

The role of the Spanish Legion in the Spanish possessions of Ifni, Tarfaya and West Sahara

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The predecessor of the Spanish Foreign Legion, the Legion, was formed on 28 June 1835, from volunteers who had previously served in the French Foreign Legion. The primary task of the corps was to support Queen Isabella in the first Carlist war of 1833-1840. The organization, which was on duty and suffered extremely heavy losses, was disbanded on 8 December 1838.¹ The creation of the Spanish Foreign Legion (Tercio de Extranjeros) was decided by the Spanish military leadership as early as 1919, but it was not established until 28 January 1920 by a Royal Decree of the then Spanish King, Alfonso XII. The creation of the Spanish Foreign Legion (“the Legion”) was based on the plan to replace the unsuccessful, poorly trained units that suffered great losses on African battlefields, mostly consisting of conscripts, with well-trained “official” soldiers.² There was hope that the Spanish unit, based on the French model, would be at least as successful as the French Foreign Legion.³ The Legion was subordinated to the Minister of Defence, José Villalba Riquelme, and Lieutenant Colonel José Millán-Astray Terreros was appointed to be its first commander, who had already begun setting up the first battalion (Bandera) in Ceuta in the first half of 1920.⁴ Although the Spanish Flag Officers and some of the officers stationed in mainland Spain opposed the establishment of the Legion, the new commander was not disturbed by their opposition, and soon, with the firm support of the emperor, set up new battalions,⁵ mainly with Spaniards, people from former Latin American colonies (such as Cuba) and, to a lesser extent, foreign nationals. Until 1921, the Legion consisted of only three battalions, but as a result of the Riff War (1920–1927),

¹ Martin Windrow, *French Foreign Legion* (London, Osprey Publication Limited, 1971.), 8.

² José E. Alvarez, *The Betrothed of Death: The Spanish Foreign Legion During the Rif Rebellion, 1920–1927* (Westport, Connecticut, Greenwood Press, 2001), 7-8.

³ John H. Galey, „Bridegrooms of Death: A Profile Study of the Spanish Foreign Legion,” *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (Apr., 1969): 49-50.

⁴ R. Geoffrey Jensen, „Jose Millan-Astray and the Nationalist 'Crusade' in Spain,” *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 27, No. 3 (Jul., 1992): 425-447, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/260899?origin=JSTOR-pdf>

⁵ Alvarez: *The Betrothed of Death*, 59.

in which the Legion was almost the only Spanish military organization to achieve victories, it was given the opportunity to set up additional battalions.⁶ Most of the first two hundred people admitted to the Legion came from Spain and from the former Spanish colonies (Latin America, Cuba, the Philippines, etc.). The foreigners in the Legion then consisted of a Chinese, three Japanese, one German, and another Austrian, an Italian, two French, four Portuguese, a Maltese, a Belgian, a Russian prince and a black African legionnaire from New York.⁷ Later, this number increased, so that the proportion of foreigners reached 30 percent.⁸ The largest number of foreigners served in the Legion during the Spanish Civil War in August 1938, a total of 1248 people from 37 countries.⁹ Nevertheless, most of the personnel have always remained of Spanish nationality.¹⁰ In the beginning, the officers were Spaniards without exception, but later, especially during the Civil War, foreigners were able to achieve lower officer ranks.¹¹

The Legion originally consisted of 3 battalions, each consisting of a command company (with technical, transport and supply platoons), two infantry companies and a machine gun company.¹² The first base of the Legion was established in Dar Riffien, 10 kilometres from Ceuta, as the primary location of the organization was in the Spanish African territories, colonies, and the first engagement took place in Spanish North Africa, in the Riff War. Because of its good performance in the war, the unit was renamed the Moroccan Tercio (Tercio de Marruecos), but by the end of the war they were only called Tercio (El Tercio) and by this time they became one of the best trained, equipped, supplied and recognized units of the Spanish Army, having already eight battalions at that time.¹³ In the war the Legion fully lived up to the hopes that led to its creation. Not only did it (or its soldiers) successfully take up the fight against

⁶ Geoffrey Jensen, *Franco – Soldier, Commander, Dictator* (Washington D.C. Potomac Books, Inc., 2005), 41.

⁷ Alvarez, *The Betrothed of Death*, 19. and G. H. J. Evans R.N. „The Spanish Foreign Legion,” *Royal United Services Institution Journal*, 70:480 (1925): 753

⁸ Jensen, *Franco – Soldier, Commander, Dictator*, 37.

⁹ Judith Keene: *Fighting for Franco: International volunteers in Nationalist Spain during the Spanish Civil War* (London, Hambledon Continuum, 2001), 8.

¹⁰ José E. Alvarez: *The Spanish Foreign Legion in the Spanish Civil War, 1936* (Columbia, Missouri, University of Missouri Press, 2018), 3.

¹¹ Galey, *Bridegrooms of Death*, 52.

¹² John Scurr, *The Spanish Foreign Legion*, (London, Osprey Publishing Ltd, 1985), 6.

¹³ Evans, *The Spanish Foreign Legion*, 754. (Source is reliable? José Álvarez's book is often the best source in English for such facts)

the Rifians, but the Legionaries also learned and successfully applied their fighting tactics, with which they generated fear even on the side of their “masters”.¹⁴ In 1925, the Legion consisted of 241 officers and 7 716 legionaries, which later increased even more. The world was then able to learn the name of the later Spanish head of state, Francisco Franco Bahamonde, who himself was involved in the creation of the Legion, as commander of the first battalion and then as deputy commander of the Legion in almost every battle of the Riff War, being awarded by the rank of a general at the age of 33.¹⁵ The war was eventually won with the military support of France, and the Spaniards pacified the area.¹⁶ The Legion took part in 845 combat engagements in this war, in which it lost 2 000 dead, 6 096 wounded and 285 missing.¹⁷ If we look at these numbers in detail, it can be seen that between September 1920 and October 1927, 45% of the Legion's officers and 38% of his non-commissioned personnel were lost.¹⁸ After the war, the country was not very grateful to the Legion, which consisted of 4 000 personnel. Manuel Azaña Diaz, the 2nd Minister of Defence of the 2nd Spanish Republic, established in April 1931, reorganized and downsized the army with no military experience at all. For such reasons the 7th and 8th Battalions of the Legion were disbanded.¹⁹ The units of the Legion were used by the government several times not only for military but also for law enforcement purposes. First in 1930, the 1st and the 4th Battalions had to be sent to the mainland to subdue the uprisings against the Monarchy in Madrid, Huesca and Aspe.²⁰ Then, in February 1931, as a result of the fall of the Monarchy, riots broke out in Eastern Spain, and a legionary battalion was deployed to subdue them.²¹ The next time in October 1934 the Legion's 3rd, 5th and 6th Battalions were involved in suppressing the uprising of

¹⁴ Geoffrey Jensen, „Military consequences of cultural perceptions: The Spanish army in Morocco, 1912–1927,” *The Journal of the Middle East and Africa*, 2017, Volume 8, Number. 2, 141-142.

