans. Specific physical and psychological qualities determined the way the Moroccan troops should ideally be employed. Given their alien nature and their reputation as fierce and savage warriors, they were also on many occasions useful to the Nationalists as a psychological weapon spreading terror through the ranks of the enemy, both military and civilian alike. But beyond the role of the infantryman, and to a lesser extent cavalryman,

[1] Interview with El Hussen ben Abdesselam, Ceuta, 19 January 2011.

the Moroccan soldiers were not used in other branches of the army such as artillery or armour, not even as drivers of motorised vehicles. Their soldierly capabilities, however magnificent they could be considered, were limited.

The Moroccans were deemed by the Spanish Nationalists to have a different psychology and therefore merited different treatment in comparison to Spanish soldiers. Those who commanded Moroccan troops would, ideally, be officers with knowledge of that psychology and of Moroccan customs, though rates of attrition in war were not always conducive to the achievement of that ideal. Differences in language played an obvious role in this need for officers with especial aptitudes, but also Spanish perceptions of the Moroccan soldiers' understanding of soldierly life and discipline. The Spanish attitude was a paternalistic one towards soldiers deemed less mature than their Spanish counterparts. The Moroccans needed a firm but also just, and occasionally generous hand to lead them, a guiding hand to be provided by Spanish leadership. But the relationship between the Spanish Army and its Moroccan soldiers went in two directions. Too firm a hand, too long a pay delay, too offensive a character of a superior officer, might occasionally lead the Moroccans to display their dissatisfaction through loud or even violent protest, or simply desertion.

To bridge the distance between the Spanish leadership and the Moroccan troops, there was a need, in addition to Spanish officers with 'especial aptitudes', of Moroccan officers who could consult and translate but also command Moroccan troops. But such officers were relatively few in number, even though that number grew as war necessities demanded. And though some managed to gain promotions that otherwise would not have been available, there was a limit to the rank they could attain. They were also expected to command Moroccan troops, not Spanish ones. After all they were not simply called officers but *oficiales moros* (Moorish officers). They were even limited to wearing a headgear that was Moroccan, and not allowed the Spanish officer's cap (perhaps with the exception of Mizzian who followed a regular military career of a Spanish officer rather than a Moorish one).

The Moroccan units of the Spanish army were to be distinguished in their appearances. The uniforms, the insignia, the unit flags, they all carried Moroccan or Islamic symbols. That was the case long before the Spanish Civil War, and it served to reduce the cultural distance between the Moroccan troops and their Islamic Moroccan environment. In Spain, that distinctively outer Moroccan appearance showed the contrast between the Moroccan troops, their Spanish military counterparts and their Spanish civilian surrounding. This distinctive Moroccan world, as it were, was not limited to appearances. The Moroccan soldiers had their own military police and served (when convicted for crimes) their prison terms separately from Spanish prisoners. They had their own camp followers composed of Moroccan merchants, Moroccan café owners, Moroccan musicians and even their own Moroccan prostitutes. In hospitals they had their own wards, were served food according to Islamic diet, and when died they were buried in separate Islamic cemeteries. Actions aimed at converting Moroccan soldiers to Catholicism were prohibited, even though a few Moroccans determined enough

to convert (for whatever reasons, earthly or otherwise) could still defy Spanish policy. The Spanish Nationalists created and maintained a separate cultural space for their Moroccan troops.

Was that a token of respect towards the traditions of the Moroccans or primarily a measure to maintain the distance between these alien troops and Spanish society? Great problems would certainly have been created had the Spanish tried to Hispanicise their troops, i.e. systematically blend Moroccan troops with Spanish ones, hospitalise injured Moroccans in the same wards as the Spanish soldiers and provide them with non-Islamic diet, allowing conversions of Moroccans to Catholicism, or replacing the crescent on the *Regulares* flag with a cross. In short, little good would have come out of making the Moroccans look, eat and pray Spanish. That is clear because in many ways, the Moroccans welcomed and even participated in the creation of the separate Moroccan sphere. In this the agency of the Moroccan soldiers becomes apparent. Moroccan recruits generally favoured enlisting in Moroccan units to be among Muslims. Many Moroccan soldiers favoured a commanding officer who could understand their culture and speak their language, i.e. an officer who was more familiar with their culture than they with his. Respecting the Islamic religion whether in the field, burial grounds or in the hospitals was one of the most important positive examples the Moroccan veterans usually cite when remembering their Spanish war experience, and was not rarely the result of their own demands. Moroccan government officials also participated in creating the separate sphere to maintain the Islamic tradition of their Moroccan troops, and Moroccan nationalists were not keen to Hispanicise the Moroccan soldiers either, and when many Moroccan soldiers were offered the Spanish nationality at the end of their military service, years after the war, most of them declined it. The Spanish Nationalists thought the Moroccans should remain Moroccans. The latter equally thought that they should maintain their Muslim separate space, and a Moroccan identity (as opposed to a family or tribal one) of which many probably became conscious only after serving in the army and moving to Spain. The Moroccan side, both soldiers and officials, participated in shaping the cultural space the Moroccans filled during their stay in Spain. It is true that the Spanish military and civilian authorities were in a stronger position to shape that space, but the Moroccan influence is not in anyway negligible, and with the prolongation of the war, the Moroccan agency grew stronger.

