

# The Rif War: A forgotten war?

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## Abstract

*Approximately 100 years ago, a colonial conflict of great breadth began on the south side of the Mediterranean. Initially seen as an “indigenous” rebellion, the conflict evolved into an intense war, the final phase of which involved the intervention of two great colonial powers (France and Spain). Looking at the Rif War (1920–1926) in a region of what is now Morocco, then claimed by Spain, as an example, this article presents a critical analysis of a conflict rich in lessons for current humanitarian challenges and the sometimes-difficult relationship between humanitarian actors and the parties to a conflict. Assessed in the light of its human cost, which is largely forgotten today, the Rif War can feed debates through necessary historical reflection surrounding humanitarian action and the role of the International Committee of the Red Cross. It will also examine the complicated connections between historical truth, collective memory and the political difficulties inherent to reconciliation.*

**Keywords:** Colonial wars, International Committee of the Red Cross, internal armed conflicts, poisonous gas, joint military operations, protection of civilians, humanitarian diplomacy.

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History is a bunch of lies that people have decided to agree upon.<sup>1</sup>

Napoléon Bonaparte

In Julien Duvivier's famous 1935 film, *La Bandera*, a platoon of Spanish legionnaires finds itself isolated on a rocky outcrop, under fire from rebel Moroccan tribes (see [Figures 1](#) and [2](#)). In the final scene, the group's only survivor stands to attention among his fallen comrades and salutes the forces sent to relieve them.<sup>2</sup> The scene depicted in the film is only just over a century old, but how many people know about the war in which it was set? The year 1921 marked the start of a conflict that is now largely forgotten, although it remains one of the most important colonial wars of the twentieth century. Certain specialists regard it as a crucial landmark of Arab nationalism. However, any anniversary of the Rif War<sup>3</sup> is very unlikely to be ever celebrated because it was in no way a "fresh and merry war" (as Kaiser Wilhelm II expected the First World War to be<sup>4</sup>). This article aims at reviewing this long-forgotten conflict from a contemporary point of view, especially in comparison with so-called new phenomenology of conflicts and their humanitarian consequences. This article will first examine the political and military developments of the Rif insurrection in the post-First World War context. It proposes looking at the diplomatic negotiation attempts initiated by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC; in French, CICR) in order to secure an agreement from Spain and France to deploy aid activities in a situation of civil war. It will then describe the consequences of the legal vacuum and some aspects and characteristics of the Rif Conflict. The arguments put forward by the ICRC and the States involved to deny and block humanitarian intervention will later be reviewed. The article will finally explore the lessons that can be drawn today from a 100-year-old conflict and propose some hypotheses on how this conflict has largely escaped humanitarian history.

## Colonial context in Morocco

The Rif, a region in the northern part of what is now Morocco (see [Figure 3](#)), is mountainous, relatively dry and very difficult to access. Located between the Mediterranean Sea and the Ouergha River to the south, the Rif is bordered on the east by the Moulouya River and on the west by the Atlantic Ocean. It is mainly

- 1 Declaration attributed to Napoléon Bonaparte after the Waterloo defeat (1815).
- 2 Two mainstream films were made using the Rif crisis as a backdrop: *Il sergente Klems*, filmed in 1971, which recounts the story of an old German soldier from the First World War who became a military leader in the army of Abd el-Krim; and *Légionnaire*, filmed in 1988, where the hero must flee France and heroically fights in the French Foreign Legion against Riffian assailants.
- 3 The term "war" has been deliberately chosen over international or internal armed conflict because this notion had not yet been codified by international law in the 1920s. In addition, the scale, duration and level of hostilities called for an explicit concept.
- 4 Serge Bernstein and Pierre Milza, "Chapitre 5 – La Première Guerre Mondiale: remise en question de la réussite allemande", in *L'Allemagne de 1870 à nos jours*, Armand Colin, Paris, 2014.



Figure 1. Abdelkrim rejetant les Espagnols, en 1921, bataille d'Anoual, lors de la guerre du Rif, Archives nationales d'Outre-Mer [Abd el-Krim rejecting the Spanish, in 1921, Battle of Annual, during the Rif War, National Overseas Archives].



Figure 2. Film poster. Source: *Le blog du cinéma*.

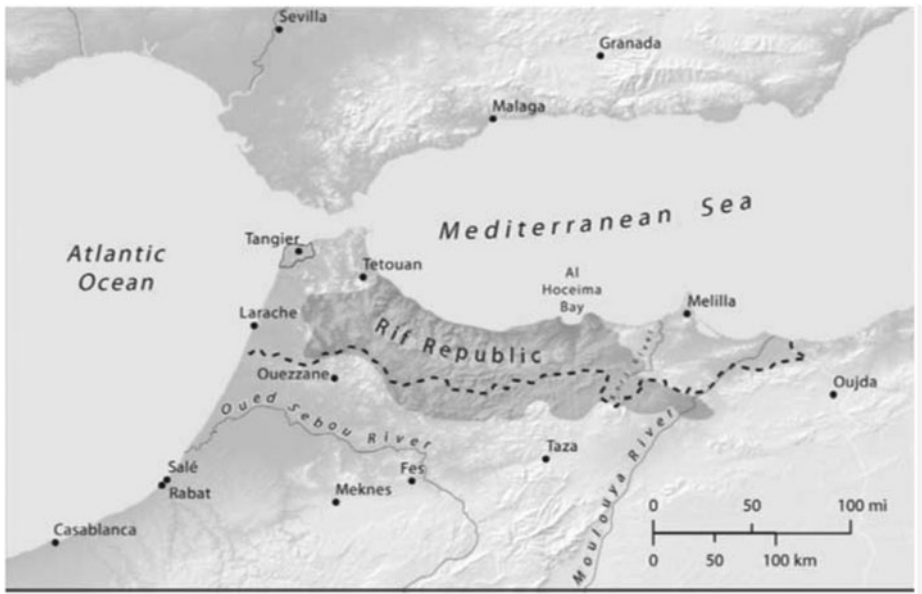


Figure 3. Map of the Rif Republic.

inhabited by Imazighen (or Berber) communities, who are Sunni Muslims. In 1905, France and Spain had the most influence over the sultanate of Morocco, but it was still coveted by Germany, a latecomer with its “*Drang nach Afrika*” (push into Africa), which was claiming the Tangiers region. In 1911, Berlin sent a gunboat to the Bay of Agadir,<sup>5</sup> under the usual pretext of claiming that its nationals were under threat. This show of strength created serious tensions in Europe, and Germany was subsequently offered additional territories in Equatorial Africa and Congo in exchange for giving up its claims on Morocco. In 1912, the Treaty of Fez<sup>6</sup> between France and the Sultan of Morocco formally created the French protectorate in Morocco, but gave Spain some sovereignty in the north, established by a separate treaty between France and Spain. This 1912 treaty established a French zone to the south of the Rif (known as “*Maroc utile*”), a Spanish zone to the north with Tetouan as the capital, the Tangier International Zone and a Saharan territory to the south of the French zone, also attributed to the Spanish. The Treaty of Versailles (1919)<sup>7</sup> confirmed that Morocco would remain under French and Spanish protection, thus definitively ending any German claims to the country.

5 This episode is best known as the “Agadir Crisis”.

6 Treaty Concluded Between France and Morocco on 30 March 1912, for the Organization of the French Protectorate in the Sherifien Empire, Fez, 30 March 1912.

7 Treaty of Peace between the Allied and Associated Powers and Germany, Versailles, 28 June 1919 (entered into force on 10 January 1920) (Treaty of Versailles), Arts 141–6.

## From military procession to attrition

In 1912, the Spanish protectorate in Morocco consisted of some small cities along the Atlantic Coast, Asilah, Larache (el-Araich (1911)) and Ksar el-Kebir, as well as a narrow strip on both sides of the Ceuta–Tetouan road.<sup>8</sup> The two enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla had been attached to Spain since the sixteenth century and served in 1912 as bridge heads for the Spanish penetration. Spain, which had lost Cuba and the Philippines in 1898, dreamed of gaining new possessions providing territorial continuity<sup>9</sup> with the Iberian Peninsula and of realizing ambitious colonial plans beyond the narrow coastal strip of land that it already controlled. Morocco was the perfect target for new expansion in North Africa. It was not until 1920 that Spain's expansion effort resulted in military activity, particularly in the Chefchaouen region. The aim was to control territories occupied by Berber tribes resisting mineral exploration and Spanish colonization in general. For that operation, Spain had created the Tercio de Marruecos in 1920, better known as the Spanish Legion,<sup>10</sup> which was later placed under the leadership of Commander Francisco Franco.<sup>11</sup> Although the Spanish army scored a number of fairly easy victories at the start, its progress in the Rif prompted the gradual mobilization of Berber tribes, which submitted to and gradually rallied to the authority of Emir Abd el-Krim al-Khattabi, a well-known Rif native and chief of the Aith Waryaghal tribe (see Figure 4). Abd el-Krim was an Islamic judge, journalist and teacher. He initially believed that Spain would modernize the protectorate and that he could play a role. He gradually realized that colonization had objectives other than developing the country. He then turned against Madrid and headed the uprising. Abd el-Krim was a local tribal chief, but he identified with the wider anti-colonial struggle, such as that of Emir Abdelkader in Algeria. Indeed, a small number of his troops were Algerian deserters from the French Legion, some of them probably inspired by Abdelkader's revolt. Interpretations differ as to his political objectives, but all historians agree that he wanted broad autonomy for his people, although he remained unclear about the concept of independence and how modern a State he wanted to create.

After a series of initial military successes that created great optimism among the Spanish generals, the Battle of Annual in Tlemsane in July 1921 resulted in a crushing defeat for the Spanish, who lost an estimated 10,000–16,000 men. The military dictatorship installed after the Annual defeat immediately decided to send huge numbers of reinforcements (36,000 troops)

- 8 Josep Lluís Mateo Dieste and José Luis Villanova, "Les *interventores* du protectorat espagnol au Maroc : Contextes de production d'une connaissance politique des cabilas", *Cahiers d'études africaines*, Vol. 211, No. 3, 2013.
- 9 Officers who had fought in Cuba formed the "*africanistas*", a hard core wanting to strengthen Spain's colonial positions in Morocco.
- 10 The Tercio de Marruecos, also known as the Spanish Legion from 1937 in reference to the French legion, was created to conquer Algeria.
- 11 Francisco Franco was promoted to Commander in 1916 against the opinion of the High Military Council but with the support of Alphonso XIII's privy council. Franco would later receive the rank of Brigadier General in February 1926.

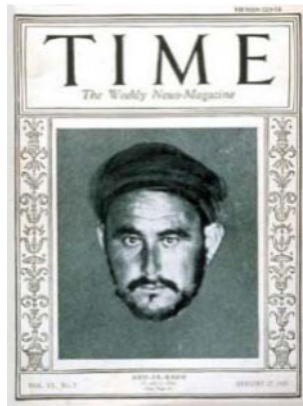


Figure 4. Cover of *Time* magazine, 17 August 1925.

and heavy equipment, but that yielded little success on the ground. Although the Rif tribes had fewer numbers and were disorganized, the terrain gave them a decisive advantage and they were very mobile, successfully repelling the forces engaged by Madrid. In these confrontations, some Spanish battalions suffered up to 75% losses.

