

## Western-Sahara under the Spanish empire

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*I led research on peacekeeping in Africa, with a special focus on the Western Saharan question. If we would like to understand this conflict properly, we need to know about the colonisation of the Western-Sahara and the formation of the Spanish Sahara. In this essay, I'd like to introduce this course of events.*

### Beginning

Europeans arrived to the Canary Islands first (1309), which they could only occupy by 1401, due to the resistance of the Guanche population. Jaime Ferrer sailed along Boujdour not much later, in 1346, however he never returned home from his voyage of discovery.<sup>1</sup>

As the Spaniards almost exterminated the native population of the Canary Islands there was no sufficient labour force available for cultivating the land therefore slave-hunting expeditions were launched to the coasts of the Sahara. The first raids were somewhere at coastlines of Boujdour in 1405, where a complete caravan was looted, the captured Sahrawis were sold as slaves at a good price.<sup>2</sup> Having become enthusiastic over the success of the first escapade the Spaniards repeated the slave-hunting journeys called “*entradas*” or “*cabagadas*” for almost two centuries. Certainly, it could not be officially declared that only the slaves are required, therefore they hid their real intentions behind the likeness of Christian mission work.<sup>3</sup>

The very first colony of the Europeans was established by the Portuguese in Ceuta (1415), than mapping the neighbouring areas began, till in 1433–1434 the expedition led by Gil Eanes and Alfonso Goncalves Baldaya reached Cap Bojador, the coastal region of present day Western Sahara.<sup>4</sup> During the following expedition, which was led by Goncalves and Nuno Tristao, the Portuguese captured 12 nomads, among whom only a few could speak Arabic as they were of Berber origin. During the expedition in the year of 1440, as many as 235 nomads were captured who were partially sold to the Spanish.<sup>5</sup> By that time a sort of competition evolved between the Spaniards and Portuguese in slave-hunting. A short while later the Portuguese, systematically mapping the coastline, established their first trade-station on Isle of D’Arguin (1445), slightly South of Cap Blanc.<sup>6</sup>

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Received: June 16, 2010

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Portuguese historian Gomes Eannes de Azurara wrote about the expedition of Joao Fernandes in one of his books. The Portuguese explorer set foot on the shores somewhere near to Dakhla in 1445 and prepared a detailed report for the Royal Court. In his report he mentioned that the nomads living there had hardly resembled those living in the territory of Morocco, even the language they spoke was different, and it was the religion alone that was identical as they also recognised Mohammad as their Prophet.<sup>7</sup>

In the meantime the Portuguese realized that its more simple to purchase cheap slaves from tribes of the Sahara, then organizing risky surprise raids, therefore they establishes trade relations with several coastal tribes who sold black slaves and gold to them.<sup>8</sup> Black slaves were transported from the town of Ouadana to the Isle of D'Arguin, which meant a merely six-day long journey. Slave-trafficking had been organized from there for about two hundred years by the Portuguese and annually thousands of slaves had been transported from the island.<sup>9</sup>

Later the islands had been occupied by the British (1666), then the French (1667), finally by the Dutch (1685–1721). The Holland bought up the acacia gum (*Acacia verec*) originated from Mauritania, which was used in their textile plants set up in Portendick in Africa. The nomads tap this type of acacia tree today too and use it for textile dying, or make jewels out of its hardened version. Although the Dutch captured the Isle of D'Arguin in 1638, later they had to give it up to the French, in this way they completely disappeared from this area (Hague Convention, 1727).<sup>10</sup>

By the end of the 15th century, the right of control over the area from Cap Bojador up to Agadir, including the Canary Islands (1480-Toledo Convention), was awarded to Spain in accordance with the resolution of Pope Sixtus VI.<sup>11</sup>

### **Merchants and slave hunting**

At the end of the century Diego Garcia de Herrera, the governor of the Canary Islands erected a fortress (Santa Cruz de Mar Pequena-1476) and permanent colonies (Ifni) but only in the coastal zones as Spain had not taken the risk of permanent settling although by that time they had already led several expeditions to the inner areas of the Sahara. In fact Herrera had built the new fortress in order to store captured slaves, since the Spanish exterminated the entire population of the islands of Fuerteventura and Lanzarote. Their raids were launched from this fortress and the captured slaves were transported to the Canary Islands from here. The success of the slave-hunters is marked by the fact that local tribes laid a siege against the fortress within two years after its building and the garrison had only been saved from massacre by the relief troops of 700 men urgently sent by the governor. As slave-hunting was extremely lucrative and the

Court acquired one fifth of its total revenue from this source, the raids continued. A slave-hunter, Juan Camacho participated in forty-six actions in 1491 alone, which, in his narration, were all successful. Nevertheless, when Governor Herrera died (1485), the fortress was abandoned and the local tribes demolished it at once.<sup>12</sup>

However, the Spanish sovereigns henceforward needed the revenue coming from slave-trafficking therefore the fortress was rebuilt and operated as a trading centre onward. In October 1550 the Spanish King appointed Captain Alonso Fernandes de Lugo from Andalusia to the Captain of Africa, and ordered him to establish new fortresses. The Captain had three new fortresses constructed: the fortresses of Taghaost, San Miguel de Saca and Cape Bojador. The fortress of San Miguel de Saca was attacked one night prior to its completion by the local nomads, who butchered more than 300 Spanish soldiers, even the life of Lugo was at risk and he was saved by his interpreter, originated from the tribe of Ait Bou Tata.<sup>13</sup>

