

THE CENTENARY OF THE RIFFIAN KABYLES' UPRISING AGAINST SPANISH COLONIAL RULE

Armin Osmanovic in conversation with Reiner Tosstorff



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June 1921 marked the centenary of the Rif uprising of the Kabyles against Spanish colonial rule in Morocco. What was the political situation before the uprising?

The north of Morocco, i.e. the area of the Rif Mountains, fell to Spain in 1912. This decision was preceded by complicated negotiations between the major European powers. France had seized the core territory of Morocco to complement and secure the Algerian colony, which had existed since 1830, and the protectorate of Tunisia, which had been under French rule since 1881. Spain came into play in the Rif. Great Britain, with its base in Gibraltar on the other side of the Mediterranean,

preferred Spain, although it had been linked to France in the Entente cordiale since 1904. Above all, Spain, Great Britain and France were united in keeping the German Empire out of Morocco. In 1911, Emperor Wilhelm II sent the gunboat Panther to Agadir. This operation, known as the «Panther jump to Agadir», almost triggered a war. Apart from its geostrategic importance at the western entrance, the German Empire with its nationalist associations, such as the Alldeutsche Verband, had an economic interest in the region. The Mannesmann brothers were interested in potential ore deposits in Morocco. The fact that this mineral wealth was hardly an El Dorado is another page in history. The prospect of quick money has in many cases shaped colonialism and colonial euphoria.

For Spain, the main concern in Morocco was to secure the hinterland of its enclaves on Moroccan soil, Ceuta and Melilla, which had existed since the 16th century. In addition, they also suspected that there were mineral resources. With the blessing of the king at that time, several companies were founded to exploit these resources but the Spanish ones were given preference. And finally, Spain was concerned with regaining colonies and the international prestige associated with them in the age of imperialism. After all, Spain had lost its last colonies (Cuba, Puerto Rico, the Philippines) in the war against the USA in 1898.

However, the transfer of the protectorate from Morocco to Spain in 1912 did not mean its seizure by any means. Although the Sultan

had signed the relevant treaties, the various population groups of the Rif Mountains lived largely autonomously, paid no taxes, etc., especially since they also belonged to the Berber tribes with their very own traditions, in contrast to the Arabic-speaking population in the core area of Morocco.

Spain embarked on a slow process of penetrating the Rif from 1906 onwards. Various leaders received monetary payments to allow the development of mines and the settlement of Spaniards. Moroccan auxiliary troops were also deployed. However, conflicts and major clashes repeatedly occurred, sometimes with the Spanish army suffering considerable losses. When the Spanish army mobilised more soldiers at home to fight the Riffian Kabyles, a series of anti-colonial movements took place in Spain. As more and more conscripts were called up, there was even a semi-insurrection in Barcelona in 1909.


What triggered the uprising led by Mohammed Abd al-Karim, who became known as Abdelkrim and what was his background?

What distinguished the 1921 uprising from earlier movements was Abdelkrim's personality. He came from a leading Riffian Kabyle family, had studied Islamic law, but also enjoyed a Spanish education. He was therefore aware of the economic and social situation

of his country and that it lagged behind Spain, a country that was not particularly developed within the European framework. He had initially hoped for a development boost considering the country's cooperation with Spain because, unlike France, Spain had been comparatively restrained as far as colonialism in North Africa was concerned. So, for example, he worked for the protectorate administration for a time and wrote for Melilla's daily newspaper.

But then the First World War broke out. Germany incited an uprising in North Africa as a strike against France, neutral Spain was only «collateral damage». In this historical situation, Abdelkrim and his friends were considered sympathisers of the empire and therefore under suspicion. Accordingly, he was persecuted and lost his position working for the protectorate. After the First World War, the situation came to a head. When Spanish troops advanced from Melilla into the eastern part of the Rif in 1921 to finally carry out territorial «development», Abdelkrim began the uprising.

In a conventional war, the Spanish had access to better equipment and larger numbers of troops. That is why Abdelkrim developed guerrilla warfare tactics, or «asymmetrical warfare», which incidentally inspired many later guerrilla fighters, from Mao to Fidel Castro. The fighters of the Rif also had the advantage of knowing the terrain, unlike the Spaniards who relied on maps.




