



Should we forget the Rif War?

military-Earth thinking notebook

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The Rif War is now a forgotten war. At a time when the interest of military history is being reaffirmed in officer training and when the lessons of the war of At a time when the interest of military history is reaffirmed in the training of officers and when the lessons of the Indochina War and even more of the Algerian War for counter-insurgency are rediscovered, does the Rif War have nothing to teach us or relearn?

A quick rereading of this war shows, however, that its RETEX is of disturbing topicality, at a time when, for example, our commitment is becoming more marked in Afghanistan. The purpose of this article is to encourage a re-examination of the Rif war, which deserves much more than an oblivion, through three tactical examples related to the terrain, the constitution of forces and finally to the population.

First of all, however, let us recall the general framework of this war: The Rif, an arid and tormented mountain range in northern Morocco, was the scene of a war of insurrection and counter-insurrection from 1921 to 1926, in which a young Berber leader, Abdelkrim, defied the great European powers occupying his country, Spain and France. After having crushed the army of Alfonso XIII, massacred thousands of his soldiers and caused the fall of the Spanish parliamentary monarchy, Abdelkrim attacked the French presence and seriously threatened its continued existence in Morocco.

One of the most striking experiences, since it gave France and Spain tragic hours, was the catastrophic establishment of military posts at the edge of the controlled zone. Spain, and then France in a way that is difficult to understand after the Spanish tragedy of the retreat of Anoual (10 to 14,000 dead), chose to build strings of posts on the peaks of this arid and mountainous massif. Linked together by mule tracks, interdependent for supplies like links in a chain, these posts soon became a tactical nightmare in the face of Abdelkrim's manoeuvre: a first detachment besieged the post and forbade it to leave, while a second ambushed the supply troops or sent in reinforcements. The posts will therefore fall one by one, taken by the enemy or evacuated at the cost of heavy losses because of

incessant harassment on the retreating tracks. Faced with this alternative, Second Lieutenant Pol Lapeyre chose to blow himself up with his post. Moreover, the Rifains benefited from the snowball effect by breaking the supply chain linking the posts, which weakened them mechanically even before their attack. General de Boisboissel summed up the equation a posteriori : " It is difficult to escape from this dilemma: either hold your water by accepting to be dominated, or have views and firing ranges, but condemn yourself to the painful, murderous and always insufficient chores of supply and watering". In fact, the post is nothing without a mobile force, and must therefore be seen not as a dam, but as the fulcrum of a mobile force. The coverage of an area must therefore consist of a small number of posts, spaced out, but whose mobile forces radiate by combining their actions.

The formation and mobility of the troops finally engaged to put an end to the insurrection from 1925 and save the remaining posts is also worthy of interest because it was innovative for the time and still up to date. Tactical successes coincided with the creation of mobile groups, which were then called mixed, in fact joint and combined according to contemporary definitions. They generally consisted of five infantry battalions, a tank company, a mounted squadron, a squadron and had organic artillery assets. Aviation is omnipresent and in direct and permanent support of the infantry : It informs the troops in the front line and in contact, and supports them directly by playing the role of a "mountain" artillery which frees itself from the difficulties of the relief and compensates for the poor mobility of the artillery pieces. Even more innovative, the interallied and joint armies were also used during the Spanish landing at Al-Hoceima, with French participation: it is a successful world first after the failure of the Gallipoli landing in 1915. 21,000 men were thus landed and received coordinated support thanks to a common firing plan.

Finally, the Rif War is particularly interesting in view of the nature of the operations that were successively conducted there by two of our great military leaders: Lyautey and Pétain. It already shows us the interpenetration of the intervention and stabilisation phases, and the need for both coercion and stabilisation know-how. The Rif was a field of application of the famous peaceful penetration of Lyautey, who believed only in "muffled blows and the ground gained". but it was also the field of the materialist doctrine of war professed by Pétain, which from the end of 1925 onwards brought together a concentration of more than 50,000 men serving with renewed materials and in significant numbers. If Lyautey saw with the Rif war the twilight of his career, and was replaced by Pétain who then appeared as the great victor over Abdelkrim, one should not conclude that one doctrine prevailed over the other. Rather, it should be understood that peaceful penetration and showing one's strength so as not to have to use it corresponds to a phase of operations that can be described as stabilization. This phase must sometimes quickly give way to strong and massive coercion, especially when the insurgency becomes widespread. However, knowledge of the populations and their customs as well as their respect remains indispensable and remains one of the keys to success in the long term, especially in Muslim territory where, according to a Berber proverb, "by day, one fights, by night, one talks". General de Boisboissel's description of the Rifani mujahideen does not tire of making one think of the Afghan insurgents: Berbers with a very strong sense of identity, almost insular", "warrior peasants, jealous of independence and freedom, immediately defending themselves against the enemy", "Berbers with a very strong sense of identity, almost insular", "warrior peasants by essence jealous of independence and freedom, immediately defending themselves against the enemy". The Afghan insurgents: "Berbers with a very strong sense of identity, almost insular", "warrior peasants, jealous of independence and freedom, immediately in defence against the foreigner, the very neighbour, insubordinate from birth to any

authority whatsoever, except to the merciless servitude imposed on their harsh existence by a fierce nature that defends as much as it oppresses". It is a question of defeating the combatants militarily, in order to rally the tribes which naturally side with the strongest, but never to humiliate them by committing acts which, taking on the value of symbols, will remain irreparable fractures. The French success, even in Pétain's offensive, thus owes much to the principles of respect for the people of Lyautey, the application of which contrasts sharply with that of the Spanish allies. Abdelkrim thus chose to surrender to French rather than Spanish troops and received the 'Aman' [1] according to the custom of war in Morocco: French troops' honorary hedges, then exile rather than trial for war crimes.

These three short RETEX field, force generation, and general population and tactics, going beyond the easy analogies of the mountainous theatre, Muslim populations and peasant warriors, counter-insurgency and multinationality with today's theatres, thus justify a thorough re-examination of this conflict forgotten by the richness of its tactical RETEX.

It is probably not by chance that this war revealed or completed the training of many of our great leaders and military theorists by deeply marking them: Juin, Leclerc, Catroux, de Lattre and Beaufre.

Finally, the little-known example of the great Lyautey, who forcefully demanded that mustard ammunition be sent to counter the savagery of the riflemen who threatened to take over and who mutilated and killed their prisoners atrociously, shows that the war was not a war of war. It is still necessary that no one, not even the prestigious leaders, the great powers and the so-called civilized forces, is safe from also committing atrocities in reaction.

1] The victor grants a guarantee of life to the vanquished who submits.

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