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ROUNDTABLE ARTICLE

Franco's Moroccans

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Recent research into the Moroccan troops who fought in the Spanish Civil War has both drawn from and contributed to insights gained from new historiographical developments in the field of the Spanish conflict as well as other European twentieth-century conflicts. Studies examining the experiences and choices of low-level participants of the war, whether soldiers or civilians – on both the Francoist and republican sides – have increasingly shown that they were players in possession of a certain degree of agency, however limited. That agency allowed these low-level players, whether Spanish or Moroccan, to influence war events to a higher degree than previously thought possible, and has shown that mobilisation for and maintenance of the war effort depended on a certain mixture of coercion and negotiation, even within the more authoritarian Francoist camp. In the European context, the Moroccan participation in the 1936–9 war has its special characteristics, one of which is that its military significance weighed heavier than other colonial contributions to European battlefields between 1914 and 1945, and therefore the agency of Moroccans was more consequential. Nevertheless, it has much in common with other European experiences. A recent collaborative volume on British, French, Spanish and Dutch colonial armies in the first half of the twentieth century, *Colonial Soldiers in Europe* (2016), edited by Eric Storm and myself, has helped put the Moroccan–Spanish experience in European perspective. Similarities abound, not only in colonial soldiers' experiences of fighting in foreign lands, but also between the various Western European attempts at controlling, i.e. limiting, the cultural and human consequences of this massive irruption of male warriors into the continent.

Of the foreign contingents that intervened in Spain, on both the republican and rebel sides, the Moroccans – the Moors as they were better known then – were among the most numerous. From 1936–9 a total of around 80,000 found their way to Spain. Along with the Spanish Legion, the other main component of the Army of Africa, they played a decisive role in preventing an early rebel defeat and securing General Franco's victory. For many contemporary observers of the war their presence represented either the embodiment of savagery, or a simpleton's bravery and nobility.

Nevertheless, Moroccan troops were for a long time the least academically studied of the major foreign fighters in the war. Access to the relevant Spanish archives was restricted. The Moroccan soldiers, many of them illiterate, rarely left written accounts of their experiences. In Morocco itself there has been little official interest in profiling the role of the Moroccans in the Spanish war, compared to what has been perceived as the glorious episode of participation in the liberation of Europe during the Second World War. Abdul Haqq Al Miryani's *The Moroccan Army throughout History* (*Al-Jaish al-Magrhibi abra al-Tarikh*), for example, which follows the development of Moroccan forces across the Middle Ages towards the second half of the twentieth century and which went through five editions from 1968 till 1997, ignores the role of the Moroccans in Franco's army in Spain save for one sentence.

Aside from a few seminal articles and books in the 1980s and 1990s, it was the early 2000s that saw a rapid succession of monographs on the relationship between Morocco and the war. Historians such as Sebastian Balfour have described how the political seeds of the civil war and the brutality with which it was waged were mainly planted during the Moroccan colonial wars of the early twentieth

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century. Others, like María Rosa de Madariaga, have dealt with rebel propaganda's 'rehabilitation' of the Moroccans' image, with war crimes that have been attributed to them, and with certain aspects of their daily lives or the political situation in Morocco. Military historians in Spain and Morocco produced new work on the military operations of the Moroccan units, on military organisation and on certain massacres traditionally attributed to Moroccans. Adopting a different approach, Gustau Nerín's *La guerra que vino de África* (2005) focused on the ideologies and main characters of the *Africanista* imperialist establishment within the Spanish armed forces. Then came my study in 2018, *Guns, Culture and Moors*, which primarily dealt with how cultural stereotypes determined not only how Moroccans were employed in combat but also their interaction with their army and their civilian surroundings. Varied in focus and source material, these studies uncovered much in terms of combat operations and organisation, and in terms of the political agendas of the Francoists, republicans and Moroccan elites, as well as foreign powers – mainly France – vis-à-vis Spanish Morocco.

However, the politically laden legacy of the war that is still felt in Spanish politics today was not absent from these studies. The political leanings or background of some of the specialists on Franco's Moors are reflected, at least partially, in their stance on such issues as the motives of Moroccans to enlist and fight in Franco's army and the degree to which they were responsible for crimes like looting, killing of civilians and prisoners of war and rape.

Certain authors emphasise the economic motives, and therefore the mercenary character, of the Moroccan soldiers and argue that the large-scale abuse committed by them in Spain was standard practice in the Moroccan context. Others downplay the exclusivity of economic factors and point to additional motives such as the effect of the Francoists' religious propaganda, which portrayed the struggle in Spain as the defence of religion against atheism. At the same time, some also downplay the claims of widespread brutality by Moroccan troops as exaggerations, often drawing on veteran interviewees for evidence. Other oral history testimonies recognise that abuses existed but deny that they were more than individual occurrences. Francisco Sánchez Ruano, who acquits the Moroccans of some atrocities, concludes that known ones committed by Moroccans were confined to certain times and places in Andalusia, Extremadura, the Toledo zone and around Madrid, as well as some in Catalonia. This raises the question of whether a logic of selective violence, along the lines espoused by Stathis Kalivas in his comparative study of civil wars, can be applied to the use of Moroccan troops to repress certain civilian communities during certain periods, especially in Andalusia.