The increasing number of slave-hunting sorties infuriated the local tribes to such an extent that finally they declared a holy war, jihad. The attacking Bedouins seized and demolished the fortress of Santa Cruz in 1517, massacred the resisting forces and the survivors were sold as slaves. The Arabs attacked the slave-ships sailing under Spanish and other flags, later they attacked the settlements in the Canary Islands.<sup>4</sup> They also sent the captured people to slave-markets. As a repercussion of this, the Spanish officially banned the actions, expecting the Saharans to end their pirate raids, too. Yet, the unpermitted slave-hunting expeditions deluding superabundant return went on till 1593.<sup>14</sup>

### **Treaties**

The lost revenue was supposed to be replaced somehow, for example to exploit the fish exuberant off-shore waters. The Spanish concluded several fishing agreements with coastal tribes who granted free fishing or had not attacked the fish-drying plants established on the shores.<sup>15</sup> However, the Spaniards had no intention to share the territories with other Europeans, thence when the Scottish George Glas established a trading station opposite the Island of Fuerteventura (1764), he was imprisoned by the Spanish, and the station christened Hilsborough was set ablaze. The Scottish businessman was arrested when he went to Lanzarote Island to purchase a ship and recruit a new crew. Although he got restored to liberty from his one-year long imprisonment by the intervention of the English Government, the building of the trading station that had remained intact so far were destroyed by the nomads.<sup>16</sup>

In 1727 the Spanish and the Sultan of Morocco, Sidi Mohamed ben Abdallah signed the Treaty of Marrakech. However neither the Kingdom of Spain, nor the Kingdom of

Morocco could handle the piratical tribes, which is proven by their agreement on common fishing, concluded on 28 May, 1767. The agreement provides exclusive fishing rights to Spain in the coastal waters from Santa Cruz (Ifni) to the Northern borders. Nevertheless, Article 18. of the agreement well indicates the existing problems of the two states in this region:

*“His Imperial Majesty will refrain from considering the determination of His Catholic Majesty, according to which He desires to settle to the South of Ved Nun, because He will not be able to assume any responsibility for those accidents and misfortunes, which may be having regard to His empery does not extend this far, and the nomadic and sanguinary people of this country will always cause damages to the inhabitants of the Canary Island, among whom many have been taken captive.”<sup>17</sup>*

This agreement was amended several times in the forthcoming years, but this Article had remained unchanged.

It is to be known that Morocco had never been a national state till the 20th century but it consisted of a Principality of several areas independent of each other. The usual Monarch had no power over the tribes living in that area, thus they could live according to their own law. The area under the control of Moroccan leadership (*makhzen*) at that time was called as *“bilad el-makhzen”*. The majority of those cities and oases where the Moroccans established their authority and the representatives of the Sultan (*kaid*) exercised the control over the area belonged here. However, there were areas, which were only known as *“bilad es-siba”* at that time, which meant the land of refugees, i.e. absconders.<sup>18</sup> The Rif Mountains populated by Kabyles, the Berber settlements of the Atlas Mountains, and the Northern part of Western Sahara also belonged to these areas.

Although the Sultans of Morocco officially expressed their empery over these areas their power and military strength was enough to control the most important trading stations and cities only. There were periods, when the Sultans were not able to control a given area for many decades, or even for a century. Still there were such tribes, which attached importance to maintain relations with the Sovereign of Morocco, therefore they entered into an alliance (*bayaa*) with him, and the Sultan appointed the chief of the tribe by a decree (*dahir*) as his representative. A few tribes of the Sahara also entered an alliance with the Sultan but there were some tribes which fled from his reign to the Sahara, like the tribes of Arosien, Ait Lahsen, or Ouled Bou Sbaa. Nevertheless, the Reguibat tribes, which constitute almost 60 per cent of the Sahrawi population, had never signed any document, which would have provided legal title to the Sultan to hold dominion over them.<sup>19</sup>

The fact that the Sultan of Morocco had no influence over the Sahrawi tribes caused several problems not only to the Spanish but to the French diplomacy too, as the

mediation of the Emir of Mauritania was needed to ransom French seamen shipwrecked at the coasts of Western Sahara. Since the Emir maintained good connections with the 'Council of Forty', he could have successfully negotiated between the parties.<sup>20</sup> Alexander Scott was among the shipwrecked mariners who suffered shipwreck between Cape Noun and Tarfaja in 1810. The captors of the sailor sold him as a slave to a warrior from the Toubalt tribe, who had been his master for five years. When Scott was travelling in the Atlas Mountains with his owner he escaped and was assisted home by an English major in official mission in that locality.<sup>21</sup>

### **Colonisation**

That was the time when leaders of Spain decided to occupy the coastal lines of Western Sahara, partly to eliminate the pirate actions, partly to defend the Canary Islands. Therefore the leaders of the country announced to establish a protectorate on the area from Cap-Blanc to Cap Bojador in December 1884. This idea was later approved and then legitimated by the participants of the Berlin Conference on 26 February, 1885.<sup>22</sup> The Spaniards created the *Compania Comercial Hispano-Africana* on 30 March, 1884 on the model of the well functioning North-African Company (*Mackenzie Company-Cape Juby*) with English-Scotch interest.<sup>23</sup>

Several people participated in the company, who took positions in the top political or economic leadership of the kingdom restored in 1874. According to their concept, the Kingdom of Spain, having lost her power and vegetating like her own imperial shadow ought to have established new colonies, particularly on the territories of Africa not occupied by other European countries.

