

Carrying the war into Africa?

Anarchism, Morocco, and the Spanish Civil War

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Part One

I was approached by Jeff Stein to write up a summary of Abel Paz, La cuestión de Marruecos y la República española so that English-language readers might be made aware of the Spanish anarchist approach to Morocco during the civil war. I would like to thank Jeff for prompting me to write what follows, although he should not be held responsible for its contents or conclusions.

‘A lenient war is a lengthy war, and therefore the worst kind of war. Let us stop it, and stop it effectually [...] stop it on the soil upon which it originated, and among the traitors and rebels who originated the war. This can be done at once, by “carrying the war into Africa.”’

Frederick Douglass, ‘How to End the War’, 1861

The question of why the revolution that accompanied the Spanish Civil War did not result in independence for the Spanish protectorate in Morocco has long vexed its supporters. Guerrilla warfare in the centre of the region (the Rif) had plagued the Spanish authorities from 1909 and had only been suppressed in 1927 following joint military operations by the French and Spanish, involving the indiscriminate use of chemical weapons, and the arrest of the famous leader Abd el Krim. The military conspiracy against the Spanish Second Republic was incubated in this brutalising colonial environment, and Moroccan troops employed in the so-called Army of Africa were crucial to the war effort mounted by the conspirators when their attempted coup stalled in July 1936. Why then was no attempt made to cut off the conspiracy’s vital base by fomenting a recurrence of fighting in the Francoist rearguard? In particular, why hadn’t the anarchist movement, through the powerful union, the CNT, forced this issue during the months of its greatest influence?

Daniel Guerin posed this question of Diego Camacho, anarchist veteran of the underground struggle against Franco and historian of Spanish anarchism (under the penname of Abel Paz) in 1969. The question resulted in a decades-long search for information and documentation that was eventually published in the book *La cuestión de Marruecos y la República española* (Madrid: 2000). It makes for a gripping read – Paz’s narrative is combined with verbatim copies of his documentary sources and witness testimonies – but ultimately provides only a partial answer to Guerin’s question. In this two-part article I will first summarise Paz’s findings before fleshing out some of the contradictions in the anarchist approach to ‘the Moroccan question’.

Paz’s book contains a dedication to its chief protagonist, Juan García Oliver, the veteran anarchist ‘man of action’ who played a key role in co-ordinating the CNT’s victorious response to the attempted military coup in Barcelona in July 1936. By the following month, García Oliver was the dominant personality in the Central Committee of Anti-Fascist Militias (CCAM), an ad-hoc body in which the CNT participated alongside anti-fascist and socialist parties in Catalonia. According to his own account, García Oliver had long been preoccupied with the question of Morocco and conceived of a rebellion in the Spanish protectorate as key to the success of the revolution. In August 1936 he contacted an old comrade, José Margelí, whom he had bumped into two months before in the company of an Egyptian teacher, Marcelo Argila. García Oliver asked Margelí about Argila, who ‘I assume, being Egyptian, must have connections with the Arab world’, which proved to be the case. Summoning both Margelí and Argila to his office, García Oliver entrusted them with a secret mission to depart for Geneva to contact Moroccan nationalists. A week later, the two men returned in the company of representatives of the newly formed

Moroccan Action Committee who, following an exchange of impressions, related García Oliver's proposals to their fellow committee members. These proposals consisted of a declaration of Moroccan independence and the provision of arms and finances in exchange for an uprising in the Spanish protectorate. At the beginning of September, a delegation arrived in Barcelona with a mandate to begin negotiations in earnest.

García Oliver made every effort to ensure the comfort and respectful treatment of the Committee, who reported their favourable impressions of the anarchist: 'García Oliver demonstrated complete agreement with us. Even when the independence of the Rif zone was spoken about there was no argument.' The Committee was mindful of a different obstacle, however, which was that the CCAM in Catalonia could not unilaterally renounce the Spanish claim to the protectorate. Such a decision would have to reside with the government of the Republic, which at the beginning of September came under the premiership of the Socialist Francisco Largo Caballero. Even on this issue, however, García Oliver was reassuring: 'He even told us that if the central government displayed ill will, then he would go and force it to sign a treaty, threatening it with the withdrawal of Catalan militias from the Madrid front.'

On 20 September, the organisations comprising the Central Committee of Antifascist Militias in Catalonia and the Moroccan Action Committee signed a pact guaranteeing the autonomy of the Spanish protectorate, the military evacuation of the zone and the confiscation of the resources of the rebellious military. A copy was taken to be presented to the Republican government in Madrid by four representatives of the CCAM, García Oliver not among them. There they were received by Largo Caballero, who seemed annoyed that the Catalan body had acted on its own account. Whether or not this was a bluff to disguise broader geopolitical concerns (Paz's book indicates that the French government had already made manifest its opposition to any gesture towards Moroccan independence), the delegation was given no grounds for hope.

