

Deadly Embrace. Morocco and the Road to the Spanish Civil War

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Deadly Embrace is not only a well-written and thoroughly documented book but also a necessary and vital contribution to the study of the turbulent and often violent first four decades of twentieth century Spain. Not surprisingly, in a country whose political destiny has unfortunately been determined far too often by praetorian intervention, there is a rich scholarly literature on the Spanish armed forces. There also exists a vast number of studies on the colonial wars of the last quarter of the nineteenth century, in particular the origins and aftermath of the disaster of 1898. By contrast, the subsequent brutal and last imperialist adventure in Morocco, and more specifically the Army of Africa, has traditionally been overlooked. Furthermore, the objectives of the previous vital works on the question of the military and Morocco have been radically different to those of the present book under review.

Joan Connelly Ullman's *The Tragic Week* (Harvard University Press; Cambridge, MA, 1968) remains the ultimate study of popular insurrection, that of 1909, against involvement in a new colonial enterprise. Yet its object was not so much Morocco itself but the linkage between anti-clericalism and anti-militarism as early forms of protests against the ruling oligarchic regime. Equally, Caroline P. Boyd's *Praetorian Politics in Liberal Spain* (University of North Carolina Press; Chapel Hill, 1979) was above all a lucid analysis of the division within the armed forces, caused to a large extent by the war in Morocco from the outbreak of the Great War to the coup of Primo de Rivera in 1923. Again, the focus was on mainland Spain, examining the parallel process between the crisis of the ruling system and the increasing intervention of the military in politics. Recent works by Spanish historians such as Pablo La Porte's *La Atracción del Imán* (Editorial Biblioteca Nueva, SL; Madrid, 2001) and Juan Pando's *La Secreta Historia de Annual* (Temas de Hoy;

Madrid, 1999) are welcome analyses of the major defeat of the Spanish army in Morocco in 1921. However, *Deadly Embrace* represents an altogether new fascinating endeavour: the study of an interventionist military elite through the experience of war in Morocco. The outcome is an illuminating analysis of the creation of a new caste of army officers who came to embody a growing colonial identity at odds with the metropolis that finally led to the rebellion of 1936. This book provides a valid model with which to understand the mentality and ideology of the colonial corps and its potentially destabilising role when confronted by metropolitan administrations.

Paradoxically, after his last work, the *End of the Spanish Empire, 1898-1923* (Clarendon Press; Oxford, 1997), a study of the impact of the colonial disaster and loss of the overseas territories, Balfour now concentrates on the new domains acquired in Africa, at the start of the twentieth century. Divided into three parts, starting with 'The Colonial Embrace', he examines the first three decades of colonial experience in Morocco.

Following the disaster of 1898, Spain consolidated through diplomatic negotiations with the two large colonial powers, Britain and France, a few footholds in Africa. They included Guinea, Western Sahara and a strip of land in northern Morocco surrounding the two traditional Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla. As Balfour correctly explains, the combination of business lobbies eager to exploit the mining resources of the area with the imperialist dreams of a group of politicians and the army's hope to recover its lost prestige, all with the full backing of the new King, Alfonso XIII, resulted in the country slowly sinking into a new adventure for which it was not prepared. Ironically, Spain was largely a victim of the increasing competition between the European powers. She secured approval to exert control of northern Morocco due to the fact that Britain needed a buffer against French expansion towards the coast opposite to Gibraltar (p. 5).

In fact, in comparison to French Morocco, Spain was allocated not only a relatively small area but also one characterized by arid and infertile terrain and inhabited by a rebellious and indomitable population. Indeed, everything went downhill from 1909. The complex existing rivalries, combined with the penetration of European capital, resulted in localized clashes and eventually to a full-scale rebellion that was to last for almost twenty years. At a peninsular level, the effects were extremely significant. Labour unrest and anger against the regime intensified. With still-fresh memories of 1898, the call-up of working class reservists to become the cannon fodder of new imperialist ambitions was greeted with riots that reached their peak during the so-called 'Tragic Week' of Barcelona in the summer of 1909. With growing popular turmoil and the emergence of regional nationalism, the military were needed increasingly to act as the praetorian guard of the ruling social order. At the same time, a new generation of young and dynamic officers soon known as *Africanistas* saw the opportunity to bypass the bureaucratic scale of the inflated army corps to obtain quick promotion by showing merit on the Moroccan battlefield. Yet the royal favouritism, nepotism and corruption with which medals and honours were awarded to these officers angered those in mainland Spain. It marked the beginning of internal fissures within an alienated and embittered army. Finally, as the Moroccan campaigns became an endless nightmare for distinct Spanish governments, aware of the unpopularity at home, they persistently underfunded and practically concealed them from public scrutiny.