Buoyed by his military success, Abd el-Krim announced the creation of the Rif Republic in September 1921 and introduced sharia law in the territories he controlled. However, he remained loyal to the Sultan of Morocco. According to sources available,<sup>12</sup> it is quite established that Abd el-Krim had plans to create an advanced and sovereign State, most probably vaguely inspired by the Kemalist experience,<sup>13</sup> but also influenced by Islamist reformist ideology (Rashīd Riḍā<sup>14</sup>). Some authors strongly dispute the modern nature of the Rif State and prefer to describe Abd el-Krim's project as an *islamo* (Din)–nationalist (Watan) State detached from tribal structures.<sup>15</sup> It is relatively clear that the transformative ambitions of Abd el-Krim had to take into account the limited reform capacities of a very conservative population.

Abd el-Krim was not a mystical prophet waging *jihad* and wanting nothing to do with heretics, in the mould of Muhammed Ahmed ibn-Abdullah (otherwise known as “al-Mahdi”) in Sudan in 1880. Neither was he a pure Berber *rogui*<sup>16</sup>

12 Charles Edmund Richard Pennell, “A Critical Investigation of the Opposition of the Rifi Confederation Led by Muhammad Bin 'Abd al-Karim al-Khattabi to Spanish Colonial Expansion in Northern Morocco, 1920–1925, and its Political and Social Background”, Vol. II, PhD Thesis, University of Leeds, Leeds, 1979, pp. 514–98.

13 The Kemalist experience refers to the political, economic and social principles advocated by Mustapha Kemal Atatürk in the 20th century and was designed to create a modern republican secular Turkish State.

14 Rashīd Riḍā, 1865–1935, was an Islamic scholar who formulated an intellectual response to the pressures of the modern Western world on traditional Islam.

15 Thomas Martel, “Stratégie et politique pendant la guerre du Rif (1921–1926)”, Thesis, École nationale des chartes, Paris, 2019.

16 This term, which means “pretender to the throne” comes from the name of an insurgent, Djelil al-Rogui, from the Rouga clan of the Seffian tribe, based in the Gharb region of Morocco, who in 1862 led the uprising in the Fez region.

competing for power. Although he was above all regarded as a local hero, he nevertheless sought to strengthen his international position by sending envoys to some European capitals, generally members of his close family, or by sending letters through foreign journalists and collaborators.<sup>17</sup> He was considered as an example in the Muslim world. The Rif Republic was largely a proto-State based on the tribal system and a fairly strict form of Islam called Salafism that stands in opposition to maraboutism and tribalism. Abd el-Krim still sought to develop modern institutions; he centralized his administration and collected taxes vaguely based on the Kemalist model,<sup>18</sup> thus showing that he had not cut all ties with European civilization. His diplomatic efforts were directed towards European civil society and its political elites, and he did not really seek to establish any pan-Arab or pan-Islamic solidarity.<sup>19</sup>

The Rif State project took the form of an embryonic administration only because the rest of the programme met a stiff resistance from its own people very much attached to the tribal structure and opposed to any kind of secularism. The Rif Republic was not recognized by any State despite efforts to attract the sympathy of the League of Nations (LN).<sup>20</sup> France and the Sultan of Morocco, for different reasons, did their utmost to sabotage any form of political or symbolic recognition of the Rif State, amongst them, the attempts to attribute Caliphate to Abd el-Krim.<sup>21</sup> At the same time, Abd el-Krim tried to “internationalize” the conflict by mobilizing Muslim and anti-colonial forces abroad and by asking for humanitarian support, but with limited success. He did not create any relief organization, which might have convinced the ICRC to do more. With hindsight, and with the usual caveats, it would probably have been fairly possible for the ICRC to establish dialogue with Abd el-Krim at least through intermediaries and to take action.

17 For example, the British captain Charles A. P. Gardiner. See Mevliyar Er, “Abd-el-Krim al-Khattabi (1882–1963)”, in *The Palgrave Encyclopedia of Imperialism and Anti-Imperialism*, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2020.

18 Some authors have expressed serious doubts about the modernist ambitions of Abd el-Krim and his true intentions to borrow the notion of statehood from the Kemalist model. See, for example, C. E. R. Pennell, above note 12.

19 In late 1925, he was invited to the Pan-Arab Congress in Cairo, which addressed the matter of a new caliphate, but ended in total failure.

20 The “Riff Republic” – The Agent-General for the “Government of the Riff” (Marocco) London [Captain C. A. P. Gardiner] – Transmits a copy of the “Declaration of State and Proclamation to all Nations” of the Government of the “Riff Republic”, United Nations Library & Archives Geneva, File R591/11/30635/12861, 31 August 1923, available at: <https://archives.ungeneva.org/the-riff-republic-the-agent-general-for-the-government-of-the-riff-marocco-london-transmits-a-copy-of-the-declaration-of-state-and-proclamation-to-all-nations-of-the-government-of-the-riff-republic> (all internet references were accessed in November 2022).

21 As of 1924–1925, the French authorities in Morocco were extremely concerned about the designation of Abd el-Krim as the new caliph by a Muslim congress due to meet in Cairo (1926). Finally, divisions within the Muslim world and systematic sabotage from various colonial powers led to the failure of the Congress and the designation of a new caliph was abandoned. See Jacques Crémadeils, “La France, Abd-El-Krim et le problème du Khalifat (1924–1926). Remarques à propos de quelques archives inédites”, *Cahiers de la Méditerranée*, Vol. 6, No. 1, 1973.

## From attrition to all-out war

In the following years, the war became a disaster for Madrid. The Spanish retreated on all fronts. Their military positions were taken one by one, although coastal towns like Tetouan, Larache (El-Araich), Ksar el-Kebir, Zeluan and Asilah remained in Spanish hands or were rapidly retaken after a few months of occupation. The French were not unhappy to see the Spanish being defeated. The Spanish retreat in 1924 encouraged Abd el-Krim to open a second front, this time in the south, and he launched raids on French military positions.

In April 1925, the Rif troops started to carry out large-scale military operations in the south against the French-controlled part of Morocco, tipping the country into conflict. Fez was threatened and the French protectorate as a whole was now in a precarious situation. Talks between Abd el-Krim and French envoys were inconclusive. France mobilized and deployed 160,000 men from its regular army that could be supplemented by colonial troops, mostly from North Africa and Senegal, along with sixteen air force squadrons.

The two colonial powers quickly reached a cooperation agreement to carry out joint military action. France's Resident-General in Morocco, Marshal Lyautey, was deemed too cautious, too political and, above all, too close to the Moroccans, and was quickly replaced by a new official transferred from Algeria, Theodore Steeg. However, the real architect of the military campaign was Marshal Philippe Pétain who, in his own words, "did strategy not politics". His aim was no longer to teach Abd el-Krim a lesson, but to crush the revolt once and for all.

On 6 and 7 September 1925, an armada of more than 100 Spanish and French ships unloaded 16,000 men and heavy equipment in Al-Hoceima Bay after unleashing some fearsome early artillery fire (see [Figure 5](#)). In all, eighty-eight aircrafts bombed the region to allow the troops to disembark. The operation later served as a template for Operation Torch in North Africa in 1943 and the Allies' Normandy landings in 1944. The operation to take back Morocco had begun. No fewer than 600,000 men (against approximately 15,000 Riffian combatants) took part in offensives intended to take control of the Riffian territory. Spain and France were supported by equipment provided by the United Kingdom and Germany. During this amphibious landing operation Spanish troops could disembark around 18,000 men and the French army up to 20,000.<sup>22</sup> In total, the joint expeditionary corps would reach 120,000 men and 400,000 auxiliary troops (for a picture postcard of General Pétain inspecting the front, see [Figure 6](#)).<sup>23</sup>

22 Jan Pascal, "L'Armée française face à Abdelkrim ou la tentation de mener une guerre conventionnelle dans une guerre irrégulière 1924–1927", *Stratégique*, No. 93-94-95-96, 2009, p. 321. See also Shannon Fleming, "Rif War, Expansion and Escalation", *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 5 December 2019, available at: [www.britannica.com/event/Rif-War](http://www.britannica.com/event/Rif-War); Vincent Courcelle-Labrousse and Nicolas Marmié, "Chapitre XVII – Al-Hoceim", in *La guerre du Rif : Maroc 1921–1926*, Editions Tallendier, Paris, 2008; C. E. R. Pennell, above note 12.

23 Alain Ruscio, "1925, Guerre du Rif. L'alliance entre Pétain et Franco contre les insurgés marocains", *Orient XXI*, 23 December 2020, available at: <https://orientxxi.info/magazine/1925-guerre-du-rif-l-alliance-entre-petain-et-franco-contre-les-insurges,4388>.





Figure 5. La playa de Morro Nuevo en los días del desembarco [Spanish troops landing at Al-Hoceima Bay on 8 September 1925]. Source: Pinterest.



Figure 6. General Philippe Pétain inspecting the front. Postcard, Pascal Daudin's private collection.

After a year of intensive military action, the losses were huge, the tribes disbanded and Abd el-Krim had lost his last supporters, including those in his own tribe. In April 1926, Abd el-Krim's envoys met with French envoys in Oujda, telling them he could accept the offers of peace and autonomy made by the Sultan of Morocco, whose sovereignty he did not dispute. However, the talks

failed. We know that the discussions faltered after three weeks on the matter of prisoner exchanges, and broke down for good on 6 May 1926. Abd el-Krim again ordered the execution of a group of Spanish prisoners, signalling that he no longer intended to negotiate. The Rif troops were defeated a few months later, although pockets of resistance lasted into 1927.

After surrendering to French forces, Abd el-Krim was first exiled to La Réunion, but escaped to Egypt in 1947 en route for France. He never returned to Morocco.

## Legal vacuum

The Rif War took place in a kind of a legal vacuum. In the 1920s, non-sovereign actors were deliberately excluded from international law. At that time the laws of war only applied to conflicts between sovereign States,<sup>24</sup> such as the Hague Convention of 1907. Although the status of the colonies or protectorates was legally uncertain, the French and Spanish authorities took the view that the Rif Conflict was taking place within a sovereign State. As a result, the Conventions did not apply to such a situation. It was not until 1949 and 1977 that the Geneva Conventions included the notions of internal armed conflict and national liberation wars. At the time of the Rif War, thinking of internal conflicts as part of the system of international law was not far beyond the horizon,<sup>25</sup> but totally segregated from the colonial space. According to some historical sources, the ICRC was rather frustrated by the situation and, in particular, to be denied access to detainees.

In addition, after the First World War, the States were more focused on avoiding further military conflagration than developing *jus in bello* instruments.<sup>26</sup> The idea of regulating civil war truly emerged only after the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939), but the main resistance against such a concept (which was later formalized as Article 3 common to the four Geneva Conventions) prevailed until 1949 and was mainly led by colonial powers which ruled millions.<sup>27</sup> Colonial powers like France and the United Kingdom wanted to deal with any sort of rebellion according to their own terms until they had to rally the majority and decided to shape the law. Today, the applicability of the doctrine of belligerency<sup>28</sup> still remains in the hands of States<sup>29</sup> and still orients all negotiations regarding humanitarian access to zones controlled by non-State actors.

24 Anna Chotzen, “Beyond Bounds: Morocco’s Rif War and the Limits of International Law”, *Humanity Journal*, Vol. 5, No. 1, 2014.

25 Giovanni Mantilla, *Law Making under Pressure: International Humanitarian Law and Internal Armed Conflict*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY, 2020.

26 Stefanie Schmahl, “The Development of International Humanitarian Law since the 19th Century”, in Thilo Marauhn and Heinhart Steiger (eds), *Universality and Continuity in International Law*, Eleven International Publishing, The Hague, 2011.

27 Giovanni Mantilla, “Forum Isolation: Social Opprobrium and the Origins of the International Law of Internal Conflict”, *International Organization*, Vol. 72, No. 2, 2018.

28 Rob McLaughlin, “Whither Recognition of Belligerency”, *Articles of War*, 17 September 2020, available at: <https://lieber.westpoint.edu/whither-recognition-of-belligerency/>; and G. Mantilla, above note 25, p. 80.