And there the matter came to an anticlimactic end. García Oliver does not appear to have made good on his promise to threaten the central government, and the CNT's entrance into the Republican government in November did not result in major changes in this direction. According to reports published verbatim in Paz's book, the biggest impact of the negotiations appears to have been in Spanish Morocco, where Franco was persuaded of the need to grant certain basic freedoms to the native citizenry, such as allowing an Arabic-language newspaper to be published, a practice apparently prohibited in the French zone of the country.

Paz includes as appendices reports from 1938 that demonstrate continued CNT monitoring of the situation in the protectorate and even a proposal for concerted action. In fact, a recently published book by Ali Al Tuma (*Guns, Culture and Moors: Racial Perceptions, Cultural Impact and the Moroccan Participation in the Spanish Civil War*) suggests there was CNT involvement in an abortive raid of fifty armed men into Spanish Morocco, intended to provoke an international crisis at the time of the Munich Agreement, but which was discovered and quashed in Tangier at the last minute. However, after decades of research, Guerin's original question has retained a good deal of its original validity. Paz's book demonstrates the efforts and initiative of one anarchist, Juan García Oliver, in establishing contact with Moroccans. This contact was established through a fortuitous meeting rather than any organisational effort on the part of the CNT (there is an alternative explanation for the initial contact, which Paz deems less likely, involving Trotskyists in North Africa). Another projected anarchist initiative is referred to: that proposed by the secretary of the International Workers' Association, Pierre Besnard, while negotiations with the Moroccan Action Committee were ongoing. Besnard's plan consisted of busting Abd el Krim

out of his French captivity on Réunion Island. This plan was apparently viewed favourably by leading anarchists Buenaventura Durruti and Diego Abad de Santillán, although García Oliver was less sanguine about its feasibility. In any case, Besnard's proposals, like those agreed with the Moroccan Action Committee, hinged on a declaration of independence for Spanish Morocco. Besnard was sent off to meet Largo Caballero with the blessing of the Catalan CNT but was given short shrift.

Insofar as the CNT was committed to collaborating with its anti-fascist allies it is perhaps the case that it could not, acting in good faith, attempt to initiate any activity with regard to Morocco without first consulting them. As with other counterfactuals posed of anarchist activity during the Spanish Civil War, it is possible, though hypothetical, that ploughing ahead with whatever revolutionary measures and resources were available at the time and stopping to ask questions later might have proven a more fruitful policy. In the specific case of Morocco, however, the possibility that the anarchist movement was held back by internal failings must also be considered.

Part Two

'Much has been written about the Moors in various sections of the Left-Wing Press in this and other countries. They have been called the "scum of the earth," "black riff-raff," "mercenaries," and other such names [...] It is not the politically backward Moors who should be blamed for being used by the forces of reaction against the Spanish workers and peasants, but the leaders of the Popular Front, who, in attempting to continue the policy of Spanish Imperialism, made it possible for Franco to exploit the natives in the service of Fascism.'

George Padmore, 'Why Moors Help Franco', 1938

I provided a summary of García Oliver's reception of Moroccan nationalists in Barcelona and his attempts to establish an agreement that would see a rising in Franco's rearguard in exchange for a declaration of independence for Spanish-held Morocco. During these weeks at the end of August and the beginning of September 1936, the CNT's newspaper in Catalonia, *Solidaridad Obrera*, carried reassurances of the organisation's good faith. On 28 August, the paper's back page drew attention to the 'reign of terror' that the fascists had implanted in Morocco, and in an article on 'the right of peoples to rule themselves', called 'for the independence of the Rif.' This was followed on 30 August by the optimistic headline: 'The *rifeños*, understanding the liberatory movement in Spain and its true significance for the self-determination of peoples, are preparing an armed insurrection to finish off the fascists in Morocco.' On 1 September the paper carried a verbatim record of a speech given in Paris by Pierre Besnard in which he urged the French working class 'not to allow the workers of the Rif to be forced to kill their Spanish worker brothers. It is important that you know that the workers of the Rif are mistreated, exploited and persecuted on a daily basis by their executioners at Franco's orders.'

Not everyone had got the message, however. In a speech broadcast on Radio Madrid and published in *Solidaridad Obrera*, Federica Montseny, speaking in the name of both the CNT's Regional Committee and the FAI's Peninsular Committee, drew attention to the 'lack of Spanish sentiment' on the part of the military rising: 'if they were Spaniards, if they were patriots, they would not have unleashed the... Moors on Spain, imposing on Spain their fascistic civilisation,

not as a Christian civilisation but a Moorish civilisation'. Montseny was part of a tendency among some educated anarchists whose glorification of 'science' entailed an acceptance of racism. Her parents had once argued that doubting the existence of superior races based on 'the shape of the brain' was tantamount to denying Darwinian selection. Montseny's reading of the civil war in civilisational terms would become dominant over the course of the conflict, and the othering of Moroccan troops fighting for the Nationalists – referred to as 'Moors' – was common (see Martin Baxmeyer's chapter in *Reassessing the Transnational Turn: Scales of Analysis in Anarchist and Syndicalist Studies*, ed. by Constance Bantman and Bert Altena [PM Press]).