Balfour could have explored more in depth the crucial years of the Great War. This was, after all, the moment in which peninsular officers badly hurt by wartime inflation formed the so-called *Juntas Militares de Defensa*: a sort of military trades unions, whose objectives included the re-imposition of a closed-scale system of promotion in detriment to their fellow *Africanistas*. The refusal of these *Junteros* to disband in June 1917 galvanized the reformist forces in the country to launch a revolutionary strike. Won over by last-minute concessions, the *Junteros* crushed with ferocity the revolution and temporarily saved an ailing regime. However, as social discontent and political turmoil continued unabated, the armed forces were increasingly called upon to bail out a discredited regime. The downward spiral of violence and repression effectively ended with the army take-over in September 1923. In Morocco, the First World War saw German secret agents seeking to incite an insurrection against the French administration. In fact, it also fuelled the rebellious spirit of many Moroccans in the Spanish zone. One of them, Abdel Krim turned during these years from collaboration with Spain to lead the forces that inflicted on the Army of Africa its worst defeat, Annual.

Balfour explains coherently the causes and aftermath of Annual, the catastrophe in which during a few weeks of the summer of 1921, thousands of Spanish troops were massacred or captured by the rebel Moroccans. It shocked the country and in a way was the last nail in the coffin of the ailing liberal regime. As the author explains, if not a disaster foretold, it could have been prevented at the very least. The inadequacy of the budget allocated to this campaign and lack of investment to buy the loyalty of the natives were important. But above all the military incompetence of adventurous generals such as Silvestre, the Commander-in-Chief of the troops in Annual, proved decisive. Yet out of the ashes of Annual a new colonial army began to be forged that had revenge as its fundamental motive power (p. 83). For the next six years, as weak governments lacking a clear strategy for Morocco succeeded each other and eventually the liberal order gave way to a dictatorship whose leader, General Miguel Primo de Rivera, was well known for his *abandonista* views, the Army of Africa came of age. Their sense of elitism and disdain for both governments and armed forces in the peninsula led them to view themselves as the vanguard of a new race of conquerors and heroes. Thus, scorn for governments of any leaning in Madrid and the practice of horrifying, brutal methods to quell dissent amongst the native population were the formative values of the *Africanistas*. When in 1927 the Moroccan campaign had been completed with success, a violent but highly efficient corps of ambitious army officers reached the peak of their glory. With their active service all but over, their mentality was bound to clash with the governing classes back at home. This was particularly glaring when a reformist and modernizing Second Republic was proclaimed in 1931.

The central section, tellingly called 'The Brutalization of Colonial War', is the essential part of this book. Balfour abandons the chronological narrative to produce a superbly written and powerfully argued wide-ranging series of thematic chapters. First of all, he offers an eloquent view of the use of chemical warfare in the Moroccan campaigns. Angel Viñas in his excellent *Franco, Hitler y el Estallido de la Guerra Civil* (Alianza; Madrid, 2001), has already advanced this argument. Yet the concern of this author was, above all, to trace the collaboration between Spanish and German army officers up to the outbreak of the civil war. By contrast, Balfour provides a convincing analysis of chemical weapons as an instrument in the offensive to quell rebellion in Morocco. After Annual, they became a key element in the arsenal of the Army of Africa. The desire to punish the recalcitrant natives, added to the low cost of production and the possible savings in terms of manpower was something that united King, *abandonistas* like Primo and *Africanistas*. Its widespread use was not as secret as sometimes this book seems to imply. Yet Balfour's as well as Viñas' previously great merit is to bring into academic scrutiny an element of Spanish warfare that had been traditionally overlooked. Furthermore, as *Deadly Embrace* insists, it was an important step in the formative descent into dehumanization and brutality of the Army of Africa. As *Africanistas* would claim, it was the regrettable but necessary corollary of civilization (p. 136).