The Abdelkrim uprising lasted until 1926. What distinguished the uprising of the Riffian Kabyles from other uprisings against the European colonial powers, such as the uprising of the Kabyles and the Arabs in 1870/71 in neighbouring Algeria?

What distinguished the uprising in the Rif under the leadership of Abdelkrim from earlier struggles in the Rif was the goal. It was no longer a matter of fighting for subsidies from the Spaniards but rather the unification of all groups of Riffian Kabyles and their independence in the form of a republic to allow independent development or modernisation. Abdelkrim wanted to go beyond the mere restoration or safeguarding of old social structures that were fragmented and characterised by each tribe being solely interested in controlling their territories. What remained intact was the relationship of this republic with the Moroccan state and thus to the sovereignty of the Sultan. If the Rif Republic had been able to assert itself it would have become an independent nation.

What should not be forgotten is that the Ottoman Empire, which collapsed during the First World War, also experienced a wave of independence initially in Turkey under Kemal Pasha, but also in Egypt and beyond in Persia and Afghanistan. This context influenced the struggle of the Riffian Kabyles, turning a mere defensive

struggle against the Spanish into a struggle for independence. Just as Kemal, the future Atatürk, had succeeded in doing.

The Rif Republic might have been able to hold its own against the Spanish alone but when the French also entered the fray in 1925 its fate was sealed. The French troops advanced from the south with a massive deployment of troops and a large air force at their disposal. The independence fighters of the Rif surrendered and Abdelkrim was subsequently deported by the French.



To what extent did the Riffian Kabyles uprising and its suppression by the Spanish influence Morocco's further development?

With the suppression of the uprising, the colonial rule of the Spanish in the protectorate was consolidated. They strengthened conservative structures and religious influence. The Spanish colonial army could continue to count on financial support from the Spanish state; it was the favoured part of the army. This did not change with the fall of the monarchy and the establishment of the republic in 1931, despite the socialist-republican coalition in Madrid that ruled until 1933. Ultimately, the reform plans for the Rif were limited by the financial resources available. All in all, the Republic, regardless of the coalitions in Madrid, maintained its claim to

colonial supremacy (e.g. securing the protectorate as an export market for Spanish goods or settlements).

While in the east of the Rif, after Abdelkrim's defeat, the anti-colonial movement was barely present, its centre of gravity had shifted to the west (with Tetuán as the «capital» of the protectorate). After 1931, hopes had been high, even minimally, for some kind of autonomy. But these expectations were thwarted. When the Spanish protectorate in Morocco became the starting point for Franco's campaign against the Spanish Republic in 1936 there was no resistance. Franco's putschists even recruited 35,000 Moroccan mercenaries for their war against the Republic.

For the French part, the situation was somewhat different. Here, the movement had little impact. After all, the different population groups of the Rif had always acted independently. Then there was the ethnic question, since the Riffian Kabyles, despite all the common ground in their commitment to Islam, also cultivated cultural peculiarities vis-à-vis the vast majority of the Arabic-speaking population in the French-dominated centre and south of the country. This is a delicate problem, even today. The French, who initially had little sympathy for the difficulties experienced by the Spaniards because they wished to take over the north as well, prevented any solidarity with the north. A victorious Rif republic would have acted like a spark that would very soon have set fire to their rule as well.

Why did Spain use poison gas in the war against the Riffian Kabyles? Was Spain guilty of other war crimes in Morocco?

Spain had remained neutral during the First World War but had immediately shown an interest in weapons technology innovations such as aircraft, tanks and even poison gas, making efforts to acquire these technologies. After the defeat of the Spanish in the summer of 1921, suffering well over ten thousand casualties, the demand to use poison gas very quickly arose in the Spanish press. It was clear that in a battle fought largely as a guerrilla war on the enemy's territory, it was very difficult, perhaps even impossible, for the Spanish army to achieve victory. Immediately, responding to pressure from King Alfonso XIII, the great-grandfather of the current Spanish king, contacts with Germany and the Reichswehr, were established. The German army still had supplies of poison gas from the World War, which they had kept in breach of their obligations under the Versailles Peace Treaty, and which could now be tested in the field in Morocco. Thus, there was not only a transfer of technology for the construction of production facilities but also large deliveries of poison gas. They started practising dropping gas grenades from aeroplanes. During the First World War, poison gas was still fired by artillery so the Reichswehr sent officers to Spain and Morocco to train the troops.