¹⁵ Jensen, *Franco – Soldier, Commander*, 35-54. and Filipe Ribeiro de Menezes, *Franco and the Spanish Civil War* (London, Routledge. 2001), 30.

¹⁶ Windrow, *French Foreign Legion 1914-1945*, 14-17.

¹⁷ Scurr, *The Spanish Foreign Legion*, 18. and Alvarez: *The Spanish Foreign Legion in the Spanish Civil War, 1936*, 4.

¹⁸ Galey, *Bridegrooms of Death*, 56.

¹⁹ Julián Casanova, *The Spanish Republic and the Civil War* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010), 38-40.

²⁰ José E. Álvarez, „The Spanish Foreign Legion during the Asturian Uprising of October 1934,” *War in History*, 18(2): 209.

²¹ Galey, *Bridegrooms of Death*, 60.

miners in Asturias and restoring public safety in the cities of Gijón and Lugones.²² This was because the Spanish military feared deploying poorly trained Spanish units of conscript soldiers with no real combat experience against insurgents having good knowledge of the area, politically motivated and well-armed from the stockpiles of occupied barracks and the Trubia Artillery Factory. Namely, in this case, the government troops would have been able to deal with the situation only at the cost of huge losses, which would have led to new uprisings, or in the worst case, it could have even resulted in the removal of the government. Therefore, the political and military leadership decided that the deployment of legionary units trained in African colonies posed a much lower risk.²³ The Legion, led by Lieutenant Colonel Juan Yagüe Blanco, also played a very important role in the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939), when its soldiers fought on the side of General Franco in Spain, who revolted against the Republican Government, together with the Moroccan formations (Fuerzas Regulares Indígenas)²⁴ and legionaries were also recruited from Sahrawi tribes living in the Sahara.²⁵ The Legion took part in 3 042 clashes during the Civil War, in which it lost 37 393 people. Of these, 7 645 died, 28 972 were wounded, and 776 were missing in action.²⁶ The leadership of the Legion tried to make up for the significant losses constantly and as quickly as possible during the civil war. For such reasons many of the troops fighting on the side of the Republican Forces and captured personnel of the International Brigades were able to join the Legion, thus enabling it to fill their vacancies with people with military service and combat experience.²⁷

²² Jensen: *Franco - Soldier, Commander, Dictator*, 64-65. and Casanova: *The Spanish Republic and the Civil War*, 107-110.

²³ Álvarez, *The Spanish Foreign Legion during the Asturian Uprising*, 202-204.

²⁴ Keene, *Fighting for Franco*, 24-25. and Robert M. Toguchi, Michael E. Krivdo (eds.), *The Competitive Advantage - Special Operations Forces in Large-Scale Combat Operations*, (Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, Army University Press, 2019), 49-65.

²⁵ Gervase Clarence-Smith, „The impact of the Spanish Civil War and the Second World War on Portuguese and Spanish Africa,” *Journal of African History*, 26, (1985): 323; Besenyő János, *Western Sahara* (Pécs, Publikon Publishers, 2009), 59.; John Mercer, *Spanish Sahara* (London, George Allen & Unwin, Ltd, 1976), 121. and Tony Hodges, *Western Sahara, The roots of a desert war*, (Westport, Lawrence Hill & Company, 1983), 68.

²⁶ The precise amount of losses of the Legionaries were 7645 dead, 28972 injured and 776 missing in action. Scurr, *The Spanish Foreign Legion*, 35. and Álvarez, *The Spanish Foreign Legion in the Spanish Civil War, 1936*, 218.

²⁷ Richard Lucas, *Spain's Legion, Soldier of Fortune*, April 6, 2018, <https://www.sofmag.com/spains-african-legions-today/> and Álvarez, *The Spanish Foreign Legion in the Spanish Civil War, 1936*, 240.

The Legion, which was sent back to barracks in Africa after the Civil War, once again underwent staff reductions. During World War II, several members of the organization fought amongst the personnel of the “Blue Division” handed over to the Germans, where they gained additional combat experience.²⁸ However, after World War II the international community quarantined the Franco regime, which began to lose its African colonies one after another.

- The organization of the Legion on the African continent

As I mentioned earlier, the Legion was set up in Ceuta and it had its first base there as well. The second base was established in Melilla (Táñima).

In 1936, the command, training and logistics base of the Legion in Dar Riffien, in the Eastern Military Zone (Melilla) the 1st (Tauima), the 2nd (Targuist), and the 3rd (Villa Sanjurjo) Battalions and in the Western Military Region (Ceuta) the 4th (Dar Riffien), the 5th (Zoco el Arbaa), and the 6th (Xauen) Battalions were stationed.²⁹ The legion then numbered 3 758 personnel, which the military leadership found insufficient, so between September 1936 and April 1938, in addition to the original 6 battalions, an additional 12 battalions, including armoured,³⁰ anti-tank, and flamethrower units were established and they were engaged in almost every battle of the Civil War. Two more battalion-level units joined the already existing battalions, comprising 600 personnel each; the “Joan of Arc” Battalion of about 500 men, consisting of purely French people, and the 15th Irish Battalion comprising almost 700 personnel.³¹ Fighters and bombers arriving as a part of Italian aid, along with their personnel, were also subordinated to the Legion, but were withdrawn at the end of the war.³² On 8 May

²⁸ David Wingeate Pike, *Franco and the Axis Stigma* (New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 60, 79. and Oleg Beyda: “Iron Cross of the Wrangel’s Army”: Russian Emigrants as Interpreters in the Wehrmacht, *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, 27 (2014): 446.