29 Henry Mark Lovat, *Negotiating Civil War*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2019.

As for the ICRC, in 1920–1921, it did not have an explicit mandate to take action in situations of civil war (what international humanitarian law refers to today as internal armed conflict). However, it is interesting to note that at the 10th International Conference of the Red Cross in 1921, the problem of internal conflicts and the ICRC's role was explicitly addressed by the International Red Cross Movement.<sup>30</sup> At that conference, Resolution XIV<sup>31</sup> stated that:

The Red Cross, which stands apart from all political and social distinctions, and from differences of creed, race, class or nation, affirms its right and duty of affording relief in case of civil war and social and revolutionary disturbances.

However, ICRC action depended on a National Society making a formal request: only then could the ICRC approach the government concerned. If the government refused, the ICRC was nevertheless authorized to voice its concern publicly.<sup>32</sup> In 1925, the Swiss Red Cross asked the ICRC to appoint a representative to collect information on Swiss soldiers in the Spanish Legion captured by the Riffian rebellion. That assignment was refused by the Spanish and French authorities<sup>33</sup> and firmly discouraged by the ICRC.<sup>34</sup>

## Use of poison gas

I have always been reluctant to use asphyxiant gases against indigenous people, but after seeing what they did in the Battle of Annual, I will use them with great delight.<sup>35</sup>

The defeat in the Battle of Annual<sup>36</sup> and the Massacre of Monte Arruit,<sup>37</sup> in which 2000–3000 soldiers of the Spanish Army were killed after surrendering the Monte Arruit garrison near Al Aaroui, were a terrible blow for the Spanish military establishment. Moreover, the discovery of mass graves in Nador and other cities conquered by the Riffian troops stirred up great emotion in Spain and fomented a desire for a modern-day *Reconquista*. One notable aspect of the conflict was the use of poison gas<sup>38</sup> against the Riffian rebels in spring 1924. In that regard, King Alfonso of Spain explained that “vain humanitarian considerations” needed to be

30 The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement (the Movement) is a network of components and consists of the International Committee of the Red Cross, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and the 191 National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies.

31 Resolution XIV, 10th International Conference of the Red Cross, Geneva, 1921.

32 See Letter from Paul des Gouttes, Spanish Red Cross, ICRC Archives, CR-138-MD-2, 17 July 1924.

33 The Spanish specified that they considered the situation a civil war, so the ICRC needed to obtain the permission of the Riffian authorities as well as that of the Sultan of Morocco.

34 Lettre du CICR à la Croix-Rouge suisse informant que le CICR ne soutiendra pas la démarche du Lieutenant-Colonel Scherrer [Letter from the ICRC to the Swiss Red Cross informing that the ICRC will not support Lieutenant-Colonel Scherrer's approach], ICRC Archives, B CR-138, 18 April 1925.

35 Telegram sent by General Dámaso Berenguer, Spanish High Commissioner in Tetouan, 12 August 1921.

36 From 21 July 1921 to 9 August 2021.

37 On 9 August 2021, following a twelve-day siege, the Spanish garrison surrendered and was subsequently executed.

38 Phosgene, diphosgene, chloropicrin and mustard gas (also known as yperite).

“set aside” in order to use blockades for starvation and intensive gas attack to help with the “extermination of malicious beasts” who were aiding rebellious Moroccan tribes.<sup>39</sup> Spain used German and French expertise to develop production plants in Spain and in the enclave of Melilla. Some material was also shipped directly from remaining German stockpiles. The French army also ordered and stored mustard gas shells, although it is not clear where and how they were deployed. The Spanish air force dropped numerous “X” bombs on the theatre of operations.<sup>40</sup> Few historians dispute the fact that the Spanish army made heavy use of these weapons, and freely admitted doing so.<sup>41</sup> According to some authors<sup>42</sup> who had access to Spanish and British military archives, the use of gas was part and parcel of the counter-insurgency strategy against the Rif Rebellion and usually directed against large concentration of civilian dwellings. Some former Spanish pilots, a few being still alive in the 1970s, publicly confessed having dropped bombs filled with poison gas in Morocco.<sup>43</sup>

In the beginning of the 1920s, the issue of poisonous gas was already subject to several condemnations, which led to their prohibition.<sup>44</sup> However, it seems that colonies were considered as exceptions<sup>45</sup> or as not being of concern.

Towards the end of 1924, the ICRC had received information from several sources, probably from public sources such as the press,<sup>46</sup> that poison gas had been used in military operations, although it is fair to say that it probably did not have the full details of what was happening in Morocco.<sup>47</sup> Pressured to act, the ICRC chose to ask the Spanish Red Cross about its government’s policy. The Spanish Red Cross responded a few days later that it had received a formal denial from the military authorities concerning such use of poison gas. The ICRC expressed its “relief” in its response to the National Society.<sup>48</sup> It is difficult to admit that this reaction was

39 Sebastian Balfour, *Deadly Embrace: Morocco and the Road to the Spanish Civil War*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2002.

40 Olivier Lion, “Des armes maudites pour les sales guerres ? L’emploi des armes chimiques dans les conflits asymétriques”, *Stratégique*, No. 93-94-95, 2009, pp. 491–2.

41 Marouf Hasian, Jr, “ICRC Non-Interventionism and Spanish Gas Attacks in Morocco, 1921–1926”, in M. Hasian, *Communicating during Humanitarian Medical Crises: The Consequences of Silence or “Témoignage”*, Lexington Books, London, 2019.

42 S. Balfour, above note 39.

43 We know of at least two direct witnesses, being the Spanish pilots Pedro Tonda Bueno and Ignacio Hidalgo de Cisneros, who confirmed in their respective autobiographies that they had dropped bombs loaded with poison gas. See Ignacio Hidalgo de Cisneros, *Cambio de rumba*, Iksuager, Vitoria, 2001; Pedro Tonda, *La vida y yo*, México, 1974. See, also, Rachid Raha, Mimoun Charqi and Ahmed El Hamdaoui, *La guerre chimique contre le Rif. Actes du colloque international sur l’utilisation des armes chimiques : Le cas de la guerre du Rif et ses conséquences*, Les Editions Amazigh, Rabat, 2004.

44 Nizar Messari, “L’utilisation des armes chimiques pendant la guerre du Rif (1921–1926) ou de l’ambiguïté des frontières et des séparations en politique”, *Cultures & Conflits*, Vol. 93, 2014.

45 Gases were used in Mesopotamia (Iraq) by the British (1920) and in Libya by Italian troops (1923–1924).

46 The European press, including *La Gazette de Lausanne* in Switzerland, regularly reported the use of mustard gas in several areas in the Rif. *La Gazette de Lausanne*, for example, wrote on 21 December 1924 that the Spanish air force was “carrying out intensive bombardments in the Andjera region and using asphyxiating gases”.

47 It has been shown that Germany provided the technology to produce poison gas, with the support of French arms suppliers. See Rudibert Kunz and Rolf-Dieter Müller, *Giftgas gegen Abd el Krim: Deutschland, Spanien und der Gaskrieg in Spanisch-Marokko 1922–1927*, Einzelschriften zur Militärgeschichte, Vol. 34, Verlag Rombach, Freiburg in Breisgau, 1990.

the result of pure credulity and not subdued complacency. Some authors<sup>49</sup> argue that Abd el-Krim might have sent letters to the ICRC and to the LN on this matter but we could not recover any trace in official archives of either organization.

In 1918, the ICRC had played a major role in a campaign to ban these types of weapons, which resulted in the adoption of the 1925<sup>50</sup> Geneva Protocol.<sup>51</sup> In its further correspondence with the Spanish government, the ICRC referred to this protocol but said that it had very serious doubts about allegations regarding the use of these weapons. It never mentioned these allegations in its public communications but praised instead the Spanish Red Cross for the excellency of its medical response in the field.<sup>52</sup> Surprising as it may seem, military operations in the Rif did not influence the signature of the Geneva Protocol, though Spain did not sign up to the instrument until 1929.<sup>53</sup> Unfortunately, this was not the last use of gas in conflict situations.<sup>54</sup>

## Foreign fighters, mercenaries and deserters

The Rif attracted a few foreign fighters, but they were subject to serious discussions between the belligerents. Among them was the so-called Lafayette Escadrille, an American squadron originally created during the First World War to support the French army on the front. In the summer of 1925, a group of sixteen American aviators joined the French contingent.<sup>55</sup> The squadron was later renamed the Escadrille de la Garde Chérifienne in order to avoid reaction from the US public opinion largely opposed to colonial politics. The squadron's members were nominally attached to the armed forces of the Moroccan Sultan, the formal ruler of Morocco, even bearing the sultanate's emblem of a five-pointed star on their uniforms. The leader of the American outfit was led by a soldier of fortune, Colonel Charles Sweeney, who proposed his services to the French authorities and

48 Letter of E. Boissier to the Spanish Red Cross, ICRC Archives, CR-138, 21 February 1925. Later E. Boissier informed the Spanish Red Cross that all references to the use of asphyxiating gases would be excluded from the report, which would merely discuss the committee's activities since July 1924. See Pablo La Porte, "Humanitarian Assistance during the Rif War (Morocco, 1921–6): The International Committee of the Red Cross and 'an Unfortunate Affair'", *Historical Research*, Vol. 89, No. 243, 2016, p. 126.

49 M. Hasian, above note 41.

50 Protocol for the Prohibition of the Use of Asphyxiating, Poisonous or Other Gases, and of Bacteriological Methods of Warfare. Geneva, 17 June 1925 (entered into force February 1928).

51 In a public statement, the ICRC openly referred to "this method of warfare which we cannot call other than criminal". ICRC, "Appel aux belligérants contre l'emploi de gaz vénéneux", Public Declaration, 6 February 1918, available at: [www.icrc.org/fr/doc/resources/documents/misc/5fzgtz.htm](http://www.icrc.org/fr/doc/resources/documents/misc/5fzgtz.htm).

52 Ben Holmes, "The *International Review of the Red Cross* and the Protection of Civilians, c. 1919–1939", *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol. 100, No. 907–909, 2018.

53 R. Kunz and R.-D. Müller, above note 47.

54 Seven years later, during Italy's campaign in Ethiopia, launched by Mussolini in October 1935 and waged against the armies and people of the Negus, chemical weapons were again used extensively when Italian troops came up against unexpected resistance. This time, the ICRC could directly witness the use of gas but its mild protests to the Italian Red Cross were rejected because Italy considered that the 1925 Protocol did not exclude the possibility of their use in the case of justified reprisals.

55 V. Courcelle-Labrousse and N. Marmié, "Chapitre XVI—Les Ailes américaines du Sultan", in V. Courcelle-Labrousse and N. Marmié, above note 22.

recruited a dozen veteran pilots who had fought in the Lafayette Escadrille during the war. The squadron flew more than 400 missions and bombed symbolic cities such as Chefchaouen,<sup>56</sup> in some sort of premonition of Guernica.<sup>57</sup> The American Legation in Tangier finally warned the American aviators that US law prohibited fighting in a war<sup>58</sup> against people with whom the United States had no quarrel.<sup>59</sup>

In the end, the US government, concerned about violations of neutrality and hostile domestic opinion, brought the chapter of the Escadrille Chérifienne to a close after only six weeks of combat operations.