The concept was promoted by king Alphonso XII himself and he donated 3,000 Pesetas to the company, which collected 37,000 Pesetas within a short time, covering the expenses of two expeditions. The first expedition led by Manuel Iradier, Amando Ossorio and Bernabe Jimenes headed to the area of Equatorial Guinea, while the other group led by Emilio Bonelli Hernando went to Western Sahara. The concept of founding colonies had been approved by royalist, conservative Prime Minister Canovas del Castillo, however, the Government resigned in the meantime, thus only the minister of foreign affairs of the new Government could order the army to conquer the unoccupied coasts of the Sahara.

The Spanish unit led by Captain Emilio Bonelli Hernando conquered Dakhla (*Villa Cisneros*), where they erected a fortress and established the mail-service. Only 25 soldiers served in the fortress at that time, who were rotated in three month periods when the ship with the supplies from the Canary Islands arrived. Bonelli became the first military

commander, who had been living in Morocco for more than six years therefore he was fluent in Arabic and could develop good connections with the representatives of the local tribes. The captain made a proposal to the government to establish further stations along the coastline (Angra de Cintra, Cape Blanc and Rio de Oro).<sup>24</sup>

To provide protection to the coasts of the Sahara and the newly established settlements the Government sent a considerable fleet reinforcement to the Canary Islands with the order to pacify the shores of Western Africa. By April 1886 the Spanish penetrated inside the continent and appointed the first Governor, who represented the Government in the area.

With the aid of a Spaniard speaking Arabic perfectly the Spanish managed to find several local representatives of the tribes, who were ready to sign an agreement recognizing the Spanish control (Iyill Convention).<sup>25</sup> In spite of the fact that their representatives had signed the Agreement the tribes represented by them took up arms against the Spanish troops marching in. The Sahrawi tribes organized several insurrections against the Spanish power of occupation, and they assaulted the fortress of Villa Cisneros in 1887, then they attacked the fort in 1892 again, while in 1894 they set fire to ships “Tres de Mayo” and “Las Marias”, anchored in the bay.<sup>26</sup>

All that the Spanish managed to achieve was a single agreement signed on behalf of the Sahrawi tribes by Ould Laroussi, the chief of one of the Ouled Delim tribes. Namely, the tribal leader recognized that it was easier to trade with the Spanish than to fight against them.<sup>27</sup> Of course, complying with the agreement was not meant by other tribes, so the skirmish went on.

The Sahrawi tribes still independent from Spain fought a battle at Daora in 1899 against the troops of the Sultan of Morocco, where they prevented the Moroccans to gain grounds in the Sahara area.<sup>28</sup> In the meantime the Spanish wanted to ensure their rights already won against the French and other European states, therefore they came to an agreement with France occupying Moroccan and Mauritanian territories on disputed border issues. As a result of the negotiations the first French and Spanish border agreement was ratified on 27 June, 1900, which was amended by secret agreements, signed on 3 October, 1904 and later, on 27 November, 1912.<sup>29</sup>

Figure 1 shows the map of the borders established by the agreements.

These agreements established the borders which were also approved by the contemporary states, with the sole exception of present-day Morocco. The borders were also established within the framework of a new agreement in 1954. Despite the successful Spanish and French diplomatic co-operation the Spanish were able to effectively act only in the coastal areas while the French managed to gain grounds in the Sahara areas faster and more spectacularly. That is why Sheikh of Smara Ma El-Ajnin,

a religious leader of Mauritanian descent asked the help of the Moroccan ruler to fight against the French (1905). The popular religious and military leader known by the nickname 'Ma El-Ajnin' (Water of the Eyes) did not belong to any Sahrawi tribe.

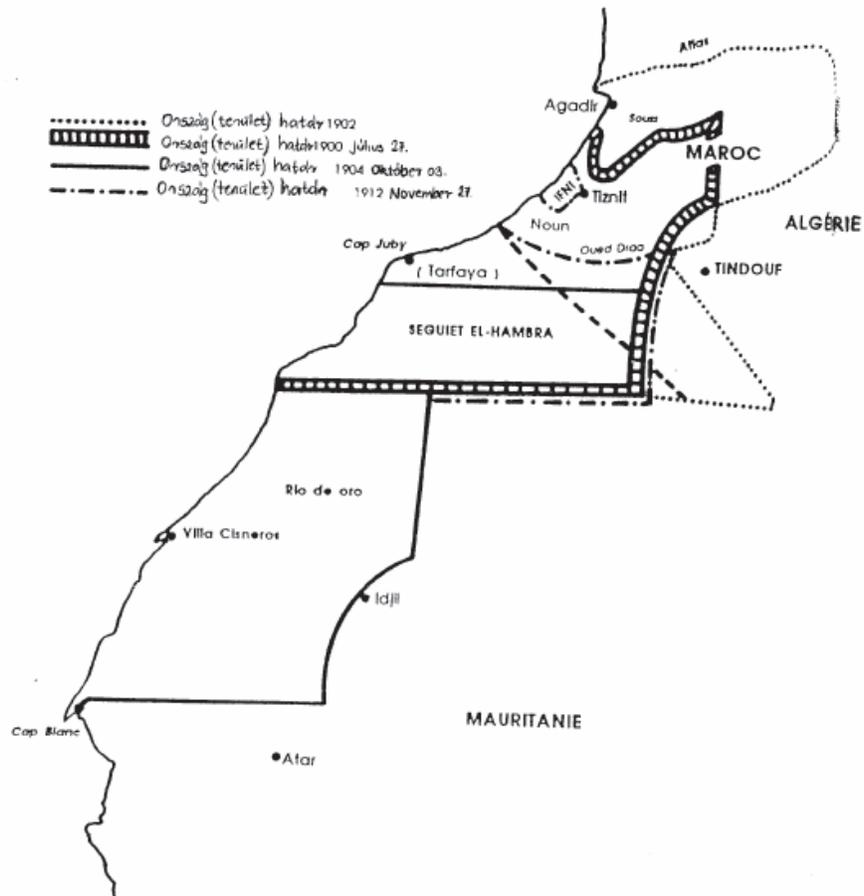


Figure 1. Map of Western-Sahara  
Source: Attilio Gaudio; Les populations du Sahara occidental p. 48