²⁹ Scurr, *The Spanish Foreign Legion*, 19.

³⁰ Steven J Zaloga, *Spanish Civil War Tanks - The Proving Ground for Blitzkrieg*, (London, Osprey Publishing Ltd., 2010), 32. and Álvarez, *The Spanish Foreign Legion in the Spanish Civil War, 1936*, 10; 16.

³¹ Keene, *Fighting for Franco*, 29, 115-127, 152.

³² Sebastian Balfour and Paul Preston, *Spain and the Great Powers in the Twentieth Century*, (London, Routledge, 1999), 171-172.; Christopher Shores, *Spanish Civil War Air Forces*, (London, Osprey Publishing Ltd, 1977), 5, 8-11, 17, 44. and Álvarez, *The Spanish Foreign Legion in the Spanish Civil War, 1936*, 21.

1937, the 1st and 2nd Regiments (Tercio) were formed from the original 6 battalions of the Legion, while the battalions formed later remained independent. On 21 December 1943, the 1st Regiment took on the name “Gran Capitan”, the 2nd Regiment “Duque de Alba” and the 3rd Regiment “Don Juan de Austria.” The 4th Regiment was formed on 12 August 1950, called “Alejandro Farnesio” and settled at the base of Villa Sanjurjo. During this period the battalions consisted of one command company and four additional companies.³³

After gave up its zone of the Moroccan protectorate in 1956, units of the Legion were allowed to remain in their former bases until 1961,³⁴ but due to tensions between the two countries, the Spanish leadership decided to deploy legionaries to replace units previously serving at Spanish Sahara, where other units used to serve, such as Saharan indigenous ones (Tropas Nómadas).³⁵ Therefore, in June 1956, the 13th Battalion (Bandera) was re-established, with the 1st company stationed in Villa Bens, the 2nd Company in Smara, while the rest of the battalion was housed at the Hasi Aotman base near El Aaiún. The battalion set up several smaller camps and checkpoints in Western Sahara to make it easier to control. However, the battalion comprising five companies of barely 700 men was not sufficient to control an area of this size, so when in June 1957 the 4th Battalion of the Legion was transferred to Ifni; the garrison of Villa Cisneros was strengthened with one additional company derived from the newly arrived battalion.³⁶ In August of the same year, the 6th Battalion was sent to El Aaiún, while in November the 2nd Battalion was also transferred to the garrison of Villa Bens in Spanish Sahara. Thus the 2nd Battalion of the Legion was stationed in

³³ Scurr, *The Spanish Foreign Legion*, 24, 36.

³⁴ H. Micheal Tarver and Emily Slape, *The Spanish Empire: A Historical Encyclopedia, Volume 2*, (Santa Barbara, California, ABC-CLIO, 2016), xxxiii-xxxiv.

³⁵ In the early 1950s, Spanish Saharan units, having Spaniards in minority, were staffed by small, poorly equipped and trained Moroccan and Saharan soldiers, mostly under the command of mostly Spanish officers. The combat value of these units was so weak that in 1951 the governor of the area, Francisco Rosaleny Burguet, and then two years later his successor, Venancio Tutor Gil, repeatedly asked the Spanish leadership to increase the number of soldiers and modernize their armaments and equipment. However, this did not happen until later, after the loss of Spanish Morocco, as until then the area was not really important to the government. Juan Pastrana Piñero, *Arda el deserto - 1957: La guerrade Ifni-Sahara y la lucha por el poder en Marruecos*, (Madrid, Nowtilus, 2017), 87-88.

³⁶ Juan Pastrana Piñero, *La guerra de Ifni-Sáhara y la lucha por el poder en Marruecos, Tesis Doctoral*, (Barcelona, Universitat Pompeu Fabra, 2013), 157-158. and Luis Eugenio Togores, *Historia de la Legión Española la Infantería legendaria. DE África a Afganistán*, (Madrid, La Esfera de los Libros, 2016), 415-417.

Villa Bens,³⁷ the 5th, 6th and 13th Battalions in El Aaiún and the 4th Battalion was stationed in garrisons in Villa Cisneros/Aargub in November 1957.³⁸ The 6th Battalion was transferred to Ifni in November 1957 as the Spanish military secret service signalled possible further Moroccan attacks on the city.³⁹ Tasks of the 6th Battalion, providing the protection of El Aaiún were taken over by the 13th Battalion stationed there and the newly deployed 4th Battalion from Villa Cisneros.⁴⁰ The 4th Battalion was also commanded to Ifni in January 1958, and the 9th Battalion was transferred from Ceuta first to Villa Cisneros and then to El Aaiun at the end of the month to take part in Operation Ouragan or Teide in February. After a successful operation, the battalion was transferred to become a subordinate of the 4th Regiment called “Alejandro Farnesio”.⁴¹

After the Ifni-Sahara War, in August 1958, the 3rd Regiment of the Legion called “Don Juan de Austria” was sent for garrison service to El Aaiún and the 4th Regiment called “Alejandro Farnesio” to Villa Cisneros. Both formations were also named “Saharianos,” which clearly indicated that they were planned to be engaged in Western Sahara. Operating independently the 13th Battalion was transferred to Ifni in October 1958 and came under the administrative command of the “Don Juan de Austria” Regiment. When Ifni had to be handed over to the Moroccans in 1969, the battalion was disbanded again.⁴²

In 1961, the last legionary units were also withdrawn from Moroccan territory,⁴³ the 1st and the 2nd Regiments were transferred to the cities of Ceuta and Melilla, while the 3rd and 4th Regiments remained in El Aaiún and Villa Cisneros. The regiments

³⁷ The village of Tarfaya was renamed Villa Bensre in 1949, from the former governor of Rio de Oro, Bens Argandoña, who ruled the area from 1904-1925. Bens occupied Tarfaya on 29 June 1916, and annexed it to the colony. The name of the settlement has been Tarfaya again since 1958. Anthony G. Pazzanita and Tony Hodges, *Historical Dictionary of Western Sahara* (London, The Scarecrow Press Inc, 1994), 69-72.