The Spanish foreign legion counted many Portuguese and a few European citizens in its ranks. However, the harsh discipline enforced by Spanish officers did not attract a large number of foreigners and was conducive to desertions. Abd el-Krim enjoyed the support of a couple of Spanish foreign legion deserters, and some Turkish and European volunteers – mainly Germans<sup>60</sup> – who served as “military advisors” for training Riffian *harkas*.<sup>61</sup>

In 1925, the Spanish Red Cross had created two research bureaus<sup>62</sup> to trace prisoners who had fallen into the hands of Rif rebels. It is difficult to know whether the ICRC was cultivating support by offering its help or was rather using the question of foreign and Spanish combatants as a political back door to obtain a license to operate in the region. In a subsequent meeting between ICRC president Gustave Ador and French ministers Briand and Painlevé in Geneva, the ICRC used the “prisoner argument” to justify and suggest a mission.

## Human toll

Telegram no. 562 O. O. — “When you report losses suffered by dissidents, just state the number of people killed or injured and the number of animals killed, without specifying age or sex.”<sup>63</sup>

There are few reliable sources regarding the human toll of the Rif War. In military terms alone, some sources suggest that 63,000 Spanish, 18,000 French and

56 Lee Ferran, “When Rogue American Flyers Bombed a Moroccan Holy City”, *InsideHook*, 11 May 2018, available at: [www.insidehook.com/article/history/rogue-american-flyers-bombed-moroccan-holy-city-chefchaouen](http://www.insidehook.com/article/history/rogue-american-flyers-bombed-moroccan-holy-city-chefchaouen).

57 Frederic Wehrey, “The Many Repercussions of the Rif Rebellion”, *The New York Review of Books*, 18 December 2021.

58 Regarding the enlistment of American citizens for military service in Morocco, see “The Secretary of State to Representative A. Piatt Andrew of Massachusetts”, *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States*, Vol. II, 881.00/1151, Washington, DC, 21 October 1925, available at: <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1925v02/d460>.

59 Gerald Loftus, “Lafayette, We Are Here in Morocco’s Rif”, *Avuncular American Blog*, 3 November 2011, available at: [www.avuncularamerican.net/2011/11/lafayette-we-are-here-in-moroccos-rif.html](http://www.avuncularamerican.net/2011/11/lafayette-we-are-here-in-moroccos-rif.html).

60 Dirk Sasse, *Franzosen, Briten und Deutsche im Rifkrieg 1921–1926: Spekulanten und Sympathisanten, Deserteure und Hasardeure im Dienste Abdelkrims*, Pariser Historische Studien, Oldenbourg Wissenschaftsverlag, Oldenbourg, 2006.

61 In the Maghreb, militia levied by religious or governmental authority.

62 Letter from the Spanish Red Cross, ICRC Archives, 7 April 1925.

63 Captain de Féraud, head of the district office, Ouezzane, 11 November 1921, in Pierre Sémard, *La guerre du Rif*, Librairie de l’humanité, Paris, 1926, p. 25.

30,000 Riffian troops died during the conflict, although these figures should be treated with caution.<sup>64</sup> There is no credible information about civilian deaths and numerous experts believe<sup>65</sup> that the numbers of civilians killed or wounded were systematically underestimated or simply not taken into account. However, we know that it was an all-out war, that the various military operations caused heavy civilian casualties and that the civilian population, assets and infrastructures were clearly targeted. Available figures<sup>66</sup> are merely extrapolations based on military losses. However, it is clearly established that military operations on both sides affected food production infrastructure, such as livestock, markets, agricultural land, dwellings and harvests.<sup>67</sup> In 1923, military planners took the view that the Rif would have to be razed completely in order to crush the rebellion. This left little scope for distinguishing between civilians and combatants. As a result, no quarter was given except for those who surrendered without fighting and agreed to collaborate. It would also be naive to think that the widespread use of poison gas in aerial or land bombing operations only affected the combatants.

In the 2000s, a few Moroccan non-governmental organizations again highlighted the fact that the Riffian people seemed to suffer from abnormally high rates of cancer (of the thyroid) and physical malformations. However, no international and independent scientific studies have been carried out to look into this phenomenon.<sup>68</sup>

The Riffian combatants also left much to be desired in the way that they conducted hostilities. In general, captured Spanish soldiers could not expect any clemency from Riffian fighters (though sometimes prisoners were returned; see Figure 7). On several occasions – such as the Battle of Annual rout, the defence of Mont Aroui and in Nador – Spanish troops were executed and mutilated, with the death toll estimated between 10,000 and 14,000. These summary executions prompted horror and dread among the Western public. Such massacres naturally fed Spanish patriotic fervour and stoked a compulsive desire for revenge within the army.<sup>69</sup> Pictures taken during the 1925 offensive<sup>70</sup> show mutilations of captured Moroccans, with severed heads, noses and ears

64 Max Schiavon, *La guerre du Rif: Un conflit colonial oublié – Maroc (1925–1926)*, Éditions Pierre de Taillac, Paris, 2016.

65 For example, Khouloud Haskouri, “Health Magazine Documents Spain’s War Crimes in Morocco’s Rif Region”, *Morocco World News*, 29 June 2021, available at: [www.moroccoworldnews.com/2021/06/343143/health-magazine-documents-spains-war-crimes-in-moroccos-rif-region](http://www.moroccoworldnews.com/2021/06/343143/health-magazine-documents-spains-war-crimes-in-moroccos-rif-region).

66 Douglas Porch, “Rif War”, *Historynet*, 6 December 2006, available at: [www.historynet.com/rif-war/](http://www.historynet.com/rif-war/).

67 For example, the French Air Force dropped 1434.62 tons of bombs between May 1925 and 1926. See Gilles Krugler, “La puissance aérienne dans la guerre du Rif: Le colonel Paul Armengaud et l’émergence de l’emploi tactique de l’aviation (1925–1928)”, *Revue Historique des Armées*, Vol. 268, 2012. See, also, Frédéric Danigo, “France and the Rif War: Lessons from a Forgotten Counter Insurgency War (Northern Morocco – April 1925–May 1927)”, Thesis, Marine Corps University, Command and Staff College, 2010.

68 In the summer of 2000, a study carried out by the Centre Hospitalier Universitaire (CHU) of Rabat reported that 60% of thyroid cancer in the Nador region was linked to chemical weapons used seventy years earlier. Locally, residents called this disease “*akhenzir*”. See Taïeb Chadi, “Le gaz moutarde agent responsable de la propagation du cancer dans la région de Nador”, *MarocHebdo*, 3 June 2000, available at: [www.maghress.com/fr/marochebdo/42106](http://www.maghress.com/fr/marochebdo/42106).

69 S. Balfour, above note 39.



Figure 7. *Campagne du Maroc. Une remise de décorations aux prisonniers rendus par les Rifains à quelques kilomètres de Targuist* [Morocco campaign. A presentation of medals to prisoners returned by the Rifians a few kilometres from Targuist]. Postcard, Pascal Daudin's private collection.

which were collected by Spanish legionaries, paraded as war trophies and worn as necklaces or spiked on bayonets. Atrocities were perpetrated by both sides without much restraint.

### Very marginal humanitarian aid

Beginning in the second phase of the conflict, in northern Europe and the United States, voices arose to call for charitable action. The fate of civilians was often brought up in the press at the time.<sup>71</sup>

There is little evidence of any large-scale humanitarian action in the Rif region for lack of available means and because of the blockade put in place, first by Spanish troops and later by the French. Civil society and charitable organizations also played a fairly marginal role and committed few resources to the war.

During the hostilities, very few relief actions were attempted, and the rare initiatives that were successful were undertaken by local organizations<sup>72</sup> managed by private individuals or very small associations without great resources. These

70 Pictures uploaded by Mevlyar Er, available at: [www.researchgate.net/figure/Spanish-soldiers-in-the-Rif-with-decapitated-heads\\_fig3\\_280233622](http://www.researchgate.net/figure/Spanish-soldiers-in-the-Rif-with-decapitated-heads_fig3_280233622).

71 For example, "The sufferers are not the fighting men but the poor peasantry who takes no part in the campaigns", *The Times*, 28 February 1925.

72 Francisco Javier Martínez-Antonio, "Resilient Modernisation: Morocco's Agency in Red Cross Projects From Hassan I to the Rif Republic, 1886–1926", *Asclepio*, Vol. 66, No. 1, 2014.



activities were concentrated almost exclusively in the city of Tangier, where several thousands of families had taken refuge. Some volunteers to the Riffian cause offered their services in combat zones, but these gestures are anecdotal from a historical point of view.

The Spanish Red Cross saw a significant increase in its health-care capacity during the conflict, but the hospitals established were entirely dedicated to Spanish troops and to civilian victims of Riffian attacks. In December 1921, after Spain's defeat in the Battle of Annual, a representative of the Spanish Red Cross was asked by Madrid to negotiate a prisoner exchange, which failed because hostilities then resumed. Spanish prisoners were repatriated in 1923 in return for a substantial ransom, but of 550 prisoners only 326 made it home, the rest dying of hunger or being executed.<sup>73</sup> Although it is difficult to attribute all of these events to the orders of Abd el-Krim himself, he did not prevent the numerous abuses perpetrated by the *harkas*, which exacerbated the conflict. On the ground, the Riffian troops were highly independent and carried out *razzia* (raids) without strong coordination.

Generally speaking, the Spanish<sup>74</sup> and French Red Cross societies were in agreement with the positions of their respective governments and sometimes participated in efforts to hinder the ICRC's timid initiatives.<sup>75</sup>

The ICRC was often satisfied to simply communicate questions or demands from National Societies concerned by the situation in Morocco (for example the Turkish Red Crescent) to the relevant Red Cross society without really taking action, even sometimes discouraging action, as was the case with the Swiss Red Cross.

At the international level, several organizations like the Society of Friends (Quakers),<sup>76</sup> the North Africa Mission Hope House Hospital, Save the Children Fund<sup>77</sup> and the Near and Middle-East Association rolled out concrete programmes for affected populations.<sup>78</sup>

A solidarity movement was also created in the Muslim world, at the heart of which the British Red Crescent<sup>79</sup> played a central role and received contributions

73 Francisco Javier Martínez, "Portuguese Soldiers in Morocco's Rif War (1921–27): Participation, Prisoners and the Intervention of the Portuguese Red Cross", in F. J. Martínez (ed.), *Entangled Peripheries: New Contributions to the History of Portugal and Morocco*, Publicações do Cidehus, Évora, 2020. See, also, V. Courcelle-Labrousse and N. Marmié, above note 22, p. 118.

74 Letter from the Spanish Red Cross informing ICRC that Riffian combatants are not belligerents but insurgents (*révoltés* in French) and should not be granted any form of aid. ICRC Archives, B CR-138-9, 27 November 1925.

75 See, for example, the letter from the French Red Cross, firmly criticizing the ICRC for having approached the colonial authorities in Rabat in order to join a French-Spanish evaluation mission in the conflict-affected regions. ICRC Archives, CR-138-167, 17 May 1926.

76 In Gabriel Pretus, "Humanitarian Relief in the Spanish Civil War (1936–39): The Independent and Non-Partisan Agencies", Master's Thesis, Royal Holloway University of London, Department of History, 2011, p. 276. See, also, Letter from Delegate General Raymond Schlemmer to Golden, President of Save the Children Fund, ICRC Archives, B CR-138, 22 November 1924.

77 See Letter from Delegate General Raymond Schlemmer to Golden, *ibid.*

78 See, for example, P. La Porte, above note 48, p. 124.

79 The British Red Crescent, founded in 1912 in the United Kingdom, was created by Indian subjects of the Crown, initially to come to the aid of Muslims in the British Empire in need of humanitarian assistance in

from some National Societies (such as the Egyptian Red Crescent). It nevertheless played only a modest role limited to the transfer of funds for material assistance to refugees in Tangier and for locally recruiting doctors, some of which were sent to zones held by the Riffian insurrection.