Despite the fact that maintaining a separate cultural space for the Moroccans was sound strategy and that it was conducted in cooperation with the Moroccans themselves, it nevertheless responded to Spanish needs to maintain a distance with the Moroccans. The Moroccans could not be buried in Catholic cemeteries, not only because the Moroccans would not wish it, but because the Spanish Catholics would not prefer it. Moroccan soldiers could not become Catholics, not because of respect towards Islamic sensitivity, but because in the Spanish mind it was doubtful whether any Moroccan Muslim could genuinely convert without having a hidden agenda. Ironically, the Moroccans were welcome to defend the Christian faith, but not to embrace it. Moroccans could not marry Spanish women because that would hurt the prestige of the Spanish protective power. They were occasionally welcome to, as Queipo de Llano put it, show the ‘red’ women what ‘real men’ are, but not to be

romantically involved with Spanish women who chose to be with them. The Moroccans were excellent soldiers and they were welcome to fight, but they could hardly serve any other function in Spain after their military duties came to an end. The Moroccan presence was justified religiously, historically and racially by people like Miguel Asín Palacios, José María Pemán, Juan Priego López, and others on Nationalist news papers or Queipo de Llano's Seville Radio. Despite that justification, the Moroccans (whose presence in Spain was justified by shared race and history) had, in the end, to leave the country.

The Spanish experience with excluding, separating and constraining the Moroccans is not without its notable exceptions. Moroccan officers faced a limit to what they could attain in rank or command, but one of them, Mizzian, was allowed to have a Spanish-style military career, enrolling in a Spanish military academy, and ended up commanding Spanish troops and officers. He concluded the war commanding a division, and later attained the rank of Lieutenant General. Despite his own merits, one wonders whether he was shown favour by the Spaniards in order to be a symbolic example of the success of the Protectorate. While the majority of Moroccan recruits enlisted in the *Regulares* units, the Spanish Foreign Legion nevertheless (unlike its French counterpart) opened its doors for Moroccan enlistees, even though Moroccan enlistment in that corps dwindled with the passage of time. The Fascist Falange's own military unit in the Spanish Protectorate, the *Bandera de Marruecos* contained Moroccan recruits. While tens of thousands of Moroccan troops were sent back to Morocco, a select few hundred were chosen to stay and become an elite guard of the head of state himself, although this might have occurred, in part, because they would form a symbolic deterrent to future opponents of Franco, and because they would be less inclined to sedition or to commit a coup. When Moroccan soldiers and officers were supposed to look Moroccan, Spanish officers and commanders walked around wearing a *chillaba* or a *tarbush*, sat drinking mint tea, and threw Arabic or Berber words in their conversations. When Moroccan soldiers were not supposed to look or act Spanish (even though the practice might have been different), Spanish officers could, though only in appearance, 'go native'.

Policy might ban mixed marriages, but in practice they took place, a sign that the agency of a determined Moroccan soldier (and a determined Spanish partner) could overcome official opposition to such marriages. Such marriages might even prevent Moroccans who remained in Spain after the war from being deported to Morocco. While being Spanish meant in Francoist Spain to be Catholic, many a Moroccan was offered and given Spanish nationality and the opportunity to become Spanish without the necessity of becoming Christian too, even though many Moroccans declined the opportunity.

It has also become clear that the rhetoric, policies and practices with regard to Moroccans in Spain during the war, reflected the rhetoric, policies and practices in the Spanish Protectorate of Morocco. The rhetoric of mixed Spanish-Moroccan identity that justified Spanish imperialism in Morocco was the same rhetoric that brought the Moroccans to Spain. The policies of separation between different communities in the Protectorate were the same as those practiced in Spain. In

practice this policy was often breached, both in Spanish Morocco as well as in the Peninsula. In some ways, the Moroccan military presence in Spain might be interpreted as an extension of the Protectorate policies and realities by other means. That the Delegation for Native Affairs brought its offices to Spain to try and continue the functions it usually undertook in Morocco is a clear enough indication of that continuation.