³⁸ Piñero, *La guerra de Ifni-Sáhara*, 298-299. and D. Francisco García Velo, „La campaña de Ifni-Sahara,” *La Legión*, XLVIII. No. 501. IV. 2007, 50.

³⁹ Scurr, *The Spanish Foreign Legion*, 36-37.

⁴⁰ Anonymus, „La IV Bandera el Sahara. Primeros años,” *La Legión*, No. 535. II/2016, 57.

⁴¹ Piñero, *Arda el deserto – 1957*, 294. and Togores, *Historia de la Legión Española*, 495-496.

⁴² Juan Pastrana Piñero, *Arda el deserto – 1957*, 334. and Togores, *Historia de la Legión Española*, 495.

⁴³ Wayne H. Bowen and José E. Álvarez (eds.), *A Military history of modern Spain, From the Napoleonic Era to the International War on Terror* (London, Praeger Security International, 2007) 128. and María Rosa de Madariaga, „Confrontation in the Spanish zone (1945–56): Franco, the nationalists, and the post-war politics of decolonisation,” *The Journal of North African Studies*, 19:4 (2014): 499.

stationed in Spanish-Sahara had two battalions each and personnel just over 5 000.⁴⁴ Their training and equipment were very good compared to average Spanish units, and in addition some of their units were equipped with French AMX-30 or Panhard AML-90 medium tanks and Heinkel 111 fighters. The battalions of the 3rd Regiment were stationed in the cities of El Aaiún (8th Battalion) and Smara (7th Battalion called “Valenzuela”, between 1964-1975), and a light infantry unit was based at Edchera base (“Armoured Light Group I” and from 1966 “Saharan Light Group I”).⁴⁵ The regiment stationed legionary subunits in the Northern areas in the following bases: Hagunia, Guelta Zemmur, Hausa, Meseied, Seguen, Aguent, Aubert, Edchedeiria and Tifariti, whose primary task was to control and supervise the Moroccan border. Battalions of the 4th Regiment (the 9th and the 10th) were stationed in the towns of Villa Cisneros and Aargub, and a light infantry unit (Armoured Light Group II and the Saharan Light Group II from 1966) were established here as well. The unit also stationed smaller subunits at bases in Aargub, Auserd, Tichla and La Agüera. The light infantry units primarily patrolled the desert, carrying out border protection and reconnaissance duties. On 23 March 1972, the 4th Regiment Commander created the first special operations unit in the Legion from the 3rd Company of the 9th Battalion, specializing on guerrilla warfare.⁴⁶

In 1974, in response to the Moroccan threat, the two regiments were redeployed to defend the Moroccan-Spanish-Saharan border and they remained there until the end of 1975. After the handover of Spanish Sahara, the legionary units serving in the area were deployed to the Canary Islands, where the disbanding of the 4th Regiment began immediately. After that, legionary units only remained on the African continent in the cities of Ceuta and Melilla.

- Loss of African colonies

The Spanish African colonies originally consisted of the Spanish Morocco, Sidi Ifni, Tekna zone (Tarfaya strip), and Western (Spanish) Sahara. They were governed from

⁴⁴ Bowen and Álvarez (eds.), *A Military history of modern Spain*, 134.

⁴⁵ Anonymus, „LXXV Aniversario del Tercio “Don Juan de Austria” (3º de La Legión),” *La Legión*, No. 529, IV/2014. 33-35.

⁴⁶ Togores, *Historia de la Legión Española*, 504-505.

Morocco (Spanish protectorate zone of Morocco) from August 1934, and on 20 July 1946 the Spanish West Africa (Africa Occidental Española) was formed, consisting of Ifni and Western Sahara. The governor of the newly created administrative unit was based in Ifni, while his deputy was based in Western Sahara (El Aaiún). This system was abolished in 1958 and two separate provinces, Sidi Ifni and Spanish-Sahara, with headquarters in El Aaiún, were established.⁴⁷ After the handover of Spain-Morocco in 1956, a kind of cooperation was observed between the Spaniards and the Moroccans, as the Moroccans wanted to gain time to consolidate the internal order of the newly formed state, and the Spaniards believed they would be able to preserve their still-existing African colony. No bigger misjudgement could have happened, as the valuable, mineral-rich Sahrawi areas and the coastal Spanish cities (Ifni, Ceuta and Melilla) have attracted the attention of the leaders of the newly independent Morocco. In addition, much of Morocco's political and military leadership has embraced the program announced by the Alsti al-Fassi-led Istiqlal Party, under which Morocco claimed the territory known as the “Greater Morocco”, to which all Spanish colonies in Africa – except Equatorial Guinea – belonged.⁴⁸ Recognizing this, the Governor of West Africa in Spain indicated on 9 April 1956, that he could not defend the region entrusted to him with the military units at his disposal, and therefore asked the Legion to command their two battalions from Morocco as reinforcements.⁴⁹ This had not yet happened because the Spanish leadership believed that they would be able to deal with the situation through diplomatic means. However, despite the Spanish-Moroccan talks, the possibility of armed clashes with Moroccans became an increasingly real threat, with the government eventually transferring the 1st Parachute Battalion to Ifni. Tan-Tan, Cabo Juby (Villa Bens), Villa Cisneros and La Güerra were also reinforced. In July 1956, the 13th Battalion of Legion was established in Western Sahara, the 1st Company of which was commanded to Villa Bens and the 2nd Company to Smara garrisons. Later, the 1st Company was sent to Villa Cisneros, where they were responsible for the protection of the city and the surrounding military posts – Aargoub, Agüenit, Derraman, Bir Nzarán and Tichla – and in January 1957

⁴⁷ Rene Pelissier, „Spain’s discreet decolonisation,” *Foreign Affairs*, 43. 3. (April 27. 1965): 522. GOOD

⁴⁸ Bowen and Álvarez (eds.), *A Military history of modern Spain*, 129.