Until the early 2000s scholarship on Moroccans in the Spanish Civil War had not yet examined systematically the daily experiences and interactions of Moroccans with their Spanish cultural surroundings, either in their military and civilian environments. These experiences and interactions were shaped by the Francoist side's policies, partly based on cultural and racial stereotypes, as well as by the agency of the Moroccans themselves which led them to accommodate, circumvent or even resist the policies and conditions they faced.

Such gaps in the scholarship are particularly apparent in comparison to the historiography on British and French colonial soldiers on European battlefields during both world wars. The use of oral interviews and letters from colonial soldiers within these fields has transformed the perspective of the colonials into a major source material and contributor to the story of colonial participation. Nancy Lawler's *Soldiers of Misfortune* (1992), for example, points to the acquisition of a heightened consciousness of self-identity among African troops, and highlights their encounters, both pleasant and unsettling, with European culture. Whereas Richard Fogarty's *Race and War in France* (2008) examines the impact of contradictory French views and policies on the life of the colonial soldiers from a multi-faceted viewpoint that includes tactics, culture, sexual relations and notions of citizenry and identity.

It is this scholarship which has inspired the most important recent developments in our understanding of Moroccans in the Spanish Civil War. New research has focused on individual experiences of the racial and cultural boundaries which Moroccan soldiers encountered, in the process revealing these individuals as more than a faceless number on the battlefield. Here we witness the Moroccan in

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his initial enthusiasm for battle but also his eventual fatigue, desperation and homesickness. We see his loyalty towards a respected Spanish officer who understood his sensitivities and traditions and perhaps spoke his tongue, but also his animosity towards a callous superior prompting plans to desert, retaliate or in some cases to travel to Salamanca to personally complain to Franco. We observe the Moroccan who is anxious to observe his religious rites, but also the one who never performed prayers and for whom Spain provided the opportunity to taste the forbidden pleasures of alcohol and prostitutes. We even occasionally notice the Moroccan, supposedly a fanatic Muslim, who prepares himself to be baptised in spite of frantic efforts by Francoist authorities to prevent clerical contact with their Muslim troops. Here also is the wounded Moroccan convalescing in military hospitals, either complaining about staff or diet, or alternatively enjoying peaceful walkabouts in the town or falling in a love with a nurse. We see the obstacles a Moroccan man and a Spanish woman must wade through in order to marry, from postal censorship and religious identity to imperial pride. And we meet a range of Moroccans who in their contact with the Spaniards range from the friendly and humble to the one who struts about haughtily with a sense of ownership, and everything in between.

This new scholarship has involved putting Moroccan perspectives at the heart of the story. In my own research this Moroccan 'voice' was found through more than a dozen interviews that I conducted, transcripts of more than two dozen interviews by the historian Mustapha El Merroun that were largely untapped, as well as more than 145 French interrogation reports of Moroccans who had originated in French Morocco, joined the Spanish Army, fought in Spain, deserted and gone back home. These Moroccan sources reveal a lot. Perhaps one of the most significant revelations is the relatively positive attitude Moroccan soldiers felt towards the Spanish Army and their immediate superiors – even towards Franco himself – and the general appreciation of the treatment they received in Spain, both on and off the battlefield.

There are two particular conclusions we can draw from the work of those of us who have sought to prioritise Moroccan voices. First, Moroccan soldiers were very much active agents in determining their fate during their presence in wartime Spain and not completely hapless victims, even though this Spanish–Moroccan relationship was unequally balanced. The need to keep troops motivated meant that many accommodating policies were developed by Francoist authorities, drawing on their own initiative as well as responding to Moroccan attitudes. Discipline, sometimes harsh, went side by side with negotiation. The Moroccans were more capable of influencing their circumstances than one might expect from seemingly poor colonials brought to fight someone else's war.

Second, as the sudden presence of tens of thousands of Moroccans for an extended period of time created a meeting of cultures that was somewhat unsettling for Francoist authorities, a paradoxical scene of inclusion and exclusion emerged. Their propaganda hailed Spanish–Moroccan brotherhood and justified the presence of the Moroccans on religious and historical grounds, portraying them as far from a strange element in a traditional Spain. At the same time, they laboured to maintain existing separate cultural spheres for the Moroccans, and to create new ones when necessary. The 'Moors' had their own units with distinctive uniforms and insignia. They had their separate hospitals, cafés and cemeteries, as well as their Moroccan prostitutes. Offenders were jailed separately. Efforts were made to prevent mixed marriages. Conversions to Catholicism were banned. The sale of alcohol to Moroccan troops was forbidden.

But in the creation of a cultural space that kept their 'brothers' at a distance, Spanish authorities often had the active cooperation of many Moroccans, whether from officials from the Protectorate or from Moroccan soldiers themselves. While many used the Spanish adventure to cross the cultural divide, the majority of Moroccans were more comfortable in their separate world. This, indeed, was one of the main things that Moroccan troops appreciated about their experience in Spain. Perhaps this insight might benefit future studies on the use of colonial soldiers in European armies.

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