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Review of Ali Al Tuma, *Guns, Culture and Moors. Racial Perceptions, Cultural Impact and the Moroccan Participation in the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939)*

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The Moroccan soldiers in Franco's Army of Africa loomed large in the Republican imaginary. They monopolize the opening stanza of the song *No pasarán*: "Los moros que trajo Franco/En Madrid quieren entrar/Mientras queden milicianos/Los moros no pasarán." And one of the most famous Republican posters, *Los Nacionales*, includes two Moroccans among the five figures on the deck of the good ship "Junta de Burgos," with three smaller ones peeping out of the port holes. This contemporary concern has not carried over into the historiography, which includes very few studies devoted to the subject, and almost no works at all in which the Moroccan voice can be heard. (Even though it was not about the Civil War itself, Sebastian Balfour's *Deadly Embrace: Morocco and the Road to the Spanish Civil War*, is a rare exception.) In his new book, *Guns, Culture and Moors*, Ali Al Tuma proposes to remedy this situation, restoring these forgotten combatants to the center of the story and, especially, making their voices audible.

That most Moroccan soldiers were illiterate makes this an imposing task and Al Tuma draws on two principal sources to confront it. One is an archive of interviews with Spanish Civil War veterans conducted in the 1990s by Moroccan historian Mustapha El Meroun and fourteen interviews the author himself conducted in 2011. The other consists of the transcripts of interviews of 147 Moroccans from French Morocco carried out by French military officials after these men had left Spain. Al Tuma is very much aware of the pitfalls of such sources and takes care to explain their limitations to his readers.

Al Tuma's main concern is the relative weight of two factors in the wartime encounter between Spaniards and "moros:" the perception of the otherness of the Moroccan soldiers by Spaniards, mostly Nationalist but also Republican, and the ability of these soldiers to exercise agency: "to exert influence on their own affairs, along with and sometimes despite the policies of the colonial power" (4). His conclusion is that even though the relationship between Spaniards and Moroccans was an unequal one, both factors were important. On the one hand, the ways in which Spaniards understood Moroccans as "other" were significant in determining the ways in which they were used as soldiers: they were believed to have a distinctive psychology and particular abilities that made them excellent warriors, but only in certain roles and only as subordinates. It also led Nationalist authorities to create separate "Moroccan spaces": hospitals with halal kitchens, cafés, and even brothels with Muslim prostitutes, both to respect their religious sensibilities, which they sometimes overestimated, and to prevent potentially dangerous interactions with Spanish civilians, especially women. On the other hand, Moroccan soldiers welcomed,

and even demanded, such separate spheres; often sought to engage with Spanish society beyond the limits the authorities thought proper; and were capable of protesting when dissatisfied with their conditions. They were “active agents... not completely hapless victims” (229).

Al Tuma is also concerned to address what he calls two “points of contention” in the existing literature around the Moroccan presence in Spain: their motivation for fighting for Franco and charges of crimes against civilians and POWs (11). On the first, he rejects arguments made by Balfour and María Rosa de Madariaga, among others, that the Moroccans were simply mercenaries, finding that motives were mixed and that defense of religion was a factor for some. On the second he concludes that the horror stories “ascribed” to the Moroccans were “partly true, partly imaginary and partly deliberate fabrications” (58). Tellingly, he quotes a speech by La Pasionaria intended as a means of urging Republicans to fight to the end that was laced with racist stereotypes of uncontrollably violent, sexually savage Moors.

Al Tuma also includes a comparative aspect, looking at how the Nationalists’ use of colonial soldiers compared with that of other European nations, especially France and Great Britain during the two World Wars. The big picture was, he finds, very similar: the ways in which these soldiers were used were shaped by perceptions of race; military authorities tried to be sensitive to what they believed were the religious feelings of their colonial troops, especially the Muslims; and all sought to hinder sexual encounters between these soldiers and white women which, they felt would undermine European prestige. However, in the Spanish case there were three important differences: Nationalists made assertions of bonds of religion, blood and history with Moroccans that were unique; were more successful in persuading their colonial troops to accept their portrayal of the war, in this case as a religious struggle against communism; and Moroccan troops were more visible and widely accepted in Spain than in other European countries. In Nationalist Spain, at least. Republicans had a much more negative view of North Africans, even those few who offered their support. I initially found Al Tuma’s assessment that “right wing Spain was more tolerant of and less racist towards the Moroccans” shocking but, on reflection, came to concede that it is probably on the mark (227).

Largely due to the fragmentary nature of the available sources, in the end Al Tuma is unable to provide more than provisional answers to the questions he asks. Nevertheless, merely by posing the questions and then bringing the voice and agency of Moroccan soldiers into the discussion, by giving human depth and nuance to people whose portrayal has rarely escaped the realm of stereotype or cardboard villain, he has made an original contribution to the study of the Spanish Civil War, itself no mean feat.

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