⁴⁹ Piñero, *Arda el deserto – 1957*, 91-92. and Juan Pastrana Piñero, Josep Pitch and Josep Contreras: „La guerra antes de la guerra: los primeros choques militares en Ifni-Sáhara,” *La Revista Universitaria de Historia Militar On-line*, Volumen IV, Numero 7, Enero-Junio 2015, 71.

the 3rd Company was placed in Ausert.⁵⁰ However, most of the military units temporarily relocated from the Canary Islands to the Sahara were returned to their original bases, so the number soldiers was still not sufficient to adequately secure the area. In addition, the Spaniards tried to control an area as large as possible, so the forces at their disposal were stationed at several bases. For such reasons, the Spanish forces were scattered and they did not have enough means of transport for quick manoeuvring. Guerrillas also saw this and carried out soft-push raids on smaller Spanish military garrisons and patrols. However, the legionaries went into a counterattack and on 26 January ambushed one of the units of the guerrillas, destroying it. The Sahrawis lost more than 50 people, while the legionaries captured another hundred.⁵¹ However, this did not change the situation, leaving the Governor of Spanish West Africa, General Mariano Gómez Zamalloa, with no choice but to evacuate the smaller desert forts and gather troops in the coastal settlements (El Aaiún, Dakhla and Tarfaya). The Spaniards even withdrew from the city of Smara - important for them - and along with other bases, were handed over to the care of nomadic troops.⁵²

The Moroccan leadership's intention to acquire the territories was also confirmed by the fact that in 1957 the leaders of some tribes living in Spanish Sahara travelled to Rabat and asked for Mohamed V's advice and support to liberate the territory. However, they also made it clear that they could not swear loyalty to Mohamed for his help. This was also confirmed by a written petition asking for help to expel the French from Tinduf, Um Lashar, Bir Um Grein, Efdeyrek, Chum and Nouadhibou. Regarding the Spaniards, the document contained the following: *"Although the Spaniards have occupied part of our land, we do not want to go to war with them, but rather to achieve their departure through the mediation and negotiation. Now we want the French to leave, and then we will have no problem reaching an agreement with the Spaniards."*⁵³ Although the Moroccan ruler encouraged the tribal

⁵⁰ Juan Carlos Caraballo Fernández de Marcos, „XIII Bandera de Legión. La Bandera „General Mola” *La Legión*, No. 534, I/2016, 52.

⁵¹ Piñero, *La guerra de Ifni-Sáhara*, 105-113. and Togores, *Historia de la Legión Española*, 448-449.

⁵² Pazzanita and Hodges, *Historical Dictionary of Western Sahara*, 56. and Hodges, *Western Sahara*, 77.

⁵³ Besenyő János, *A nyugat-szaharai válság egy magyar békefenntartó szemével* (Pécs, Publikon, 2012), 70.

representatives, he did not provide any real assistance or written agreement with them, but sent them to Ben Hammu Mesfioui, who had previously served as a non-commissioned officer in the French Army, and at this time he was the commander the Rif Warriors Liberation Army (Jaich at-Tahrir).⁵⁴ The parties quickly came to an agreement and their first joint actions were directed against French military bases in North Africa, such as Foug Alachir, Mergala, M'hamid Ghizlane, etc. At that time, even in Spanish-Sahara, no serious attack had been carried out, with the tacit consent of the Spanish Government; they had been able to march through the area and even operated bases.⁵⁵ This was partly because of the good relations between the Sahrawis and the Spaniards, and partly because the Moroccan Army was not strong enough to risk a collision with the French and the Spaniards at the same time.⁵⁶ Moreover, the conflict between the Spaniards and the French in the region dates back several decades, during which in several cases an almost open conflict broke out between them.⁵⁷ In this case, however, it soon became clear that they were facing a common enemy, as the Moroccan leadership also decided to get the city of Ifni, which the Moroccan sultan officially renounced in favour of Spain in 1860, but which Spain occupied only in 1934. The Spanish military intelligence gained information about the preparation,⁵⁸ so the military leadership was less and less confident in the loyalty of the units recruited from the locals. In June 1957 the 4th and the 6th Battalions of the Legion were transferred to the Spanish Sahara, and the 111th Henkel Fighter Squadron was sent to Ifni, and the 2nd Parachute Battalion stationing there was ordered to

⁵⁴ The group's predecessor was Al Mounaddama Assiryala, established in 1951, whose members fled to Spanish-controlled areas after Mohamed V's exile in 1953, where the organization was set up in 1955 to oust the French and help V. Mohamed return his throne. In addition to the Liberation Army, other groups were set up which, although independent of each other, often cooperated and, because of their organization, posed a real threat not only to the French or the Spaniards but also to the current Moroccan ruler. When V. Mohamed returned, much of the country was under control of these groups, not by the king's army created with the help of the French. Later, although there were armed clashes between army units and guerrillas over the possession of areas, the king was pleased, when various armed groups fought the French or the Spanish units. He provided not only encouragement, but also weapons and some money. Aware of this, Ben Hammu contacted the Sahrawis to cooperate in the fight against the French and the Spaniards. José Carlos López-Pozas Lanuza, *África Occidental Española: la cuestión de la soberanía y la retirada del Sahara*, Tesis Doctoral, (Madrid, Instituto Universitario General Gutiérrez Mellado, 2015), 81. and Hodges: *Western Sahara*, 74-75.

⁵⁵ Diego Aguirre and José Ramón, *Historia del Sahara Español: La verdad de una traición*. (Madrid, Kaydeda, 1988), 306-314. and Jensen, *Franco – Soldier, Commander, Dictator*, 107-109.

⁵⁶ Bowen and Álvarez (eds.), *A Military history of modern Spain*, 129-130.

⁵⁷ Martin Thomas, „At the Heart of Things? French Imperial Defence Planning in the late 1930s.” *French Historical Studies*, Vol. 21. No. 2. (spring 1998): 341-342.