The latter holy man of the Sahrawi tribes was born in Hodh, near the banks of the River Niger around 1830–31, under the name of Mohammed Mustafa Ould Sheikh

Mohammed Fadel.<sup>30</sup> His family came from Tafilalet (South-East Morocco) and moved to Hodh in the 17th century. His father, Mohammed Fadel Ould Mamin, was one of the most honourable religious leaders (*marabu*) of the city, who founded the Kadirija denomination of Sufism (Muslim religious school). As a tradesman Ma El-Ajnin moved to the North-Western part of the Sahara in 1859, close to Tindouf city founded by the Tadjakent tribe a few years earlier. When he arrived to this area he had already performed his pilgrimage to Mecca thus he received great prestige among those people living here, who had never reached Mecca.<sup>31</sup> Because he maintained good connections with the members of the Alavita dynasty it is not surprising either that in 1887 the then Monarch of Morocco appointed him his official representative to the nomads of the Sahara, who already worshipped him as a saint. When the construction of the city of Smara founded by him had begun, the then Sultan Moulay Abdelaziz sent masons and building material (timber beams and other material not available in that region) to expedite the construction.<sup>32</sup>

However, the Sheikh worried about the headway of the French, who approved a plan in 1899, the developer of which proposed the creation of a French protectorate from Senegal to the River Draa. In the spirit of the plan the French had occupied the entire territory of both Algeria and Tunis by 1903.<sup>33</sup> The fortified city of Brakna, the last refuge of the resisting Arab warriors, was conquered by Xavier Coppolani of Corsican origin in French service by the end of 1903. Thus there was no more considerable power in the North, which could offer resistance against the colonization intentions of the French, although the French commander and a few soldiers were slaughtered by the nomadic troop led by Sidi Seghir Ould Moulay Zein in the village of Tagant later on, when he stood overnight in the local caravansary in transit with a few soldiers (12 May, 1904).<sup>34</sup>

According to the French assumption the raid was ordered by Ma El-Ajnin. Of course, the assassination could only temporarily delay the French, who soon appointed a new commander to lead their troops. The French troops started to occupy the still independent little desert state, Adrar on that time (9 January, 1909). The French defeated the resisting tribes (Ouled Delim, Reguibat, and Aroussiyyine tribes) in several battles, which surrendered after losing their leaders and most of their warriors.<sup>35</sup> That's the reason why Sheikh Ma El-Ajnin tried to counterbalance the French headway by founding a new town, present day Smara, in the territory still under Spanish control (1898). The town was located between Tindouf and Adrar, near a busy caravan route, and the good lands suitable for grazing further increased its value. The construction of the main buildings of the town was completed by 1902 and Ma El-Ajnin dislocated his headquarters here for good.

It is interesting that the Sheikh did not regard the Spaniard so dangerous, who really had control over the three major cities strengthened by them, namely Villa Cisneros (Dakhla), La Guerra and the port of Cabo Juby (Tarfaya), and Sidi Ifni later. Therefore the patrolling warriors of the Sheikh left the Spanish patrols in peace, moreover, they even exchanged commodities with the smaller Spanish military posts, where they could pay for tea, sugar, flour and other commodities with their products (furs, stock, dates, etc.). As the Spaniards had not represented a considerable threat, the chiefs of the local tribes rather focused on the attacks against the French forces.<sup>36</sup>

As early as 1902 the French launched an expedition to the Sahara, which surveyed the area of present day Western Sahara and Mauritania, and also collected information for the French troops (Blanchet expedition) springing to attack soon afterwards. One of the members of the expedition, lieutenant Jouinot-Gambetta in his report warned the French military leadership about the dangerousness of the Sheikh:

*“Ma El-Ajnin, alias Mohamet Fadel, who lives among the locals is a truly fanatic Muslim, and according to his vision their faith will triumph and by that they will overcome the infidels occupying their land.”*<sup>37</sup>

The new town, Smara, soon became the spiritual centre of the nomads of the Sahara, from where they started to organize the armed uprising against the French. According to the concept of the Sheikh, they could have joined the factious tribes with the support of Morocco then they could have announced a holy war (jihad) against the infidels. The Monarch of Morocco first promised his support for the revolt, but he compromised with the French later, and then the betrayed Sheikh attacked Morocco. His troops comprising of Sahrawi and Mauritanian tribes occupied Marrakesh, but suffered defeat at Fez on 23 June, 1910 from the better equipped and trained French troops led by General Moinier.<sup>38</sup>

The Sheikh died within a few months, and his sons El-Hiba and Mohammed Laghdaf continued the struggle, however, they were far from being as talented strategists and spiritual leaders as their father. The reputation of the Sheikh is also shown by the fact that his descendants, as an independent tribe, became a part of those living in Western Sahara and had seats in the 'Council of Forty', later even in the Djemma. The tribes of Western Sahara continuing their struggle used the area of Saguia El Hamra under Spanish rule as the background-base of the fight against the French.<sup>39</sup>

As Spain was greatly disturbed by the French intention to develop a bordering colonial empire on the territory of Western Sahara, there was not any particular Spanish intervention against the Sahrawis. Moreover, there are evidences of paying monthly salary for Laghdaf even in 1919, so that he would not attack Spanish military check-points and other interests.