Nor should such instances of racism be written off as mere rhetorical excesses inevitable in wartime. Recent research by Ali Al Tuma indicates that the racism propounded in the rearguard translated into discriminatory violence at the front when Moroccan soldiers were captured. This, in turn, was a disincentive to Moroccans either crossing the lines or surrendering. I have found only one instance of protest against the othering of Moroccan troops in Republican propaganda (which is not to say that there are not more examples). In response to recruitment posters in the Republican zone urging men in Madrid to enlist to prevent 'their' women from being 'despoiled by the Moors', the anarchist women's group *Mujeres Libres* put out the following appeal: 'Comrade, brother: do not join the struggle out of fear of the Moorish "razzias," the bane of Christian women... you do not need the encouragement of opportunists who, to win a victory – almost always for their party – resort to the lowest of incitements... You are struggling for yourself; out of your deepest conviction and not because of the ridiculous threats, of greater or lesser accuracy and terror, of humiliation to your wife who, what is more, shares your ideal and knows how to defend it and herself.'

By the end of 1936, when this statement was published, such principled positions were unlikely to be echoed in the official newspapers of the CNT. Prior to the organisation entering the central Republican government in November, with Montseny and García Oliver taking on ministerial roles, the editorial board of *Solidaridad Obrera* had been cleared out. One member of the replacement team was Salvador Cánovas Cervantes, a dubious character who considered anarchism to be a 'racial', indigenously Spanish movement. Another was Jacinto Toryho, who in January 1937 introduced a speech by the veteran geographer Gonzalo de Reparaz, which was subsequently published by the propaganda department of the CNT-FAI with the title 'What Spain could have done in Morocco, and what it has done.' This curious pamphlet lamented the missed opportunity of Spanish colonialism, which, had it been more enlightened in Morocco, might have turned the protectorate into 'the cradle of a new Spanish empire.'

It is worth considering whether the extension of such civilisational thinking in the anarchist movement, and particularly among some of those in positions of influence, may have been an obstacle to a more coherent approach to Morocco during the war. But even if we disregard such examples as regrettable anomalies, the alternative conceptualisation of Moroccans as allies which briefly flourished when championed by García Oliver, was also limited. For one thing, it glibly assumed a commonality of interests and purpose among self-appointed representatives of the Moroccan nation in the Moroccan Action Committee and the tribespeople of the Rif who had fiercely resisted incursions into their territory in the previous two decades. This was not the case, as the historian Maria Rosa de Madariaga has made clear. García Oliver, remembering his meeting with the urbane and multi-lingual Moroccan Action Committee, was disappointed that they were not the kind of rabid and fanatical nationalists he had hoped to encounter. He later reflected in a letter to Abel Paz that the failure of the entire episode had less to do with the anarchists or the

Republic than with the fact that ‘the Arabs and Moroccans were still in the midst of a secular dream, from which they would only be awakened by the Jews with the creation of the state of Israel.’ We can read this as one more facet of the exoticisation of Moroccans that had served other sectors of the CNT as justification for paternalist colonialism and racist propaganda, or a comforting counter-narrative designed to shift responsibility for defeat; quite likely it was both.

The role of Morocco in the Spanish civil war is one element in the longstanding tendency to look back at the war and pose counter-factual arguments that result in a comforting parallel universe in which fascism lost. Collaboration with the Republican state is another. The latter limited the autonomy of Spanish anarchism and prevented the movement as a whole from acting in accordance with its principles. A declaration of independence for Spanish Morocco and its unpredictable consequences is one imagined scenario that may have resulted from an alternative path. This is possible but closer examination of the history provides no comforting assurances. Collaboration encouraged and made hegemonic tendencies that were already present in the movement: the most relevant to this article being an understanding of civilisation that carried with it nationalist and racist baggage. The fact that the biggest and most successful anarchist movement in history was unable to completely overcome these obstacles to libertarian communism is perhaps unsurprising given the movement’s international isolation and the predominance of racist ‘common sense’ in the period. While the ease with which anarchists were able to draw on their own tradition to justify nationalist positions is unsettling, the internationalism promoted in the pages of *Solidaridad Obrera* in the summer of 1936 and articulated alongside an interconnected anti-sexism and anti-racism by *Mujeres Libres* provide resources that may help guard against complacency on these issues today.

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