⁵⁸ Bastian Matteo Scianna, „Stuck in the past? British views on the Spanish army's effectiveness and military culture, 1946–1983,” *War & Society*, 38:1, (2019): 46.

maintain an elevated level of readiness.⁵⁹ However, the Spanish troops were still outnumbered by the insurgents, so new legionnaires were transferred from Spanish Sahara to Ifni, and all the smaller guard posts were merged into barracks in El Aaiún, Villa Cisneros and La Güera. In the small guard posts in the desert only nomadic units remained and their personnel either fled to Mauritania or joined the Liberation Army. Only a few Sahrawi soldiers of nomadic troops held out at Tichla base, who were evacuated by Colonel Troncoso despite the firm prohibition of his superiors.⁶⁰ In Ifni, however, the 14 watchtowers around the city were not evacuated, and it was even decided that they should be protected until the last minute.⁶¹

In the spring of 1957, the Liberation Army carried out several actions in the territory of Ifni and then extended its activities to the Spanish Sahara, engaging the legionary and nomadic units serving there, so that the Spaniards defending Ifni could not expect help from there.⁶² Mesfioui concentrated most of its force of 7-8 000 in the Ifni area, and then occupied most of the guard posts surrounding the city (Tabel Kut, Bifurna, Sidi Borya, Hameidusch, Tamucha, Sidi M. Daud, Biugta, Sidi Uarsik and Ug-gu), thus isolating the city from the outside world, which received logistical supplies only from the Canary Islands via the sea.⁶³ The city was attacked several times by the Moroccans between October 1957 and June 1958, but they were unable to occupy it. The biggest attack took place on 23 November 1957, when Moroccans cut off telephone lines and simultaneously attacked the airport, the weapons depot and several parts of the city. The city was defended by the 1st and the 2nd Legionnaire Parachute Battalions, the 6th Legionnaire Battalion, 3 artillery batteries and a unit of the Saharan Police (1 500 Spanish soldiers and 500 Saharawi police). Because the inhabitants of the city were not trusted — for many of the members of the Ait ba Amaran tribe who lived here joined the Moroccans — they were disarmed and kept in

⁵⁹ Scurr, *The Spanish Foreign Legion*, 36. and Velo, *La campaña de Ifni-Sahara*, 51.

⁶⁰ Emilio Marín Ferrer, *Atlas Ilustrado - Ifni, Sáhara, Guinea - Últimas colonias* (Madrid, Susaeta, 2014), 120-121

⁶¹ Lanuza, *África Occidental Española*, 88, and Piñero, *La guerra de Ifni-Sáhara*, 157-158.

⁶² José Carlos López-Pozas Lanuza, „La Guerra de Ifni-Sahara (1957-1958) y el conflicto del Sahara de 1975.,” *Revista Universitaria de Historia Militar*, 2(3), 2013, 82-83.

⁶³ Luz Marina García Herrera and Fernando Sabaté Bel, „Global Geopolitics and Local Geoeconomics in Northwest Africa: The Industrial Port of Granadilla (Canary Islands, Spain),” *Geopolitics*, 14 (2009): 599.

their houses by strict ordinances. The attackers' artillery fired on the city for hours, then approx. 1 200 Moroccans equipped with automatic weapons stormed the defences. The defenders suffered significant losses, but repelled the attack. As the attackers also suffered heavy losses, no more serious attacks were attempted against the city in the coming weeks, but the guard posts in the desert, still in Spanish hands (Tiugsa, Tenin, Zoco Arba de Mesti, Telata and Tiliuin) were kept under constant attacks.⁶⁴ The rescue and evacuation of the soldiers and civilians there were mainly done by the 6th Legionary Battalion transferred from El Aaiún to Ifni as reinforcements. Tiliuin's fortress was protected by a section of indigenous soldiers (Tiradores de Ifni) and a section of Saharan police with the help of local Bedouins, which were constantly attacked by Moroccans between 25 November and 4 December. The defenders of the fort suffered such heavy losses that a rescue team had to be sent to their aid.⁶⁵ The forces involved in Operation "Pañuelo" launched on 25 November consisted of the 1st Parachute Battalion and the 6th Legionary Battalion also having a battery with 81 mm cannons. Although they managed to occupy the fort, they had so many dead and wounded that they had to leave the fort and retreat to Ifni.⁶⁶ The "Netol" Operation was carried out between 1 and 5 December, during which the soldiers of the 4th Legionnaire Battalion and other Spanish units in Zoco El Arba de Mesti, Telata, and Tiluin fortifications, and Operation "Gento" between 5 and 8 December, in which the members of the 4th Legionary Battalion and other units sought the liberation of the Tenín de Amel·lu and Tiugsa (Tagragra) bases and the rescue of the Spanish units there.⁶⁷ The operations were carried out successfully, but by 9 December, all guard posts had been lost and all units had been trapped in Ifni, which was completely surrounded by Moroccan troops. During the defence of guard positions, the Spaniards lost 55 soldiers, 128 were injured, 7 went missing,⁶⁸ but the attackers suffered even heavier losses. In January 1958, the Spaniards received

⁶⁴ Bowen and Álvarez (eds.), *A Military history of modern Spain*, 129.

⁶⁵ Mercer: *Spanish Sahara*, 221.

⁶⁶ [Timothy J. Stapleton](#), *A Military History of Africa, Volume 3* (Santa Barbara, California, ABC-CLIO, 2013), 32. and Lanuza, *La Guerra de Ifni-Sahara (1957-1958)*, 83-85.

⁶⁷ Piñero, *La guerra de Ifni-Sáhara*, 251-282. and Vicente Bataller Alventosa, „Operaciones Netol y Gento,” *Revista del Ejército de Tierra Español*, Número 932 Extraordinario Noviembre 2018 - Año LXXIX, 9-16.

⁶⁸ Az első spanyol veszteséglista 62 halottat és 115 sérültet tartalmazott. ugyanis az eltűnteket is úgy tartották nyilván, mint akik az életüket veszítették. Pazzanita and Hodges, *Historical Dictionary of Western Sahara*, 53-54.

reinforcements, including the 4th Legionnaire Battalion, and then on 31 January they went into counterattack and managed to reclaim Sidi Ifni's immediate surroundings during Operation “Diana”.⁶⁹ Encouraged by the success, Operation “Siroco” was launched on 10 February 1958, which was aimed to reclaim Arba de Mesti and Operation Pegaso on 19 February, to get Tabel Kut.⁷⁰ Although the Spaniards were unable to reclaim their former territories, the immediate surroundings of Sidi Ifni were secured. However, the siege could only be lifted by June 1958 and the Liberation Army was forced to withdraw its units.