It is also surprising that the movement with considerable religious background and declaring all-out war against Christians had procured the majority of their weapons from the companies Woerman of Hamburg and Torres of Barcelona.<sup>40</sup> That was also well-known by the French military high command, therefore army units penetrated the territory of Saguia El Hamra under the cover of chasing rebellious tribes several times. During one of these attacks the units of Mouret comprising of the Senegal Rifle and Kounta, Oulad and Ghalian tribesmen Gendarme following a more than 800-kilometre-long forced march captured and later demolished Smara together with its Library founded by Sheikh Ma El-Ajnin.<sup>41</sup> More than 5,000 valuable, ancient manuscripts were stored in that library, a significant part of which perished. This march is mentioned by the French even today as a daring military action. The commanding lieutenant colonel departed with his unit from Atar Garrison on 9 February and arrived in Smara on 1 March.

Laghdaf tried to force a battle with the French troops leaving the town, therefore he lured them to the environs of Leburat. He passed false information to the French that he had barely 250 armed men, therefore they could surely expect a victory, but in reality, he had 1,200 warriors, mostly from the coalition of Reguibat Sarg and Sahel tribes. The Sahrawis attacked the rearguard of the French in the Valley of Tagliat (Oued Tagliat), and also the units sent to their rescue, finally completely surrounded the troops of Mouret (10 March).

The raid was just partial success, since the total losses of the 400-strong French unit after the battle were two officers (Lieutenant Morello and Captain Verhardt) and 28 enlisted, while more than 200 soldiers of Mouret were wounded. Finally the French retreated toward Mauritania, but the Sahrawis were unable to exploit their dubious victory, as they suffered the loss of nearly 100 men and the discouraged desert warriors refused to chase the French any further.<sup>42</sup>

After the lost battle, Mouret (according to his memoirs, at least) could have defeated the Bedouins led by Laghdaf, however, he ordered retreat to the French Garrison in Atar city (28 March, 1913), where his units were originally stationing. Otherwise the French deny the fact of setting the library ablaze. According to their story the soldiers of Mouret only placed mines under the most important buildings, in order to demonstrate their determination to the local population, but they did not detonate anything. Although, due to an unfortunate accident (lightning) a part of the library really took fire, but they rescued the books, a part of which later went into Moroccan possession somehow. Two French travellers in 1931 still saw the books, and the airplanes of the French colonial army took photos on Smara to prove to the world that their predecessors did not destroy the city.<sup>43</sup> The photos were published in a Moroccan daily; even so, the

descendants of the Sheikh have possessed no reliable information about the library to this day.

There was no significant fighting on this territory during World War I, apart from a smaller marine conflict, in which two German cruisers encountered with one of the battle ships of the British Fleet near to Dakhla. Naturally the German high command tried to engage French troops in the Sahara, as well; therefore they delivered weapons and other equipment to El-Hiba. The UC20 submarine sent by the Germans reached the coastlines of the Sahara on 15 October, 1916, where Edgar Probster, the consul stationing in Fez earlier handed over 600 modern weapons and the letter of the Ottoman Sultan to the Sahrawis. On his way back the Spanish captured the German envoy near Tarfaya and deported him to the Canary Islands.<sup>44</sup>

As France and Spain did not wage war on each other, the Spanish authorities tried to consolidate the relations of the territory under their rule.

The Spanish Governor, Francisco Bens Argandona, appointed in 1903, established good relations with the Ouled Delim, Ouled Bou Sbaa and Arosien tribes. The veteran of the Cuban war overbore the members of the tribes with his unescorted trips in the Sahara area, accompanied by a few Sahrawis. However, his friendships with the Sahrawis was not looked with favour by the French, and when he met Sheikh El-Hiba, who was one of the leading personalities of the uprising against France, they protested in an official note against contravening the agreement between the two states.<sup>19</sup> During the 22 years of his governorate he founded the second settlement, Cabo Jubu (June 29, 1916) of the conclave on the previous location of the North-West African Company of Mackenzie. The next settlement, which was occupied and fortified by the Spanish under his command, was the city of La Guerra (November 27, 1919).

Although the Spanish Government officially banned the occupation of the settlement, they easily occupied the city with three officers and two platoons of the 66 infantry regiment under the shroud of the night. As a matter of course, the leadership in Madrid, previously worried about the attack of the French and the local nomads, declared the entire operation their own success. Anyhow, the capture of the new city counter-balanced the trading influence of the nearby French city, Port Etienne.<sup>45</sup> 703 Spanish soldiers served at the areas of the Sahara at that time, out of which 121 in Villa Cisneros, 159 in La Guerra and 423 in Tarfaya. The strength of the contingent in Tarfaya was increased due to the airfield and the proximity of the French forces. 6 military airplanes (Henkel aircraft) had been deployed at the airfield since 1928.