In 1922, via its representatives in India and in London, the British Red Crescent officially requested permission from the British authorities to send a contingent of Muslim doctors to Morocco. This initiative was strongly discouraged by the British ambassador in Madrid, Esme Howard, who declared that such an act would gravely undermine the image of the United Kingdom in Spain, so much so that the British government rejected the request to visit Spanish prisoners detained by Abd el-Krim. One might add that even if the great powers still had a contentious relationship after the First World War, inter-imperial solidarity demanded that one did not encourage indigenous rebellions in case the example took.<sup>80</sup>

### The ICRC: Impotent, legalist, pusillanimous or indifferent?

Although the war did not go unnoticed by the ICRC, the latter remained largely on the sidelines. It was not an international armed conflict, and therefore the applicable protection regime was ambiguous – if not absent – and there was no legal or formal basis for the ICRC to take action. This attitude was slightly inconsistent with the resolution and political courage that the ICRC had shown in the past, such as during the Anglo-Boer war (1899–1902), where the ICRC encouraged the Transvaal and the Free State of Orange<sup>81</sup> to establish a Red Cross society and to accede to the Geneva Convention despite the strong objection of the British Crown, which contested the sovereignty of these entities. The ICRC and the Movement components had also taken humanitarian action in the Finland Civil War (1918), in Upper Silesia during the Russian Civil War (1919), the Ukraine War of Independence (1918–1921) and in Hungary during Béla Kun’s communist uprising (1919), which were not inter-State conflicts.<sup>82</sup> In all these situations, the ICRC quietly intervened without much resistance from legitimate or *de facto* authorities.

situations of conflict (“to aid sick and wounded in times of war”). It began its activities by helping Ottoman soldiers wounded in the Balkans. It was never recognized by the Movement of the Red Cross and Red Crescent and seems to have ceased its activities in the beginning of the 1930s. See, for example, Jonathan Benthall and Jérôme Bellion-Jourdan, *The Charitable Crescent: Politics of Aid in the Muslim World*, I.B. Tauris, London, 2003.

80 Giorgio Poti, “Un microcosme de l’entre-deux-guerres : La Guerre du Rif (1921–1926) et la reconfiguration du complexe impérial euro-méditerranéen”, *Cahiers de civilisation espagnole contemporaine*, Vol. 18, 2017.

81 Matthias Schulz, “Dilemmas of ‘Geneva’ Humanitarian Internationalism: The International Committee of the Red Cross and the Red Cross Movement, 1863–1918”, in Johannes Paulmann (ed.), *Dilemmas of Humanitarian Aid in the Twentieth Century*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2016.

82 H. M. Lovat, *Negotiating Civil War*, above note 29.

It was not until 1924, three years after the conflict began, that the ICRC started to become a little concerned with the situation in the Rif. This concern was mainly triggered by the mobilization of what would today be called civil society. According to the available sources,<sup>83</sup> it is only after it was approached by charitable organizations and some national Red Cross societies already working in the region, alerting it of the severity of the situation and particularly that of refugees, that the ICRC took some action. In the end, it decided to send a representative to the Marquis of Hoyos, president of the Spanish Red Cross, who immediately retorted that “it was not a conflict, the needs of civilians were amply covered and so there was no justification for the ICRC to take action in the region”.<sup>84</sup> The ICRC was only able to establish direct contact with the Spanish government once, through the Spanish Red Cross, but the reaction was similar. After being approached by the Near and Middle-East Association, a charitable organization concerned about the humanitarian situation in the Rif, ICRC Vice-President Paul des Gouttes confirmed that the ICRC could only take action on the express invitation of a warring party, and that Abd el-Krim did not have that status.

In the course of discussions and exchanges with Spanish authorities and the national Red Cross, further arguments were consistently claimed to obstruct any international intervention.<sup>85</sup> These arguments would strangely resonate today for humanitarian negotiators attempting to gain a licence to operate in some modern conflicts:

- Civilians are marginally impacted by the war and they have already full access to the existing governmental medical structures;
- The ICRC is manipulated by charitable organizations who work to promote foreign interests and undermine legitimate Spanish (and French) protection mandate in Morocco;
- The local population is largely responsible for its own predicament for not evacuating combat places;
- A humanitarian intervention would encourage the rebels to fight and legitimize their cause while Spain and France are trying to bring the light of civilization to a backward and violent population; foreign aid would unnecessarily prolong the conflict;
- There is no relief society in the Rif region that would as such operate as a Red Cross component and the rebels have no trained personnel to treat their own people or to manage medical aid;

83 As of September–October 1925, the ICRC started concrete preparations to send an exploratory mission to Morocco despite negative signals from Spanish and French authorities. See Mission Letter to Dr Fred Blanchod, ICRC Archives, CR-138, 24 October 1925.

84 In this regard, see the Report of Delegate General Raymond Schlemmer’s Mission in Spain, ICRC Archives, BC-138-36, 10 November 1924.

85 See the ICRC’s various exchanges between 1924 and 1925 with the Spanish Red Cross, The British Red Crescent Society, The Near and Middle East Association, the Spanish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Turkish Red Crescent, the Swedish Red Cross, the Dutch Red Cross, the German Red Cross, the French Foreign Minister Aristide Briand and the French Red Cross, ICRC Archives, CR-138.

- The Riffians are not only rebelling against the Spanish presence but also against Morocco's legitimate ruler (the Sultan);
- There is no Riffian disciplined military force and tribal outfits are rather unruly warriors without a code of honour;
- There is no Red Cross in the Region because the conditions are not met to establish one;
- The Cheriffian Empire has refused to participate in the Red Cross Movement and we should respect its choice;
- The rebels are condemned by all Muslim religious authorities;
- Abd el-Krim would anyway refuse any help coming from infidels like the ICRC or European Red Cross;<sup>86</sup>
- The shelling of civilian dwellings is inevitable as no distinction is possible between civilians and combatants.<sup>87</sup>

Given the growing concern in the West, in November–December 1925 the ICRC nevertheless sent an envoy to the Tangier International Zone and to Rabat<sup>88</sup> to enquire about the humanitarian situation and in particular about the fate of approximately 5000 Riffian refugees. However, no concrete action was taken at that stage. ICRC's *missus dominicus*, Dr Mentha, was unable to establish any contact with high-ranking officials or with the rebellion representatives or even with the Berber community as such. The whole affair left the impression of a lack of determination and tokenism.

The following year, the ICRC received from the Swedish Red Cross<sup>89</sup> a copy of a letter sent by Abd el-Krim to the King of Sweden,<sup>90</sup> informing him of civilian suffering, and it again sent a delegate to Rabat. On 23 May 1926, Abd el-Krim had already informed the French of his intention to surrender and so the ICRC's relief efforts were deemed to be unnecessary.<sup>91</sup>

It is surprising to see how fainthearted the ICRC was in the Rif affair given that, almost simultaneously, in 1925, it had taken very proactive steps in relation to the Druze revolt in Lebanon, then under French mandate. It showed a much more energetic approach to diplomacy by putting a delegate on the ship carrying France's new high commissioner to Beirut in order to negotiate ICRC action in Lebanon, a French protectorate.

86 Lettre du Vice-Président du CICR Edmond Boissier à Akil Moukhtar, Vice-Président du Croissant-Rouge Turc, ICRC Archives, CR-138, 19 February 1925.

87 Report from Gerald Spencer Pryse transmitted to ICRC by NMEA, ICRC Archives, CR-138, 13 December 1924.

88 Henri Mentha, "Mission à Tanger", *Revue Internationale de la Croix-Rouge et Bulletin International des Sociétés de la Croix-Rouge*, Vol. 7, No. 84, 1925.

89 Abd el-Krim's request was transmitted by Alexander Langlet, correspondent of the Swedish newspaper *Dagens Nyheter*.

90 Letter from Prince Carl of Sweden and Norway to ICRC, ICRC Archives, CR-138, 30 April 1926.

91 Cancellation of Mission of R. Schlemmer and Dr Reverdin, ICRC Archives, CR-138, 28 April 1926.

## Quest for justification

There is no final explanation as to why the ICRC was so passive regarding the Rif War, but we can imagine that it was not inclined to alienate two European countries for the sake of an “indigenous revolt” that, at the time, did not appear comparable to conflicts between “civilized powers”. We may also suppose that the ICRC was more prone to consolidate and further develop the existing interstate conflict regulation than to spend political assets/resources on a colonial police operation. The French and Spanish Red Cross societies did consider their role as supporting their own troops and helping specific categories of victims but certainly not to offer impartial help to all people affected. Let us note that the issue of impartiality and independence of National Societies is still very prominent in many contexts where they have to operate in internal conflicts.

Before 1924, ICRC archives are mute on the Rif issue. We could not find any reference to the conflict; it is thus hazardous to deduce the level of information the Committee had before this date, or the content of discussions on this issue, if any. It is, however, established that the news from the Rif front had reached newspapers in Europe at least since the Battle of Annual (1921). It is highly improbable that committee members or the small administrative nucleus would have completely overlooked the unfolding events in Morocco<sup>92</sup> before 1924.

However, it is difficult to interpret the ICRC’s strategy and intentions merely based on available institutional archives. There are only assumptions about the ICRC’s apparent unwillingness to act. Some authors<sup>93</sup> argue that the ICRC was kept busy by other contexts where it was running assistance and repatriation programmes and most probably considered the situation in Morocco as being marginal. It is true that for the Committee the rules of war had been established to regulate warfare between “civilized nations”; however, despite the legal vacuum, it had serious concerns concerning the fate of civilians in conflict situations following atrocities committed by various armies during the First World War and its aftermath. In 1921, an ICRC delegate, Maurice Gehri, had, for example, published an account in the *Review* about the atrocities committed by the Greek army against the Muslim population in Anatolia.<sup>94</sup> In that sense, it would be excessive to claim that the ICRC was totally blind to the suffering of non-European populations.

Until the end of 1924, it seems that the institution was very adamant not to upset the Spanish (more or less represented by the Spanish Red Cross), sometimes even responding to queries from other Red Cross societies by endorsing arguments put up by the Spanish authorities to justify their refusal of foreign aid. On the other hand, it would systematically forward to the Spanish Red Cross all letters and communications from National Societies and other charitable organizations

92 B. Holmes, above note 52.

93 E.g. P. La Porte, above note 48.

94 Maurice Gehri, “Mission d’enquête en Anatolie. (12–22 mai 1921)”, *Revue Internationale de la Croix-Rouge et Bulletin International des Societes de la Croix-Rouge*, Vol. 3, No. 31, 1921.

voicing their concern about the situation prevailing in the Rif in a form that could be seen as a protracted and low-key advocacy manoeuvre. By 1925, the tone had changed, and the ICRC started to affirm its resolution to send an official or unofficial (unauthorized) mission to the Rif region.

In November 1925, the ICRC published in the *Bulletin*<sup>95</sup> a rather extensive but clinical summary of decisions taken by it. This article brought clarification to why the organization had decided not to act, identifying itself with the arguments expressed by the Spanish Red Cross.

What must be underlined is that, in 1920, colonialism was not an undisputed policy and its legitimacy was already the subject of heated debates within European States. However, the international climate around the ICRC was still relatively conservative and responding to the plea of unruly natives looked like a potentially dangerous venture. The famous Wilson's fourteen-point programme in which self-determination was exposed was not addressing colonized people but countries like Poland or Czechoslovakia. The United States were largely retaining the idea that the role of colonial powers was to help "less civilized peoples achieve the habit of law and obedience".<sup>96</sup>

In addition, the First World War had shown to the colonized people that "their masters" were not invincible. Colonial rulers were persuaded they had to retain their respective possessions in firm hands in order to avoid a disintegration of their respective empires.