The next chapters are of great quality. Here Balfour investigates the cultural background and conditions in which the Army of Africa was raised. It deals, firstly, with the widening gap between the mentality and values of *Junteros* and *Africanistas* that would ultimately prove irreconcilable. An antipathy would remain through to the civil war and would play a part in the support given by leading *Junteros* to the Republic,

when the bulk of the *Africanistas* rose in revolt in 1936 (p. 168). In the remaining chapters, *Deadly Embrace* offers a fascinating contrast between the experiences of soldiers and officers. Balfour portrays convincingly the quasi-surreal world dominated by terror, alienation, corruption and unabated warfare which the Army of Africa inhabited. For the recruits, Morocco was a meaningless nightmare in which fear for their lives, anxiety to return home and appalling living conditions went together. However, for the *Africanista* officers of either the native-led troops or *Regulares* and the Foreign Legion, the Moroccan campaigns became the crucial part of their upbringing. Indeed, most *Africanistas* would have subscribed to Franco's words: 'Without Africa, I can scarcely explain myself'.

Amongst the *Africanistas* existed a minority of enlightened officers interested in embracing the Arabic culture and winning over the natives. Yet for the majority, their African experience was a schooling in which they embraced a core ideology of brutality, sacrifice and discipline. The best exponent was the Foreign Legion. Created by the brutal Millán Astray, Franco and the best-known *Africanistas* served in its ranks. Under the motto 'Bridegrooms of Death', the Foreign Legion blended Prussian militarism with the Japanese *Bushido* code of violence, abnegation, elitism and honour. Thus, they regarded themselves as the saviours of a decadent Spain, the expression of an extreme form of nationalism in which the ultimate goal was glory or death. In this process of legitimization of repression, the natives were seen as the archetypal 'other': primitive, fanatic and backward, who ought therefore to be crushed.

The concluding part examines the 1930s, the tragic period that encompassed the proclamation of the Second Republic and the civil war. *Deadly Embrace* illustrates how the Army of Africa played a central role in the unfolding of the dramatic events. In their distorted view of nationalism, their role as saviours of the motherland was now manipulated. The Moorish 'other' was no longer the enemy, but the 'reds', masons and separatists who had captured the government of the country.

The establishment of a new republican regime brought a new governing class. Inspired by ideals of modernization, the new administration introduced wide-ranging reforms that threatened the vested interests, no less the armed forces. The Republic's strongman Manuel Azaña, the Prime Minister who was also in charge of the War Department, would become the *bête noire*. Military measures that included the promotion of loyal officers, mostly *Junteros*, the freezing and review of the awards and promotions conceded during the last Moroccan campaigns, and the opening of new judicial enquiries into the disaster of Annual, confirmed the anti-republican instincts of the colonial corps. Thus, *Africanista* officers were at the centre of the reactionary conspiracy to overthrow the new regime. One of them, General Sanjurjo, staged an ill-fated rebellion in August 1932. Yet a year later the political pendulum was to swing the other way, as right-wing parties emerged victorious in the elections of November. The repression of the revolutionary movement of October 1934 then became a dress rehearsal for the horrors of the civil war. With martial law declared, power rested officially in the hands of the War Minister, Diego Hidalgo. In effect, General Franco, his technical adviser, was the one in charge. His dispatch of units of Legionnaires and Moors to crush the Asturian miners represented the crossing of the Rubicon. The great paradox was that Muslim mercenaries were employed to suppress, with unprecedented levels of brutality, Spaniards in Asturias, the cradle of the Spanish Christian *Reconquista* in medieval times. When two years later, a left-wing swing brought the Popular Front to power, the die was cast. *Africanista* officers began to plot in earnest the destruction of the Republic.

Deadly Embrace's final chapter is entitled 'The Reconquest of Spain'. Although too short for the crucial three years it narrates, it is a powerful recollection of the crucial role played by the Army of Africa. Ironically, General Mola and the other *Africanista* conspirators, confident in the rapid success of a military coup, assigned the colonial army initially only a passive role. Yet this all changed when the insurrection failed in the capital and the most important urban and industrial centres of mainland Spain. As the partially botched rebellion gave way to a cruel civil war, the Army of Africa became the most important asset of the insurgents. With the blessing of the Catholic Church and the people of order, the discourse of the 'other' was finally reshaped. Messianic zeal, nationalism and myth came together to justify the savagery of the colonial shock troops let loose in the country. The cleansing and brutal methods of warfare previously used to subjugate the natives became now commonplace on the mainland. By 1939, the *Africanistas* had succeeded

in their mission of 'saving' Spain. Yet the bloodbath and repression was far from over. One of the *Africanistas*, General Franco, was to rule the country for almost 40 years. Spain herself had become a colony.

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