The Republicans displayed a clear negative attitude towards the Moroccans. The intervention of Moroccan troops in the Asturian Uprising of 1934 and the violent deeds that accompanied the march of the Army of Africa in the first months of 1936 stimulated the Republicans to spread a demonizing image of the Moroccan troops that often encouraged Republican fighters to show no mercy towards those Moroccans who fell prisoner. The Republican attitude probably better reflected traditional Spanish hostile images of the Moroccans and position towards them than the Nationalist attitude did. The Republic had little interest in promoting a discourse of brotherhood or shared history since the Republicans had not imported tens of thousands of Moroccans into Spain and did not need to justify their presence. Nor were people who had worked to justify the establishment of Spanish imperialism in Morocco by bonds of blood and history were prominently represented in Republican circles. But the Republicans let their negative view of the Moroccans, and Maghrebis in general determine their attitudes towards those Maghrebis who helped their cause or offered to do so. The fact that rightist Spain was more tolerant of and less racist toward the Moroccans is, despite the explanation given, remarkable to say the least.

On the issue of how far can war bend, break, or reshape pre-existing limits, prejudices, and taboos that separated the Spanish society from the colonial one, and how far it shaped Spanish policies towards the colonials, this study has demonstrated that on the Nationalist side (where this question matters most) there existed a (positive) reshaping of existing prejudices on the level of propaganda and imagery. There was a slight and temporary liberalisation and expansion of the limits of human and cultural interaction and intermixing, a liberalisation that grew partially as a result of the new propaganda and imagery and partially as a result of the efforts of the Moroccans who defied and crossed the boundaries and taboo-lines between Moroccans and Spaniards. There was also a growth in the consideration that the Moroccan colonial society (because of its military value and contribution) was accorded in Nationalist Spain. The war had indeed a great impact on the Spanish-Moroccan relationship and led to the elevation of the Moroccans to a higher level of partnership with the Spaniards, even though the Moroccans were still obviously a junior partner by far. However, what the war proved is that, and despite the glaring exceptions, the broad structures that sought to maintain the limits separating the Spanish and Moroccan societies from one another were (and again with significant Moroccan participation) relatively successfully maintained.

The agency of the Moroccan soldiers played an important role in both the small opening of the Spanish and Moroccan human spaces towards each other, as well as in generally maintaining both spaces separate. Indeed, a Moroccan soldier could choose to enlist in the Spanish Foreign Legion,

befriend Spanish civilians, consume alcohol, have a romantic relationship with a Spanish girl, and yet be adamant that he received a halal diet in a military hospital, request burial at an Islamic cemetery should he die, cause enough trouble to be discharged from the Legion (if unsatisfied) and enlist in the *Regulares*, and decide to return to Morocco should he be offered a stay in Spain. More importantly the role of agency reflects both the will of the large number of individuals who chose to cross the cultural divide, and the agency of the majority who preferred the comfort of the separate Moroccan and Muslim sphere and worked for creating and maintaining it. The temporary nature of the stay of the Moroccan troops in Spain (as well as the decision by most of the Moroccans who were offered the Spanish nationality to decline the offer) meant that the majority of the Moroccan soldiers could easily maintain their familiar cultural identity. Had they remained in large numbers in Spain, as tens of thousands of North Africans did in France after the First World War, they could have been captives of their new homeland from which they would have had to lend part of a new and conflicting identity. In that way, returning to Morocco, or even to the much Islamicised Ceuta and Melilla, must have been a great comfort.

In many ways the Moroccan participation during the Spanish Civil War reflects other European experiences with colonial troops that fought in Europe during both world wars, and especially in the French Army. Racial perceptions determined the military role of Maghrebi and other African soldiers and the tactics they should use in a similar way to that of the Moroccan soldiers in Spain. The French and British armies paid much attention to showing respect and sensitivity towards the religious feelings of the colonial troops, whether Muslims or otherwise. In the case of the French, they regarded their Maghrebi soldiers as fanatical Muslims. Nevertheless, many of these Muslim young men showed themselves not to be strict followers of Islamic tenets in their daily life. Relations between colonial soldiers and European women was a sensitive point for European authorities, both civilian and military as well as European populations. Aside from the shocking accusations of mass rapes by colonial troops, whether in Germany in the 1920s or in Italy in 1944, even consensual relationships were frowned upon and met with discouragement. Measures were taken by European authorities to hinder this kind of romantic liaisons, justifying them by pointing to the European prestige that had to be protected.