In 1923, the informal embassy of the Rif government based in London sent a "Declaration of State and Proclamation to all Nations" to the LN reaffirming its independence and its desire to fight for its political recognition.<sup>97</sup> In political terms, the LN had from the outset declared that it had no power to intervene, because the Treaty of Versailles had confirmed the major powers' role as protectors of Morocco. The accounts from the period show that ICRC governance shared more or less that vision.<sup>98</sup> The LN and the ICRC also agreed that Riffian fighters did not qualify as a "belligerent". As a result, the LN refused to act as a mediator because it did not regard the Rif Republic as a national entity.<sup>99</sup> It is interesting to note that, almost at the same time, France's military

95 "La Croix-Rouge et le Rif", *Revue Internationale de la Croix-Rouge et Bulletin International des Societes de la Croix-Rouge*, Vol. 7, No. 83, 1925.

96 Joshua Keating, "The Accidental Anti-Imperialist", *Slate*, 30 June 2020, available at: <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2020/06/woodrow-wilson-racism-self-determination.html>.

97 The "Riff Republic" – The Agent-General for the "Government of the Riff" (Marocco) London, above note 20.

98 See, for example, David P. Forsythe, "The ICRC as Seen Through the Pages of the Review, 1869–1913: Personal Observations", *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol. 100, No. 907/908/909, 2018. See, also, Paul des Gouttes, "Une thèse de doctorat en droit sur la Croix-Rouge", *Revue Internationale de la Croix-Rouge et Bulletin International des Societes de la Croix-Rouge*, Vol. 4, No. 45, 1922. In this article, the ICRC Vice-President Paul des Gouttes stressed that having invited some Red Cross Societies from "the Dominions" to the Xth International Conference was rather a favour and an exception and should not in any way be considered as a recognition.

99 "In reply to your letter of October 7th I have the honour to inform you that the provisions of the Covenant concerning the settlement of disputes apply solely to disputes between States, the status of which has been

response to the Druze revolt in Lebanon, which spread to much of Syria, did not encounter the same lack of reaction from the LN because Syria was not a colony but a mandated territory. France would have to answer for its actions before the Permanent Mandates Commission and reassure the international community about the use of poison gas. The LN, when considering whether the Geneva Protocol on poison gases applied to Morocco, confirmed that it could only apply to belligerent States,<sup>100</sup> which Spain and France were not, and the Rifians even less so. French perception, for example, was that the use of poison gas in the Rif context was an optional strategic possibility rather than the subject of total ban.

The difference in the ICRC's approach to the Rif War and its humanitarian efforts in the Second Italo–Ethiopian War ten years later is also striking, although it must be said that the latter was an international armed conflict taking place against a completely different political backdrop. It is also worth mentioning that in 1925 the ICRC was still a tiny organization that had almost no operational and financial capabilities. It was not until the Second Italo–Ethiopian War and the Spanish Civil War that the term “delegation” could be used to describe the ICRC's presence.<sup>101</sup>

For the ICRC, any humanitarian action without Madrid's consent would have been regarded as meddling in Spain's domestic affairs. The ICRC's Archives strongly indicate that ICRC management and governance at the time were more inclined to give credit to official State representatives involved than to the version of events that was in line with communications from charitable organizations, which were treated with great wariness. After its disappointing experience with the Spanish Red Cross, the ICRC directly approached the French government through the LN, but faced a similar refusal. A few months later, ICRC Vice-President Boissier<sup>102</sup> added that he doubted in any case that Abd el-Krim would accept aid from an organization belonging to the “infidel” side. At no time did the ICRC make serious efforts to contact the rebel leader or his envoys.

We may conclude that the ICRC's “procrastination”, so to speak, may have had two distinct but intertwined causes. Firstly, there was a willingness to preserve and further develop what had been already achieved with existing States, and, more importantly, to get further legal codification.<sup>103</sup> In 1920–1921, the ICRC was also very busy preserving its lead role within the Movement which was somewhat contested by the newly established League of the Red Cross. It seems that the ICRC wanted to protect its right of initiative (later recognized in 1928) and that Rif

generally recognised. They may be either Members or non-Members of the League.” Letter from Paul Mautoux, LN Director of the Political Section, in Dossier concerning various requests for League intervention in the Rif War, United Nations Library & Archives Geneva, File R591/11/41612/12861, 18 October 1925, available at: <https://archives.ungeneva.org/dossier-concerning-various-requests-for-league-intervention-in-the-rif-war>.

100 Pablo La Porte, “‘Rien à ajouter’: The League of Nations and the Rif War (1921–1926)”, *European History Quarterly*, Vol. 41, No. 1, 2011, pp. 76–82.

101 See, in particular, Rainer Baudendistel, *Between Bombs and Good Intentions: The Red Cross and the Italo–Ethiopian War, 1935–1936*, Berghahn Books, New York, 2006.

102 Lettre du Vice-Président Boissier, ICRC Archives, CR-138-70, 14 February 1925.

103 John F. Hutchinson, *Champions of Charity: War and the Rise of the Red Cross*, Westview Press, Boulder, CO, 1996.

events did not fit in this strategy. Secondly, the lack of resources and operational experience to set up a large-scale humanitarian action in a non-European context was clearly a source of concern that transpired from the correspondence.

## Public opinion divided

The Rif War stirred little reaction in Spain because the public still very strongly believed that every effort should be made to combat and punish “backward” peoples taking up arms against “civilizing forces”. Additionally, the various prisoner massacres and mutilation of dead bodies that took place in the 1920s’ offensive did not make the Riffian rebellion very popular. The mindset was very different from that which led to the Tragic Week in Barcelona in 1909, during which protests about soldiers being sent to Morocco turned into several days of extremely violent rioting in the city.

In France, a left-wing social-democrat coalition came to power in May 1924 and in 1925 it signed an agreement with Spain<sup>104</sup> regarding joint military action in Morocco. What was most worrying to the French was the idea that, after the bloodbath that was the First World War, more young people – whose fathers had died in Verdun – would be sacrificed. The fate of the local people, meanwhile, was of no real concern. For France’s Right and Far Right, the country needed to show that it was capable of defending itself and, above all, maintaining its place in the world. Only the French Communist Party (PCF) – initially accused by the Komintern of being ambiguous about colonial matters and supported by intellectuals including the Surrealist “Clarté” group – organized mass protests against the war, and particularly against the sending of troops to Morocco. At the end of 1924, the PCF also wrote “a pro Rif manifesto” and sent a telegram of support to Abd el-Krim<sup>105</sup> that would be read before the National Assembly.

From 1925 to 1926 the controversy grew in Scandinavia. The publication of a series of articles reported very disturbing testimonies on the conduct of hostilities and the situation of the civilian population. Some authors did not hesitate to qualify military acts as crimes against humanity.<sup>106</sup> Personalities like the explorer Sven Hedin<sup>107</sup> used their prestige to serve the Riffian cause, to the chagrin of French diplomats, who multiplied efforts to discredit the information in these articles to the ICRC. They did their utmost to persuade public opinion that these

104 From 17 to 25 June 1925, French and Spanish delegations met in Madrid to negotiate a series of agreements that committed both sides to, among other agreements, a military pact against the Republic of the Rif. See S. Fleming, above note 22.

105 Nicole Le Guennec, “Le Parti communiste français et la guerre du Rif”, *Le Mouvement social*, No. 78, 1972, p. 41.

106 Article by Waldemar Lanke, *Aftonbladet*, 8 May 1926.

107 Sven Hedin (1865–1962) was a Swedish geographer and explorer as well as a political public figure. He particularly condemned the intervention of foreign mercenaries in Morocco. See, also, Francisco Javier Martínez-Antonio, “An Individual Affair? Sven Hedin, Hans Langlet and the Intervention in Morocco’s Rif War of the International Committee of the Red Cross”, Speech delivered during the “International Health Organizations (IHOs): The History for the Future Network” Conference, University of Strathclyde, 21 April 2016.





Figure 8. Bank note: State Bank of the Riff – Foreign Issues (1923) (Numizon).

personalities were serving foreign powers. Generally speaking, the joint military operation between France and Spain was the object of robust public diplomacy to avoid the emergence of international solidarity between Riffian nationalist forces and communist or anti-colonial movements.

Despite some gains in popular support, Abd el-Krim's efforts to garner foreign political support were largely unsuccessful. The UK government showed very vague sympathy, but offered no diplomatic help. In 1922, debates in the British Parliament showed very clearly that His Majesty's Government was not ready to intervene in any way in the affairs of "friendly Spain".<sup>108</sup>

Abd el-Krim also struggled to convince other countries that the Rif Republic was a fledgling State, despite having very embryonic institutions (for example, a State Bank; see Figure 8). Robert Gordon Canning,<sup>109</sup> chairman of the Rif Committee based in London, tried to intercede with France's Minister of Foreign Affairs Aristide Briand, but in vain. He put that refusal down to France being unable or unwilling to recognize the Rif authorities.

108 "The Riff tribes now engaged in fighting Spanish forces in districts which His Majesty's Government have recognised as forming a Spanish sphere of influence in Morocco must be regarded by His Majesty's Government as rebels against a friendly Power, and consequently His Majesty's Government must refuse to recognise or have any dealings with the emissaries of the Riff tribes now in London. I am not aware whether the Spanish Government are now negotiating with private English manufacturers for the purchase of aeroplanes. For the reasons explained in the first part of my answer, His Majesty's Government do not see their way to intervene, either through the League of Nations or otherwise." *Statement of Neville Chamberlain*, Volume 157: debated on Friday 4 August 1922, UK Parliament, London.

109 Robert Gordon Canning was a dubious character who, in late 1925, visited Tangiers and rapidly became a military advisor, publicist and gunrunner for the Riffian rebellion. He created "the Rif Committee", a rather eclectic organization which tried to convince the British authorities to support Abd el-Krim's project and lobby the French government to conclude a separate peace with the Riffian rebellion. He managed to concoct a peace proposal substituting independence for autonomy but, after weeks of dithering, the French rejected the Proposal. In the 1930s, he joined the British Fascist Union. See Thomas Heyen-Dubé, "Fascism, War and the British Officer Class: The Case of Robert Gordon-Canning", *War & Society*, Vol. 40, No. 4, 2021. See, also, V. Courcelle-Labrousse and N. Marmié, "Chapitre XX – Le Riff Committee et les sauterelles d'Ajdi", in V. Courcelle-Labrousse and N. Marmié, above note 22.

## The strange case of the disappearing war

For decades, the Rif War and its ephemeral Republic were not the object of significant political debate, and it only raised modest interest in academic circles.

However, in December 2018, Spanish Minister of Foreign Affairs Josep Borrel declared that Spain would start a process of healing wounds on both sides, on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the Rif War.<sup>110</sup> That stance followed a request, made by the Republican Left of Catalonia party, for Morocco to receive compensation for the use of chemical weapons. This was the first time that any reconciliation and reparation process had been openly mentioned. Mr Borrel announced that the process should also take into account the suffering caused by the Battle of Annual and of the 10,000 Spanish soldiers who died in it. The government had – in February 2018 – received a request from the Amazigh World Assembly (AMA),<sup>111</sup> asking Spain to present its apologies for the use of chemical weapons in Morocco and proposing a compensation plan, but things did not advance further. The AMA also mentioned, in its request, the need to put in place a transitional justice mechanism.

Almost at the same time, Netflix broadcasted a series entitled *Morocco: Love in Times of War (Tiempos de guerra)*,<sup>112</sup> telling the story of Spanish Red Cross nurses in a military hospital in Melilla in 1921.