In the meantime the new French Governor, General Gaden, developed new plans to pacify the nomads living on the territory. However, the situation in Mauritania and some parts of Western Sahara began to consolidate only later, after the Battle of Trefiya

in 1925, where the French completely eliminated the troops of the rebel tribes. Nevertheless, the raids went on and the situation in the Sahara worsened so far that France threatened Spain with the occupation of Spanish-controlled territories in 1934, if Spain could not hold up law and order there.<sup>46</sup>

In order to demonstrate the seriousness of the situation the French troops led by Colonel Trinquet occupied the town of Tinduf, which was an extremely important strategic point, and was annexed to Algeria within a few years.<sup>47</sup> The resistance of the Sahara tribes had become exhausted by then, and when the revolt of Ait Ba Amrane tribe was suppressed in the same year (March 4th 1934), the nomads definitively gave up marauding the French territories.<sup>48</sup>

The Spanish, led by Captain Galo and Lieutenant Carlos de la Gandara, sent their camel detachment comprising of Sahrawi soldiers to Daora. Following the occupation of the town the scarcely defended city of Smara was also occupied by the Spanish, where they established a permanent garrison.<sup>49</sup> Nevertheless, they were able to completely occupy the areas of Western Sahara only by 1936, and then they deployed garrisons (Zug, Tichla etc.) there and renamed the territory Spanish-Sahara.<sup>50</sup>

### **Spanish Sahara**

As a consequence of the occupation of the region local tribes launched several uprisings against Spanish rule. The most significant of such events happened in 1938 although it was quickly suppressed by the units of Spanish Legion. In fact only towns were under Spanish control while tribal areas were attempted to be controlled through heavy patrols.<sup>51</sup>

Figure 2 shows the map of the locations of former Spanish garrisons and military checkpoints.

That time the Spanish Army in the Sahara comprised the following personnel:

527	Officers and senior officers
246	Non-commissioned officers
12,713	Soldiers and police officers

Total: 13,486 troops

The control over the region was primarily the task of the units of Spanish Legion, the Ifni riflemen, recruited from local tribes (Tiradores de Ifni), local police forces (Policia Territoria), and nomadic cavalry units (Troopas de Nomadas).



Figure 2. Locations of former Spanish garrisons and military checkpoints  
Source: www.westernsahara.org

The Spanish Legion was established by King of Spain Alfonso XII in 1920 similarly to the French Foreign Legion. Lieutenant Colonel Millan Astray was appointed the first commander of the Legion, who began to set up the first battalion (bandera) in Ceuta that very year. The soldiers of the unit participated in every local battle until 1976, which saw the withdrawal of the Spanish forces. The personnel of the unit also included soldiers from Sahrawi tribes although their proportion was a few percent only.<sup>52</sup>

In the Sahara region the following units of the Legion stationed for some time:

- 2. battalion
- 4. battalion
- 6. battalion
- 9. battalion
- 13. battalion

The training and equipment of the units were very good: besides camel troops they also had French AMX-30, or AML-90 Main Battle Tanks and Heinkel 112 fighter aircraft.

Tiradores units were established in Morocco (Ifni) with Spanish and Moroccan officers but by the eruption of the Sahara conflict 98% of their officers had been Spanish because of the unreliability of locals. The majority of soldiers were Moroccan and nearly 40% was recruited from Sahrawi tribes around the town. The units had transportation, signals, supply, and medical subunits. First the troops of the units were equipped with small arms and light weapons but later on artillery units were also established equipped with 50-, 60-, 81- and 120-mm mortars.

The official establishment of nomadic cavalry units was in 1926 although nomads of Sahara had been employed for reconnaissance and other military tasks by the Spanish.<sup>53</sup>

The “Cabo Juby” unit was set up on 27th July, 1926 by local military leaders, which was reorganised subunit on 10th October 1928. Later, in order to increase their efficiency infantry units were equipped with horses. In 1930 the personnel of the nomadic unit comprised 30 Europeans (including 6 officers) and 198 Sahrawis, who had 62 horses and 183 camels. In 1937 one of the units was stationed in Tan-Tan (Sagua el-Hamra) and the other in Villa Cisneros (Capitan de Gandara).

After the Spanish Civil War the Spanish augmented nomadic troops and established new units so two units stationed in Tan-Tan, one in Smara and another one in the town of Villa Cisneros. Nomadic units were independent of one another and the regular army and they were under the command of a Government Envoy.<sup>54</sup> Nomads were tasked with the control over the border area and the tribal areas, collecting information for garrisons, policing and mass control, and keeping rebelling Sahrawis at bay. The structure of the nomadic unit (company) was as follow:

- 25 European soldiers (mostly officers and NCOs);
- 140 NCOs and soldiers recruited from local tribes;
- 146 riding camels;
- 37 camels for transportation;
- 2 machine guns;
- 1 small calibre field gun;
- 1 portable radio transceiver;

By the early 1970s all units were modernised and equipped with Land Rovers and Pegazo trucks except for one which continued to patrol on camels.

Although it is not a well known fact several Sahrawi soldiers served in General Franco’s forces although only Moroccans are mentioned by most historians dealing with Spanish Civil War (14% of Franco’s soldiers were Muslim during the war).<sup>55</sup> In the Sahara region the only event related to Spanish Civil War took place in March 1937

when Communists kept in the Villa Cisneros prison bribed a guard, seized some weapons, and broke out from their captivity. Since they had no chance to take the entire town they took a fishing boat and almost immediately left the port.<sup>56</sup>

That was also the golden age of Cabo Juby (Tarfaya), recorded in the history of civil and military aviation. For soldiers serving there the town was more infamous than famous as the Spanish armed forces ran a disciplinary company there. Between 1918 and 1936 a civil and military airfield operated in the garrison. Although there was an enormous competition between Spain and France in the region, that could not be an obstacle to building and using Cabo Juby airfield together. The French moved there their air mail service operating between Casablanca and Dakar (Compagnie Generale Aeropostate), managed by the famous French writer Antoine de Saint-Exupéry in 1927–1928. He wrote his short story “Courrier”, published in monthly “Him navire d’argent” and French Gallimard. This is the short story that brought him fame in literature. In 1929 the writer was appointed Head of Argentinean Air Mail and left town but remembered the 18 months spent there with pleasure.<sup>57</sup>

