CHAPTER 7

Moros y Cristianos: Religious Aspects of the Participation of Moroccan Soldiers in the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939)

Ali Al Tuma

Introduction

The Spanish Civil War, in which around 80,000 Moroccan Muslims fought, was not, initially, supposed to be a holy war in the religious sense. Nor were the majority of the Spanish Nationalist officers who rebelled against the Spanish Republic in July 1936 particularly religious, despite their political conservatism. In fact, it was in the Spanish protectorate of Morocco that the military coup first received its designation as a holy war, and it was the Moroccan Khalifa, the nominal representative of the Moroccan sultan and the highest Moroccan authority in the Spanish zone, who first did so. In this chapter I discuss the religious aspects of the Moroccan participation in the Spanish Civil War. I examine the idea of a religious alliance between Moroccan Muslims and Spanish Christians against a supposedly atheist enemy from the point of view of Spanish Nationalist propaganda, but also from the point of view of the Moroccan soldiers. I also demonstrate that the Spanish Nationalists portrayed the Moroccans in their Moroccan protectorate as devout Muslims. This portrayal influenced the propaganda the Nationalists used to win the loyalty of the people in Spanish Morocco. With regard to the Moroccan soldiers, many aspects of their daily life was deferred to the notion of the religious Moroccan. The Spanish Nationalist military endeavored to create a separate Muslim religious sphere for the Moroccan soldiers. In this chapter I show that the Nationalist authorities not only wanted to respect the Islamic religion of their troops but also expected the

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1 The phrase ‘Moros y Cristianos’ translates to Moors and Christians. It refers to the battles between the medieval Moors and the Christians in Spain during the age of the Reconquest, and to the festivals in Spain that commemorate and re-enact these battles.

2 Stanley G. Payne, The Franco Regime 1936–1975 (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), 197n1. Initially, as Payne states, religious concern did not play an overt role in the rebellion of July 1936, rather it was its counter-revolutionary character that made Catholics natural allies from the start.
Moroccan soldiers to adhere to the idealized image of devout Muslims, even when some of these soldiers had no desire to comply with that idealized image.

Soon after the outbreak of the Civil War, strange scenes started to emerge: the archbishop of Toledo returned to his archiepiscopal see escorted by Moroccan Muslim troops, a priest accompanied Moroccans into battle, pro-Nationalist crowds cheered and pinned crosses and scapularies on the chests of African soldiers, and many similar scenes. Soon after the outbreak of the Civil War, strange scenes started to emerge: the archbishop of Toledo returned to his archiepiscopal see escorted by Moroccan Muslim troops, a priest accompanied Moroccans into battle, pro-Nationalist crowds cheered and pinned crosses and scapularies on the chests of African soldiers, and many similar scenes. In Ceuta, the Nationalists authorized the building of a new mosque in which stones from the battlefields of the Alcazar of Toledo, Oviedo, and Teruel were integrated as “official recognition” of the existence of Islam in Spain and as “proof” of the meaning of these “martyred cities” for Muslims.

As a matter of fact the Spanish Republicans inadvertently helped the Nationalist propaganda in portraying this war to the Moroccans as a struggle in which the Republic targeted Islam and Moroccans in particular. Early in the war, Republican planes struck the native medina of Tetuan, hitting a mosque in the process, and later dropped bombs near a ship that was to take pilgrims on their trip to Mecca, while the Republican navy shelled a number of coastal towns in Spanish Morocco. In August 1936 the Nationalist newspaper Diario Marroquí highlighted an air raid that supposedly targeted the Mezquita of Cordoba, “the historical monument of Arab civilization.”

The Nationalists portrayed the struggle against the Republic to the Muslims of Spanish Morocco as a conflict in which religion played a prominent role, because the Nationalists saw and presented the Moroccans as primarily oriented and driven by religion and religious biases. The Moroccans were first and foremost Muslims. It was clear that they were perceived as extremely religious by those who held a negative, hostile view and by those with a benign or


4 Tomas García Figueras, Marruecos: La acción de España en el Norte de África (Madrid: Ediciones Fe, 1944), 292.


6 “Los aviones rojos bombardean la Mezquita de Córdoba,” Diario Marroquí, 19 August 1936. The famous mosque-turned-cathedral was not hit.