This slight resurgence of interest only partially masks the relative parsimony of historical studies on the Rif War, which is compounded with the almost total lack of collective memory about this period. This is not even a situation of competing memories in which diverging narratives collide and feed modern political controversies.

Whereas the Rif War was centre-stage politically in the late 1920s and was highly controversial in Europe between pro-colonial and anti-colonial forces, it did not elicit much scientific literature until very recently. However, it is one of the first examples of Western powers forming a coalition to wage a long and ruthless counter-insurgency campaign. It is also an example of the kind of asymmetric wars we are witnessing today. Although a major conflict, it has not been greatly explored by historians and represents a real black hole in terms of remembrance. It should be stressed that it was not just another police expedition aimed at subduing some restive natives using specialist colonial troops, or intended to make a local despot yield using a skillfully deployed gunboat. Rather, it was a

110 In December 2018 *Morocco World News* reported that Spanish Minister of Foreign Affairs Josep Borrell was proposing to use the centenary of the Battle of Annual to mend fences with Morocco in relation to the Rif War. See Safaa Kasraoui, “Rif War: Spain Wants to ‘Heal Wounds’ of Gassing Moroccan Resistance”, *Morocco World News*, 28 December 2018, available at: [www.morocoworldnews.com/2018/12/261799/rif-war-spain-morocco](http://www.morocoworldnews.com/2018/12/261799/rif-war-spain-morocco).

111 MEMO Middle-East Monitor, “Spain Urged to Investigate 1920s Toxic Gas Use in Morocco”, 12 February 2018, available at: [www.middleeastmonitor.com/20180212-spain-urged-to-investigate-1920s-toxic-gas-use-in-morocco/](http://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20180212-spain-urged-to-investigate-1920s-toxic-gas-use-in-morocco/).

112 Queen Victoria Eugénie sent a group of nurses from the Spanish Red Cross to Melilla to establish a new hospital. Led by the Duchess of La Victoria, María del Carmen Angoloti y Mesa, the group was composed of young women from Spain’s upper classes.

large-scale conflict pursued using the most modern military resources of its time, and the excessive scale of those resources is still shocking today. It is likely that only the crackdown that followed the Indian Rebellion of 1857 (the Great Mutiny)<sup>113</sup> or, more recently, the massacres of the Herero and Nama populations in Namibia<sup>114</sup> (1904–1907) by the German Empire surpassed the Rif War in terms of civilian casualties.

Not surprisingly, there are very few monuments, commemorative works or gravestones specifically dedicated to the fighters killed during this campaign, not to mention the civilian casualties. A few names are mentioned in some military sections of national cemeteries in France and Spain, but that is about all. The victims of the conflict have faded from history. This situation is paradoxical if one considers the number of monuments to the dead that studded France after the First World War. Closer to us, the French government was until recently very reluctant to create remembrance places for its military personnel fallen in the so-called external operations.<sup>115</sup>

French philosopher Paul Ricœur<sup>116</sup> explored what he called “*les ruses de l’oubli*” (tactical forgetting), which includes the removal of historical records, which may be conscious or unconscious but is in all cases collective. Among the French and Spanish, there has not yet been any political will to revisit an embarrassing colonial episode, which could also result in claims or requests for compensation that would be very complicated to address. France still struggles to approach the Algerian War with equanimity and Spain has not finished managing the heritage of the Franco regime and the Civil War.<sup>117</sup> There are still numerous subjects of disagreement between Spain and Morocco, in particular the fate of the two Ceuta and Melilla enclaves, among others.

In 2007, Moroccan documentarian Tarik el-Adrissi made a film<sup>118</sup> about the use of poison gas, which had relatively little impact in Morocco and Spain. The Rif War has been erased from collective consciousness, and is very rarely alluded to, even for

113 In which estimates suggest that 800,000 people died. See Douglas M. Peers, *India Under Colonial Rule: 1700–1885*, Routledge, Abingdon, 2013, p. 64: “The number of Indians who died during the mutiny and the famines and epidemics that followed in its wake is far more difficult to compute. Attempts to do so based on comparisons between the very sketchy demographic data that we have for the period before 1857 with the census results of 1871 have suggested that the number of deaths might be around 800,000.”

114 Mads Bomholt Nielsen, *Britain, Germany and Colonial Violence in South-West Africa, 1884–1919: The Herero and Nama Genocide*, Cambridge Imperial and Post-Colonial Studies, Palgrave MacMillan, Cham, 2022, pp. 17–34. “Historians estimate that approximately 80,000 indigenous people were killed in the genocide. While these numbers are difficult to confirm, this figure represents about 80 percent of the Herero people and 50 percent of the Nama people.” United States Holocaust Museum, “Herero and Nama Genocide”, available at: [www.ushmm.org/collections/bibliography/herero-and-nama-genocide](http://www.ushmm.org/collections/bibliography/herero-and-nama-genocide).

115 Mali, Niger, Chad, Afghanistan, etc.

116 Paul Ricœur, *La Mémoire, l’histoire, l’oubli*, Points, Paris, 2000.

117 In this vein one might ask the delicate question of the transfer of the remains of General Franco from his mausoleum in Santa Cruz (l’Abadia Benedictina de la Santa Cruz del Valle de los Caidos) by the socialist government of Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez, which continues to cause controversy and political confrontation in the heart of Spanish political culture. See, for example, Olivier Perrin, “L’Espagne veut régler ses comptes avec les horreurs du franquisme”, *Le Temps*, Geneva, 25 June 2018, available at: [www.letemps.ch/opinions/lespagne-veut-regler-comptes-horreurs-franquisme](http://www.letemps.ch/opinions/lespagne-veut-regler-comptes-horreurs-franquisme).

118 Tarik el-Idrissi, *Arrhash (Veneno)*, 2007.

ideological purposes. Objectively speaking, no protagonist, except maybe the fragmented Riffian community, has any interest in exhuming this historical episode. The “rediscovery” of a forgotten conflict necessarily stems from a political decision. In that regard, one could say that the current amnesia is the result of a deliberate political strategy, but there is not even clear evidence for that. Neither is it a case of the traditional conflict between official history and collective memory, as seen in debates about the Algerian War<sup>119</sup> and Vichy France, for example. There are no eyewitnesses left who can tell us about what happened in the Rif. The historical imprint left by a war, which goes beyond the real-life experiences of the protagonists, varies from conflict to conflict but it remains entirely real. It is impossible to understand war in the Balkans during the Second World War without the Jasenovac concentration camp<sup>120</sup> or the Ukraine without the Kuban famine or the Babi Yar massacres. In the case of the Rif, there is no collective remembrance of particular episodes that would strike the imagination, as even the Annual disaster is long forgotten.

## History versus collective amnesia

Rebuilding a nation often involves inventing a national narrative or reconstructing its backstory retrospectively to ensure social cohesion. We may wonder if the Rif War and its humanitarian consequences warrant a more thorough scrutiny.

For a quarter of a century, lawyers, politicians, psychologists and historians have debated the role of collective memory in the socio-political sustainable resolution of conflicts (the Rwandan genocide, apartheid, the Bosnian War, the repressive regimes in Chile and Argentina, etc.). Pierre Nora<sup>121</sup> clearly distinguishes the need for remembrance and the historical imperative and is wary of both. Henry Rousso<sup>122</sup> warns against the excesses committed in the name of remembrance and the mental manipulation that can result. Conflicts do not end when the last shot is fired. Certain humanitarian issues, such as people who are missing and unaccounted for, eat away at societies for several decades after hostilities have ended.<sup>123</sup> We know that acknowledging human suffering in conflict is often a preliminary step towards more ambitious phases of the social and political reconciliation and normalization processes. Unfortunately, this collective memory<sup>124</sup> can be revived or manipulated by those who are not solely concerned with giving a voice to victims.

119 Benjamin Stora, *La gangrène et l'oubli : La mémoire de la guerre d'Algérie*, La Découverte/Poche, Paris, 2005.

120 An extermination camp set up by the Ustaše Government (1941–1945) in which several hundred thousand Serbian, Jewish and Roma prisoners died.

121 Hanna Nosova, “Pierre Nora’s Concept of Contrasting Memory and History”, *International Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 9, No. 4, 2021.

122 Henry Rousso, *La Hantise du passé*, Textuel, Paris, 1998.

123 In places such as the Balkans, Cyprus or Iraq.

124 The historian Pierre Nora defines collective memory as “what remains of the past in the real-life experience of groups, or what those groups do with the past ... It is sweeping and borderless, vague and jumbled. It is based on faith and only assimilates that which supports it.” The quote comes from Jacques Le Goff (ed.), *La Nouvelle histoire*, Retz, Paris, 1978, pp. 398–401.

Some experts believe that forgetting is sometimes a great healer, meaning that reviving forgotten suffering is much riskier than letting injustices go unpunished.<sup>125</sup> Others take the opposite view,<sup>126</sup> claiming that there can be no reconciliation without some sort of recognition of the past, or without justice being served. As Australian aboriginal history and the Rwandan genocide have shown, denying and negating traumatic events seriously damage efforts to promote reconciliation or normalization, develop a peaceful society and establish lasting peace. The Kantian ideal of justice should win out over any other form of moral claim but the Battle of Annual happened four generations ago and its protagonists are long deceased. Nonetheless, it would be too hasty to ignore the symbolic weight<sup>127</sup> of such events.<sup>128</sup> The challenge in the case of the Rif War is that there is no one left to reconcile, which raises the following question: Can justice be served posthumously? A mechanism of restorative justice or compensation could doubtless be put in place but that would probably serve some political purpose being implemented.

The history of humanitarianism is still an emerging discipline, but it has seen significant growth in recent years and can only continue to do so. It is nonetheless difficult to examine conflicts before the 1960s, in particular colonial history, with a few rare exceptions.<sup>129</sup>

125 David Rieff, "... And if There Was Also a Duty to Forget, How Would We Think About History Then?", *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol. 101, No. 910, 2019.

126 See, for example, the declaration of António Guterres, "La réconciliation ne saurait se substituer à la justice, ni même ouvrir la voie à l'amnistie pour les crimes les plus graves" ("Reconciliation, however, cannot be a substitute for accountability or pave the way for amnesty for serious crimes under international law"), United Nations Security Council, UN Doc. S/PV.8668, Press Release SC/14024, 10 November 2019, p. 3. See, also, Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report*, Vol. 1, 1998, available at: [www.justice.gov.za/trc/report/finalreport/Volume%201.pdf](http://www.justice.gov.za/trc/report/finalreport/Volume%201.pdf). In South Africa's TRC, the slogan "revealing is healing" crystallized ideas about the healing and conciliatory power of verbal memories of violence and abuses that were promoted in that commission. Archbishop Desmond Tutu was Chair of the TRC. See Rosalind Shaw, "Rethinking Truth and Reconciliation Commissions", United States Institute of Peace, Special Report, February 2005, available at: [www.usip.org/sites/default/files/sr130.pdf](http://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/sr130.pdf).

127 To take the Opium War between the British Empire and China as an example, there has not been a symmetrical process of forgetting.

128 For the British, it is largely a forgotten episode belonging to a colonial era that disappeared for good in 1999 in Hong Kong. For the Chinese, it is etched into the collective consciousness, an act that founded modern China and an Asian "never again".