In the light of these similarities what sets the Spanish experience apart, in light of this study is that: firstly, no other European country went so far as the *Africanistas* in Spain in claiming bonds of religion, history and blood between them and the colonial soldiers they employed in fighting their war. Secondly, as a result of their larger role and closer historical bonds, the presence of the colonial troops in Spain was, in terms of visibility and in terms of acceptance, greater in Nationalist Spain than in other parts of Europe between 1914-1945. The Nationalists did not attempt to diminish or downplay the significance of their colonial troops in the war. Furthermore, Nationalist Spain had, due principally to the religious propaganda it conducted, probably more success in making its colonial soldiers ideologically embrace the cause of the struggle they were fighting for, than the other major colonial

powers. However, it remains unclear how much a lack of such an ideological embrace would have mattered, given the accompanying material incentives to enlist.

An innovative aspect of this study is constituted by the fact that it has explored, on a significant scale, sources that provided the Moroccan perspective of the Civil War, and that it has provided these sources with a greater share in the discussion and presentation of evidence, than has so far been the case. The Moroccan perspective not only gives a fresh view of the war and the role of the Moroccans in it, but it continues where Spanish documentation stops, by showing the effects of Spanish preconceptions, policies and practices and how were they were received and negotiated with by the Moroccans. The sources on the Moroccan perspective are varied and range from the contemporary perspective of Moroccan soldiers and deserters, captured in documents written in Spanish, French and Arabic, to the latter day interviews conducted by this and other authors. In doing so, it has emerged that both sets of perspectives, separated by long decades, have much in common in the facts and insights they provide. Indeed, they have more in common than not. This study has also explored a myriad of sources of multifaceted nature: military; administrative; diplomatic; journalistic; published diaries as well as private papers and from multiple non-Moroccan points of view: Spanish (both Nationalist and Republican) and foreign (British, American, French, Soviet, German and Dutch). Despite the significance of the Moroccan perspective, the picture of the Moroccan participation in a civil war that took place in Spain and that involved fighters and observers from many countries would not be complete without this international perspective.

This study has demonstrated that the Moroccan soldiers were active agents in determining their fate during their service in the Spanish Nationalist forces, and not completely hapless victims, even though this Spanish-Moroccan relationship was not even-handed. The Spanish military and political authorities obviously had more power in determining the fate of the Moroccan soldiers and in shaping the relationship between these soldiers and their Spanish employers. In this regard, this study is one among few in the field of colonial military history that systematically discussed the agency of colonial troops, and has done so significantly from the perspective of these colonial troops. This research has also made clear how the separation in cultural spheres between the Moroccans and the Spaniards was something the Moroccans (both officials as well as soldiers) cooperated with the Spaniards in achieving.

The memory of the Moroccan troops' role in the Spanish Civil War has not disappeared. Many Spaniards blame the Moroccans for helping establish Franco's dictatorship. As a former Moroccan ambassador to Spain put it in 2009, when Spain was governed by the Socialist Party: 'Memories of this war are still alive. These emotional things are difficult to erase. So the participation of Moroccans in the war is a negative factor in ties between the two countries'.[2] The opening, in 2006, of the Mizzian Museum in Beni Ansar (Nador) celebrating Franco's Moroccan general, caused outrage

[2] Zakia Abdennebi, 'Morocco Tackles Painful Role in Spain's Past', *Reuters,* 14 January 2009.

among many progressive Spaniards.[3] But there are other aspects of the continuing influence of the Moroccan participation in the Spanish war. Cemeteries in Seville, Granada or Griñón, which were established to bury Moroccan soldiers have re-assumed their functions as cemeteries that Muslim communities nowadays use to bury their departed loved ones. The *Regulares* units still exist and have re-established much of the traditional Moorish features of their uniforms which they had abandoned in the 1970s and 1980s, and (in the case of Ceuta) they have annually invited their aging Moroccan veterans to attend the 30 June celebrations of the foundation of the *Regulares*. Many of the sons of the Muslims of Ceuta and Melilla continue to serve in the *Regulares*, and many of them are descendants of veterans of the Spanish Civil War. The ghost of the Moroccan participation in the Spanish Civil War has influenced Spanish Moroccan relationships and it will continue to do so in the foreseeable future.

[3] Ignacio Cembrero, 'La última victoria de Mizzian, el general exterminador', *El País*, 4 June 2006.