That time Sahrawi tribes lived in relative peace and the Spanish began to reorganise the regional administration although had no real interests in their Sahara colonies as that time there were no data on the phosphate and iron ore deposits in the area. The only income for the Spanish came from fishing industry so the colony produced only deficit for the Spanish Government. It is well indicated by the fact that in 1958 523 tons of fish and other products were exported at an overall value of 958,015 pesetas while import was twenty times higher: 21.4 million pesetas.<sup>58</sup>

Fishing was supervised by state-founded company IPASA, which built cold stores and controlled seaports. In the early 1950s 26,000 tons of fish was caught annually, mostly off the coast of Villa Cisneros and La Guerra. Besides fishing the company also ran seaweed-gathering and -processing plants but their revenues did not grow significantly. In order to found new bases for the fishing fleet the Spanish Governor deployed troops under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Del Oro who established the town of Laayoune in the Saguia el-Hamra valley in a mere 25 kilometres from the Ocean (1940). The new settlement (El Aaiun) was named after the wells (*ayoun*) in the vicinity and was renamed only after the Moroccan occupation.<sup>59</sup> The Spanish selected El-Aaiun as their administrative centre where the Governors of Saguia el-Hamra and Rio de Oro had their residencies. However, the development was very slow as in the region there were only small settlements with little population like Smara, La Guera, Dakhla, and some minor fortresses, such as Tichla and Zug.

World War 2 had no influence on the region although German Command considered the area of Spanish Sahara as a potential base for military operations in Africa.<sup>60</sup> Since

not only did Franco-led Spain support the Third Reich but also had Fascistic features itself the Germans trusted a tacit Spanish support although were also ready to occupy the region with the use of military force. Just in case the curriculum at the Berlin Military Academy included military topography of Spanish Sahara in the academic year 1942–43. (Spanisch-West-Sahara, Rio de Oro mit Spanisch Sahara und Spanisch-Süd-Marokko, Generalstab des Heeres, Abteilung für Kriegskarten und Vermessungswesen, Berlin 1942.)

The consolidated situation changed after WW II, when in 1946 Ifni and Western Sahara were united under the name of Spanish West-Africa and new unrests broke out in the area. In the early 1950s local people were involved in the fight of the Moroccan Liberation Army (*Jaich at-Tahrir*) and as a result of it Morocco offered its support to their fight for independence.<sup>61</sup> After the liberation of Morocco (April 1956) Moroccan military units fought shoulder to shoulder with Sahrawi tribes against Spanish troops stationing in Spanish Sahara. By that time the region got increasingly important for Spain as in the late 1940s Spanish geologist Manuel Alia Medina discovered the first phosphate deposits in the region of Bou Craa. The discovery grabbed the attention of General Franco, visiting the area in 1950 and ordered the Spanish Institute of Geology to send an expedition to confirm the findings of the geologist. According to scientists in Spanish Sahara there is a major, nearly 85%-pure phosphate deposit.<sup>62</sup> Spain had no intention to allow Morocco or any other nation to exploit those deposits promising extra profit.

Officially, Morocco was not at war with Spain, moreover, it attempted to maintain good relations with the Spanish Government in order to gain some time to stabilise the internal structure of the newly independent state. Of course, Sahara areas rich in minerals and the Spanish towns along the Atlantic coast (Ifni, Ceuta and Mellila) caught the attention of the leaders of the sovereign state. Therefore then Chief of General Staff of the Royal Armed Forces (*Forces Armées Royales-FAR*) – later King Hassan II – provided support both in weapons and information to irregular forces attacking the Spanish colony.<sup>63</sup>

The primary objective of attacks of Moroccan and Sahrawi troops (mostly from Tekna and Reguibat tribes) was the town of Ifni, which was officially handed over to Spain by the Sultan of Morocco back in 1860. Although the town was taken under siege between October 1957 and June 1958 the Moroccan troops were unable to occupy it. On 23rd November, 1957 the Moroccans cut the telephone lines and launched an attack against the airfield, weapon stores, and several points of the town, defended by 3 infantry battalion, 3 artillery battery, and a unit of the Sahara Police Force (1,500 Spanish soldiers and 500 Sahrawi police officers). Since they did not trust in the town dwellers they disarmed civilian and forced them to stay in their houses. The artillery of

the attackers kept the town under fire for several hours then the barrage was followed by an attack of some 1,200 rebels equipped with automatic weapons. The Spanish troops lost 55 soldiers, 128 were wounded, and 7 were missing in action. The attackers had huge losses too and in the following weeks did not attempt any major attacks against the town, however, they eliminated minor Spanish outposts (Tamucha, Mesti, T'zelata de Sbuia, Tiliuin, Sidi Inno, Tabelcut) in the desert.<sup>64</sup>

The fortress of Tiliuin was defended by a platoon of Tiradores and a platoon of Sahrawi police officers with the support of local Bedouins but by 25th November their losses had grown so high that relief units had to be deployed to help them. The relief force comprised Legion soldiers, paratroopers, and an 81-mm artillery mortar. Although the outpost was saved the defenders had so many casualties and wounded that they had to leave the fortress and retreat to Ifni. Other outposts saw similar events since the Spanish had no intention to give up their positions without fight. Nevertheless, by December 9th they had lost all of their outposts and every Spanish unit was forced into Ifni, which was completely surrounded by the Moroccan troops. The siege was taken only 6 months later when in June 1958 the attackers retreated.