129 For example, the work of Caroline Reeves, Hanna B. Krebs and Miwa Hirono on humanitarianism in China, e.g. Caroline Reeves, "China, 'State-Centric' Humanitarianism, and the International Committee of the Red Cross: A Historical Background", in Elena Fiddian-Qasimiyeh and Patricia Daley (eds), *Routledge Handbook of South-South Relations*, Routledge, Abingdon, 2018; Hanna B. Krebs, "The 'Chinese Way'? The Evolution of Chinese Humanitarianism", Humanitarian Policy Group, 2014, available at: <https://cdn.odi.org/media/documents/9140.pdf>; Miwa Hirono, "Three Legacies of Humanitarianism in China", *Disasters*, Vol. 37, 2013; the work of Rainer Baudendistel on the humanitarian action of the ICRC during the Ethiopian conflict (1935), above note 101; the work of Jennifer Polk on the foreign humanitarian aid of revolutionary Russia, e.g. Jennifer Ann Polk, "Constructive Efforts: The American Red Cross and YMCA in Revolutionary and Civil War Russia, 1917–24", PhD Thesis, University of Toronto, 2012, available at: [https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/bitstream/1807/65487/3/Polk\\_Jennifer\\_A\\_201206\\_PhD\\_thesis.pdf](https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/bitstream/1807/65487/3/Polk_Jennifer_A_201206_PhD_thesis.pdf); and the research of Jasmine Moussa on the origins of the concept of humanitarianism in the Middle East, e.g. Jasmine Moussa, *Ancient Origins, Modern Actors: Defining Arabic Meanings of Humanitarianism*, Humanitarian Policy Group,

The rise of nationalist governments and community lobbies contributes to the risk of history being transformed in the name of the sacrosanct collective memory or duty to remember. These ideas can quickly serve to impose a national fiction, in some cases inscribed in law. We know that these “excesses in the duty of remembrance”,<sup>130</sup> “competing victimhood” or the judicialization of historical “truths” are seriously detrimental to critical analysis and the comprehension of both facts and the intent of actors.<sup>131</sup> History does not belong to historians alone<sup>132</sup> and historians are not meant to produce adequate memorial discourse on command. However, humanitarian historians who study these questions must increasingly live with the fact that the discipline is not exclusively neutral and impartial, as the morality of the sector for which it is named. They must speak honestly about the defaults of collective memory with all unpleasant political consequences that this implies.

This article does not aim to determine whether remembrance is socially or politically necessary, nor to assess whether any confessions or reparations are legitimate demands for the Rif War. However, and without overstating the educational value of historical analysis, humanitarian historians should perhaps examine the Rif War more closely, over and above the remembrance efforts that are solely a matter for the people concerned. People make many strategic mistakes when they are unaware of history and when the subjective experience of those affected is rejected or misunderstood. Beyond its academic support, humanitarian history can also help clarify complex reconciliation processes, such as seen through the massacres in Namibia (1904–1907).

## What can we learn from the Rif War?

The Rif War is not yet really part of humanitarian history. The Boissier–Durand history of the ICRC between 1914 and 1945 which gives an account of the actions and initiatives of the Committee to send a mission to Morocco<sup>133</sup> stands as the exception. Otherwise, it is curious to note that François Bugnion, in his magnum opus *The International Committee of the Red Cross and the Protection of War Victims*<sup>134</sup> makes only a very short notice of a conflict which lasted for more than five years and caused tens of thousands of deaths. Michel Veuthey, in

Overseas Development Institute, London, 2014, available at: <http://cdn-odi-production.s3.amazonaws.com/media/documents/9290.pdf>.

130 François Dosse, “L’histoire à l’épreuve de la guerre des mémoires”, *Cités*, Vol. 33, No. 1, 2008, p. 31; Olivier Bertrand, “Compte rendu de *La mémoire, l’histoire, l’oubli* de Paul Ricoeur, Paris, Seuil, 2000”, *Politique et Sociétés*, Vol. 20, No. 1.

131 In 1995, the orientalist Bernard Lewis (1916–2018) was found guilty by the Paris Tribunal de Grande Instance for having expressed reservations about the genocidal character of the massacre of Armenian populations in 1915–1917.

132 See René Rémond, “L’histoire et la Loi”, *Études*, Vol. 404, No. 6, 2006.

133 Pierre Boissier, André Durand, Catherine Rey-Schyrr, Françoise Perret and François Bugnion, *Histoire du Comité international de la Croix-Rouge*, 2 vols, Institut Henry-Dunant, Geneva, 1978.

134 François Bugnion, *The International Committee of the Red Cross and the Protection of War Victims*, International Committee of the Red Cross, Geneva, 2003, p. 299.

his seminal thesis on guerrilla warfare and humanitarian law,<sup>135</sup> only mentions it briefly and in relation to the use of poison gas.

What is noteworthy about the Rif War is that, in its second phase, it involved a coalition of forces operating outside of their respective national territories, including regular armies, local back-up troops, tribes, mercenaries and even converted pirates. One can also discover the foundations of a sort of transnational mobilization of civil society.<sup>136</sup> In this respect, it was a thoroughly modern conflict.

The Rif War was a rehearsal, taking place behind closed doors, for future colonial wars, but also to some extent for today's counter-insurgency and insurrection wars. It contained all the ingredients for widespread abuses and excesses. It raised all the issues and complexities relating to the protection of civilians during an internal armed conflict, and showed that States can be reluctant to allow organizations to do their work impartially. So, while the ICRC sent its General Delegate Raymond Schlemmer to Madrid in 1924 to meet Baron de Hoyos (President of the Spanish Red Cross) and the head of the political cabinet of Prime Minister Primo de Rivera, the arguments raised at that time against the ICRC's intervention strangely resound with the reasons put forward by some current governments to deny humanitarian presence or action. As for the "recognition of belligerency" in internal armed conflict, although the legal framework and customary law have considerably evolved since, it is still a recurrent problem when negotiating protection and humanitarian access.

It is striking to see that the powers involved in this conflict already considered that humanitarian action by external actors constituted a risk of political interference and possible politicization of any publicity that could be given to it.<sup>137</sup> On top of this, aid could needlessly prolong the conflict, the presence of a foreign organization on rebel-held territory could in fact give a status to belligerents and the very nature of Riffian combatants, who did not understand the notion of humanity, did not allow the ICRC to act safely.<sup>138</sup> Together, the Spanish government and Red Cross affirmed that the rebels were unwilling to be administered Western medicine and that, in any case, there were no longer civilians in the areas concerned. It is frustrating to see that the arguments used nowadays to deny the ICRC access in certain situations are exactly the same as those advanced 100 years ago.

Is the Rif War a mere historical episode to be filed alongside others such as the Crimean War, the Napoleonic campaigns or the Peloponnesian War? It is not as simple as that.

135 Michel Veuthey, *Guérilla et droit humanitaire*, 2nd ed., International Committee of the Red Cross, Geneva, 1983.

136 G. Poti, above note 80.

137 Even in the 1920s, a period when colonialism did not raise much controversy, the practice of denouncing abuses by competing powers was common. So much so, that in 1917 when an Irish officer, Thomas Leslie O'Reilly, denounced German military acts in Namibia (1904–1907) against the local population ("The Blue Book"), the Germans immediately threatened to do the same regarding British colonial expeditions, which provoked the immediate withdrawal of the report.

138 Francisco Javier Martínez-Antonio, "Weak Nation-States and the Limits of Humanitarian Aid: The Case of Morocco's Rif War, 1921–1927", in J. Paulmann (ed.), above note 81.

The humanitarian approach to history is valid because it relates to ideas and values that are still prompting discussion and controversy today. As such, the Battle of Solferino is of limited historical interest and was nothing like modern conflicts. The only reason it is important today, and has been since 1857, is because it gave rise to a conceptual revolution in the art of war and because it is the foundational moment of modern humanitarianism.

It would be tempting to state that nothing has really changed and that modern wars resemble old ones. However, wars have come a long way since 1920. Although the conflicts in Syria and Yemen might raise doubts about the usefulness and relevance of the law and of the international security system, few contemporary conflicts take place behind closed doors or in a legal vacuum that fosters impunity. The development of rules applicable to internal armed conflicts, although far from being perfect and fully implemented, has established a protection framework that can always be invoked and that has curbed the most serious excesses. States are now accountable for their actions. No regular army can ignore the law and carry out systematic, large-scale violations of the rules without risking international opprobrium. Humanitarian organizations now have a major presence on the ground, although working conditions are increasingly dangerous and access can be often uncertain.

In 1925, no European State disputed the idea that the colonial powers were entitled to settle their differences with native populations as they saw fit, without any sort of international scrutiny or constraints. The Rif was a colonial problem that needed to be settled as one might resolve a domestic dispute, behind closed doors using discretionary powers.

Since 1925, conflict regulations and the protection framework have considerably evolved, but the existing legal construction is repeatedly put into question. The current return to a rigid form of sovereignty, which is opposed to or imposed upon humanitarian organizations, needs to be monitored because it will inevitably make some States feel entitled to use unlimited force to settle political problems. This is in line with the current trend of the rise of “exceptionalist” regimes who also seek to deny certain categories of fighters the protections they are entitled to and therefore the obligations envisaged by international humanitarian law. At 100 years after the first skirmishes of the Rif War and despite the extraordinary accomplishment in terms of normative developments, these questions are at the heart of humanitarian endeavour.

## The reasons behind political procrastination

It is usually very dangerous to assess the past using current political, legal and moral concepts,<sup>139</sup> but it is fair to say that the ICRC could have done better during the Rif

139 Andrew Roberts, “Should we Judge Historical Figures by the Morals of Today?”, *BBC World Histories Magazine*, January 2018, available at: [www.historyextra.com/period/modern/historical-figures-statues-judge-morals-today/](http://www.historyextra.com/period/modern/historical-figures-statues-judge-morals-today/).



episode despite adverse political conditions. It would be presumptuous to say that the ICRC completely failed in its mission, but its lack of political daring doubtless helped to legitimate the dominant discourse of the time, according to which all victims were not equal. It adopted a passive and conservative attitude, probably grounded in its desire to preserve State support to the emerging legal framework on international armed conflicts.

As Yuval Noah Harari once said, “history does not study the past but rather transformations”.<sup>140</sup> Since 1920, the evolution of the ICRC’s operational practices and humanitarian diplomacy is striking. Over the years, it has developed the ability to translate strictly humanitarian concerns into a political language that States can understand and has managed to extend its mandate to the point of being sometimes accused of “mission creep by rejectionist states”. Max Weber<sup>141</sup> has described this dilemma well as two fundamentally differing and irreconcilably opposed maxims. An organization can either be oriented to an ethic of responsibility (*Verantwortungsethik*), meaning that it is accountable for the foreseeable consequences of its actions, or to an ethic of conviction (*Gesinnungsethik*), in which it is accountable only for applying existing policies.

Confronted by new forms of warfare or simply new man-made harmful phenomena, the ICRC has to decide between preserving the existing protection architecture or venturing into uncharted waters. Through its right of initiative, the ICRC’s identity is intrinsically linked to its ability to highlight the plight of victims above all other political or legal considerations when the circumstances require it, beyond positive law. In 1925, during an audience with the Spanish Ambassador Quinonès de León,<sup>142</sup> ICRC representative Raymond Schlemmer declared that humanitarian duty “was clearly contradicting the diplomatic duty”. In this author’s view, the ICRC is never so relevant as when it puts the humanitarian imperative before the norm.

140 Quoted in Sebastian Matthes, “L’IA pourrait engendrer un néocolonialisme, celui des données”, *PME Magazine*, 22 February 2022, available at: [www.pme.ch/strategie/2022/03/08/ia-pourrait-engendrer-un-neocolonialisme-celui-des-donnees](http://www.pme.ch/strategie/2022/03/08/ia-pourrait-engendrer-un-neocolonialisme-celui-des-donnees).

141 Max Weber, *Le savant et le politique*, Presses Électroniques de France, Paris, 2013.

142 Note from Delegate General Raymond Schlemmer following a meeting with the Spanish Ambassador Quinonès de León, ICRC Archives, B CR-138, 18 August 1925.