The poison gas was systematically used against the civilian population and there were regular bombings on market days. Agricultural land was deliberately contaminated to cut off the food supply to the insurgents. This forced them to retreat to areas controlled by France. In this «roundabout way», France became a Spanish ally.

The battle was brutal, i.e. annihilation of the enemy, which was not uncommon in colonial wars. Indeed, the Rif rebels had also taken prisoners who were later exchanged after long negotiations. But not all Riffian Kabyles followed Abdelkrim's strict orders to protect the lives of prisoners of war. Rage over the Spanish attacks on the civilian population was too great to be easily controlled especially since the Spanish Foreign Legion, modelled on the French one and also comprising foreign soldiers including Germans, took no prisoners. The macabre images of the legionnaires proudly standing alongside decapitated Rif fighters can still be found on the internet today.

What about the reappraisal of colonial history in Spain? Which actors in Spain are pushing for a reappraisal of history and what is the situation in Morocco? Is there a confrontation with this part of the country's history or is the government in Rabat deliberately

neglecting history because parts of the population in the Rif are protesting against Rabat's policies?

The reappraisal of Spain's colonial history is unfinished because it is either revered by the Right or glossed over by the socialist party. This continuously leads to conflicts with Latin American states, most recently Mexico. In the case of Morocco, it is a little more nuanced because the country can hardly be counted as part of the «Hispanic cultural circle». As previously mentioned, there is a connection to the Franco coup and therefore also the unbroken lines of tradition in the military. The Legion, albeit currently purely Spanish, is the «elite unit» that is also sent on missions abroad.

While there has been a very critical and productive stocktaking of colonial rule in northern Morocco in academic historiography in Spain for years, including an exchange with Moroccan historians – even though with less impetus than in France – colonial history and its crimes have not arrived comparably in the public consciousness. There is still a lot to be done. Spain's Left revisits the topic from time to time, but the politics of history in Spain is of course completely dominated by the civil war and its aftermath. This has, to put it another way, «great power of mobilization» on all sides of Spanish politics. Spain's defeat in the colonial war in the twenties, commemorated this year, led to the publication of many books and newspaper articles but was not addressed in «major» politics particularly because of the

pandemic. However, it has not been forgotten. During a parliamentary committee meeting Josep Borrell, at that time Spanish Foreign Minister, called for a declaration to be made. The Republicans of Catalonia are the most active on this issue.

Does colonial history weigh on Spanish-Moroccan relations and to what extent does the Riffian Kabyles' demand for reparations influence bilateral relations?

Colonial history is like a ghost waiting in the wings. On the official stage, it plays no role because neither the government in Rabat necessarily wants to refer to the Rif fighters, who are too much of a reminder of the repeated mobilisation against the discrimination of precisely this part of the country, nor does the government in Madrid like to see itself in the succession of colonial rule, which is, after all, also closely linked to the officers of the coup of 1936. There are also no official demands for compensation on the Moroccan side so officially Spain does not need to take a stand.

Even Spain's extreme right, Vox, with its echo in the Popular Party, refrained from making this an issue on the occasion of the centenary. Many Spaniards who died in the Rif were conscripts who did not want to be there. Conflicts between the two countries revolve entirely around the migration issue, economic disputes related to fishing rights, exports to the EU, and so on. Furthermore,

Spain does not want to endanger its enclaves, Ceuta and Melilla, and seal off the Canary Islands from the Moroccan mainland on the opposite side. Added to this is the unresolved Western Sahara issue.

This then leaves the population of the Rif. The cancer rate among the population in the area is substantially higher when compared to the rest of the country, which is presumably a long-term consequence of the poisoning of the soil. There have been no investigations about this and neither Rabat nor Madrid have attempted to resolve the problem. Berlin is also culpable because it was here that the delivery of the poison gas, in breach of international law, was initiated. That too is a «German legacy»


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