Simultaneously with the siege of Sidi Ifni, units of the Saharawi Liberation Army (SLA), formed by the Moroccans, consisting mainly of Tekna and Reguibat tribes, also carried out attacks in the Tarfaya region and in Spanish-Sahara (El Aaiún, Aarguib, Tan, Tarfaya) and against Spanish units patrolling the area.⁷¹ Although the attackers were unable to achieve better results, the Spaniards, as most of their soldiers were redeployed to Sidi Ifni, were not in a position to take action against them more effectively. In addition to the insufficient numbers, it was also a problem that the loyalty of the Moroccan and Saharan ethnic soldiers was called into question again, and many soldiers switched to the Sahrawi Liberation Army or simply deserted.⁷² In addition, the supply of legionnaires and other units left much to be desired, especially concerning food allowance,⁷³ which negatively affected the morale of the soldiers, while guerrillas continued to harass them for months and endangered their supply lines.⁷⁴ In November 1957, the city of El Aaiún was repeatedly attacked unsuccessfully,⁷⁵ and on 30 November, the unguarded lighthouse at Cape Bojador was raided, from which seven Spanish workers were abducted after the entire equipment was completely destroyed. The Spaniards sent reinforcements to Villa Bens base, including the 2nd Legionnaire Battalion, but it only provided a temporary

⁶⁹ Vicente Bataller Alventosa, „El Tenín de Amel-lu y Operación Diana,” *Revista del Ejército de Tierra Español*, Número 932 Extraordinario Noviembre 2018 - Año LXXIX, 17-24.

⁷⁰ Lanuza, *La Guerra de Ifni-Sahara (1957-1958)*, 85. and Vicente Bataller Alventosa, „Operaciones Siroco y Pegaso,” *Revista del Ejército de Tierra Español*, Número 932 Extraordinario Noviembre 2018 - Año LXXIX, 25-29.

⁷¹ Mercer, *Spanish Sahara*, 222. and Hodges, *Western Sahara*, 78.

⁷² Piñero, *Arda el deserto – 1957*, 364-367.

⁷³ D. Francisco García Velo, *La campaña de Ifni-Sahara*, 54.

⁷⁴ Bowen and Álvarez (eds.), *A Military history of modern Spain*, 130. and Scianna, *Stuck in the past?* 46.

⁷⁵ Piñero, *La guerra de Ifni-Sáhara*, 302-304. and de Marcos, *XIII Bandera de Legión*, 52.

relief, as the clashes continued. The Sahrawis carried out another failed attack on El Aaiún between 20 and 22 December. The legionnaires of the 4th and the 13th Battalions not only succeeded defending the settlement, but they also initiated a counterattack. This counterattack succeeded in driving out their foes and liquidating their camp in the Messeied oasis. Villa Cisneros was also attacked several times between December 24-25 and early January 1958, but the attacks were repulsed both times.⁷⁶ On 3 January 1958, the Aargub garrison was attacked unsuccessfully,⁷⁷ then El Aaiún was attacked again on 12-13, and although the legionnaires were overwhelmed, the attackers failed again to occupy the city. Then the 1st and the 2nd companies of the 13th Legionnaire Battalion carried out a reconnaissance mission in the immediate vicinity of El Aaiún, but guerrillas lured them into a trap among the sand dunes near Edchera. The commander of the 1st Company, Captain Agustín Jauregui Abellas, was fatally shot right at the start of the attack. Although most of the company managed to retreat, the 3rd Platoon was cut off from the main forces, losing half of their personnel fighting for several hours. Finally, Sergeant Francisco Fadrique and Legionnaire Juan Maderal Oleaga covered the successful retreat of the survivors with a machine gun, but they themselves fell. The 2nd Company of the 4th Battalion hurried to relieve them, but they could only secure the retreat of the survivors.⁷⁸ During the attack, the Spaniards lost 42 dead and 55 wounded, but 241 attackers lost their lives. The two legionaries securing the retreat of their platoon while sacrificing their lives for their comrades received the San Fernando Military Order of Merit posthumously.⁷⁹

As a result of the fighting, the Spaniards were pushed out of the coastal zone and then planned a joint operation with the French, also threatened by the rebels, against the tribes of Western Sahara.⁸⁰ During a joint Franco-Spanish operation (“Ecouvillon” in French, “Ouragan” or “Teide” in Spanish) started on 10 February 1958, allied troops eliminated resistance from local tribes extremely quickly and in some cases very brutally. The joint force numbered 9 000 Spanish and 5 000 French soldiers,

⁷⁶ Lanuza, *África Occidental Española*, 94-95.

⁷⁷ Ferrer, *Atlas Ilustrado*, 127.

⁷⁸ Jesús Martínez de Merlo, „El combate de Edchera,” *Revista Ejército*, N°. 802, 2008, 111.

⁷⁹ Scurr, *The Spanish Foreign Legion*, 37. and Piñero, *La guerra de Ifni-Sáhara*, 555-558.

⁸⁰ Thomas A. Marks: „Spanish Sahara - Background to Conflict,” *African Affairs*, Vol. 75, No. 298 (Jan., 1976): 6-7.

supported by 60 Spanish and 50 French aircraft.⁸¹ The Spanish units were led by General Lopez Valencia, commander of the troops stationed in the Canary Islands, while the French and Mauritanian troops were led by General Gabriel Bourgund. However, there were significant differences in the equipment and morale of the troops deployed by the Allies. The French troops were supplied well and equipped with weapons to successfully fight battles in desert conditions (they also tried the napalm against the rebels, which was a new weapon at that time).⁸² In contrast, the Spaniards' equipment was outdated, most of their handguns dated from the 1940s. They did not have armoured vehicles, and their Junker-52, Henkel-111 and Messerschmitt Bf-109 aircraft dated back to the time of the Spanish Civil War. The Spanish logistics were disastrously poor, even catastrophic.⁸³ The French also criticized the Spaniards for not having enough tanks, not having armoured transport vehicles, for their limited radio communication between units due to outdated equipment. The Spanish were also criticised for not having enough ammunition, proper clothing, and protective equipment for their soldiers.^{84 85} The Allies nevertheless successfully carried out the joint military operation. The Spanish main forces, led by General Héctor Vázquez, left El Aaiun and Villa Bens (Tarfaya), while the French left Tindouf (Algeria) and Fort Gouraud (Mauritania) to recapture the area.⁸⁶ The rebels gathered their troops in the valleys of the Tan-Tan and Sagiet el Hamra rivers, where they built their positions in caves and on the river bank. However, Allied forces fighter jets bombed the area, and the Sahrawis lost more than 150 soldiers and most of their weaponry during the air strike. Between 10 and 20 February 1958, units of the Spanish Motorized Group ("Motorized Group A") occupied the Edchera Pass,⁸⁷ then the towns of Tafurda and Smara. On 21 February, the Spanish and French troops liquidated another unit

⁸¹ Pazzanita and Hodges, *Historical Dictionary of Western Sahara*, 57-59.