Naturally, fights broke out not only around Ifni but in the entire territory of Spanish Sahara. One Moroccan group e.g. attacked and took the unguarded lighthouse of Cape Bojador capturing 7 Spanish workers there and destroying the entire equipment of the lighthouse. Soon afterwards a column of vehicles was attacked near Arbaa el-Mesti but the rebels were forced to retreat.<sup>65</sup>

On 12–13 January 1958 rebels launched an attack against El-Aaiunt, defended by the 13 Battalion of the Spanish Legion. Although the attackers outnumbered the defenders they were not able to capture the town. The victorious Spanish began to pursue the retreating enemy but were ambushed in the sand dunes (Edcherra) near the town. The commander of the Spanish unit (1 Company), Captain Jauregui was fatally wounded at the very beginning of the ambush. Although the majority of the company managed to retreat, the 3rd platoon was isolated from the main unit. The platoon kept fighting for several hours losing half of its personnel; finally Sergeant Francisco Fadrique and legionnaire Juan Maderal Oleaga with their machine gun covered the successful retreat of their comrades still alive and got killed in action. The overall losses of the Spanish counted 37 killed and 50 wounded in action. The two legionnaires covering the retreat of their comrades and sacrificing their lives were awarded San Fernando medal, posthumous.<sup>66</sup>

As a consequence of the fights the Spanish were pushed back to the coastal area. There, however, together with the French who were also threatened by the rebels, they planned a joint military operation against Western Sahara tribes. The joint Spanish-

French military operation began on 10th February 1958 (Operation Ecouvillon or Teide), in the framework of which allied troops extremely quickly and in some places rather brutally eliminated the resistance of local tribes.<sup>67</sup> The joint forces consisted of 9,000 Spanish and 5,000 French soldiers and officers, supported by an air force of 60 Spanish and 70 French aircraft. The Spanish units were commanded by General Lopez Valencia, commander of troops on a Canary Islands and the French and Mauritanian troops were commanded by General Bourgund.

The Spanish main forces started to retake the area from the towns of El Aaiun and Villa Bens, while the French launched their offensive from Tindouf (Algeria) and Fort Trinquet (Mauritania). The rebel forces concentrated their troops in the valleys of rivers Tan-Tan and Sagiet el Hamra, taking up positions in caves and the riverbank. However, the area was bombed by allied warplanes and Sahrawis lost more than 150 men and most of their weapons in the air raids. Between 10th and 20th February 1958 Spanish mechanised forces (4, 9, and 13 battalions of the Legion, Santiago armoured regiment, one rifle battalion, and an artillery unit) took Edchera Pass then towns of Tafurdat and Smara.

On 21st February Spanish and French troops eliminated another, 300-strong rebel unit between Awsard and Bir Aznaran. As a result of these operations significant forces remained only in the region of Agadir, with some 12,000 rebels stationed there. However, when the locals saw the massive allied forces, the insurgents sneaked back home. Thanks to the results of the military operations the Moroccan Government got scared and refused to deliver food or weapons to the rebels and later on concluded an agreement with Spain. In exchange for into neutrality Morocco was given the Tarfaya region in the northern zone of Sahara, dwelled primarily by Sahrawis (Cintra Agreement, 1 April, 1958). The total losses suffered by the allied forces during the operation were 8 Spanish and 7 French killed in action and a few wounded.<sup>68</sup>

In the period of time after the military campaign the region had a relative peace. The only incident took place in March 1961 when American, Canadian, French, and Spanish researchers of Union Oil Company were kidnapped. Later the hostages were freed after the ransom money was paid for them. Meanwhile the political course of colonialist countries changed. After the Bandung Conference on 19th April, 1955 these countries started to give autonomy to their colonies. The rapid decolonisation was also supported and underpinned by UN Resolution 1514, the so called "Colony Declaration". The approval of the declaration by the colonising countries was a significant step toward the elimination of colonies resulting in a nearly total redrawing of the political map of Africa in the following 10 years.<sup>69</sup> In 1962 Morocco, Algeria, and Mauritania, the three countries surrounding Spanish Sahara also gained their independence and in 1965 there were 38

independent countries in Africa. Partly because of this fact and partly because of an increasing diplomatic pressure the option of gaining autonomy by local people emerged.

### Conclusion

Western Sahara didn't gain its independence, however it is clear from the past that the Moroccan sovereignty above this area never ever existed, but Spanish indeed. The Saharawis fought against the Spanish Forces for many years, but they didn't succeed. But later General Franco announced that he would grant territorial autonomy for the Sahrawis and gradually also the right for self-determination. As a result, Morocco started a powerful diplomatic offensive in order to prove their historical rights to the territory of Western Sahara. According to them, the locals had only two choices: either to stay under Spanish rule, or to join the Moroccan homeland. Two years later when the international situation changed and the most of African colony gained their independence; the Spanish leaders offered the same to the Sahrawis.

According to the International Court of Justice, the Moroccan evidence concerning common history "*was not sufficient to prove that there had ever been de facto Moroccan authority over the territory*". On the basis of the evidence presented, the Court decided that as there was no proof that Morocco had ever collected taxes on the territory, there was nothing to prove Moroccan authority. When Spain left Western Sahara, the inhabitants wanted independence, but Morocco and Mauritania invaded their land, so they were colonised again.

Today Western Sahara is the last colony in the world with unresolved problems and close to start a possible new war. It is a challenge to the world to find a workable solution for this situation.

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