⁸² Bowen and Álvarez (eds.), *A Military history of modern Spain*, 131.

⁸³ Besenyő, *Western Sahara*, 63.

⁸⁴ Bowen and Álvarez (eds.), *A Military history of modern Spain*, 131. and Piñero, *La guerra de Ifni-Sáhara*, 216-217.

⁸⁵ Contrary to French criticism, the British military leadership, acknowledging the shortcomings, appreciated the courage and aptitude of the Spanish soldiers in desert fighting, and even called their operation against the uprising, mainly by units of the Legion, a success. That is why, unlike others, the British did not see the Ifni War as a failure. Scianna, *Stuck in the past?* 46-48.

⁸⁶ Anonymus, „War and Politics in Western Sahara: the 1956-1958 Campaign,” *The Moorish Wanderer*, July 29, 2011, <https://moorishwanderer.wordpress.com/2011/07/29/war-and-politics-in-western-sahara-the-1956-1958-campaign/>

⁸⁷ Legion IV., IX. and XIII. banderas, the Santiago Armored Regiment, an infantry battalion, and an artillery unit. Scurr, *The Spanish Foreign Legion*, 38.

consisting of approximately 300 soldiers in the area of Awsard and Bir Aznaran. After that, only a significant force remained in the vicinity of Agadir, where the rebels camped a contingent of 12 000 people. However, most of the locals returned home once they realised allied military power. Moroccans frightened by the results of allied operations did not supply food and weapons to the insurgents and then came to an agreement with the Spaniards.⁸⁸ In return for their neutrality, in accordance with the provisions of the Treaty of Angra de Cintra of 1 April 1958, the Moroccans were granted the Tarfaya (Tekna zone) in the northern part of the Sahara which is mainly inhabited by the Sahrawis.⁸⁹ The 1,500-strong Spanish garrison stationed here, part of which was part of the 2nd Legionary Battalion. The battalion was planned to be withdrawn from the area in late April, but instead of that an incident in the vicinity of state borders almost resulted in a war between Spain and Morocco. In a Moroccan violation of the agreement between the Spaniards and the Moroccans, under the leadership of General Mohamed Oufkir, Moroccans invaded the territory of Spanish-Sahara along the Haguina and Daora with a mechanized unit of 1 500 soldiers, but in the 2nd Legionnaire Battalion and soldiers of the 19th Pavia Regiment pushed them in the framework of Operation “Cepo”. During the two-day conflict, the Spaniards made it clear that they would even commit to war to protect the Spanish Saharan border, so the Moroccan ruler, not considering his army strong enough to fight a war, ordered his troops to return. Due to the tense situation, the official handover of the zone finally took place only on 20 May.⁹⁰ This case also indicated that Moroccan leadership could have further territorial claims against the Spaniards, who, however, refused to acknowledge this. Madrid believed that they would be able to keep the Spanish Sahara. Partly because of this, the Spanish leadership sought “silence” concerning the clashes in its territories in North Africa, with only very limited official communication and no press coverage. Therefore, the events of 1957-58 are still

⁸⁸ The guerrillas left alone soon turned against each other. Members of the Sahrawi tribes not only deserted from the Moroccan-controlled Liberation Army, but in several cases armed clashes broke out between the former allies. Hodges, *Western Sahara*, 81-82.

⁸⁹ [Stapleton](#), *A Military History of Africa*, Volume 3, 33.

⁹⁰ Mercer, *Spanish Sahara*, 226.; José María Pérez Arias, „Cabo Juby. La zona sur del Protectorado Español en Marruecos,” *Revista del Ejército de Tierra Español*, Número 932 Extraordinario Noviembre 2018 - Año LXXIX, 38. and Ferrer, *Atlas Ilustrado*, 154-158.

referred to today as the “Forgotten War” (La Guerra Olvidada), in which 205 Spaniards died, 573 were wounded and 166 disappeared.⁹¹

Although the Spaniards were able to retain the city of Ifni, they had to hand it over to the Moroccan government on 30 June 1969, in accordance with the Treaty of Fez. Thus only the Spanish-Sahara, previously declared Spanish, remained under the control of Madrid, where the Spanish had made serious improvements over previous years in the fields of economics (development of agriculture, fishing, trade, construction of wells, roads and ports, etc.), education (construction and modernization of the school system), health (construction of hospitals, pharmacies) and improvements were also made in other spheres. In addition, it was discovered as early as 1945 that there was a significant phosphate field in the area, the extraction of which promised serious profits.⁹² The area was not particularly important from a military point of view before the discovery and only a small fortress was built in Villa Cisneros, from where the Spanish tried to supervise the entire area. After 1934, however, the situation has changed as the colony became more established, increasing number soldiers started to arrive and new forts and desert outposts were built, one after another. After Spain lost Morocco and then Ifni, more soldiers arrived to the area. In addition to the Legionnaires and other units, the infamous penal unit of the Spanish Army, the Cabrerizas Battalion, was relocated to Villa Cisneros together with the 4th Regiment. The Legion differed from other units of the Spanish Army in that it operated its own punitive / disciplinary units for its regiments stationed in El Aaiún and Villa Cisneros.⁹³ The primary task of those serving in these penal units was to build and maintain forts and roads in the area.⁹⁴ However, the Moroccan leadership has decided to get control of Spanish Sahara as well. As no open conflict was decided

⁹¹ Piñero, *La guerra de Ifni-Sáhara*, 593.

⁹² Clarence-Smith, *The impact of the Spanish Civil War*, 315.

⁹³ This was necessary, not only because serious punishments were imposed in the Legion for the slightest offenses, but also because the Legionnaires committed crimes outside service on several occasions that were severely sanctioned by the Spanish colonial and military administrations. For example, in 1960, a legionnaire named Jacinto D. harassed the child of a local Spanish merchant in El Aaiún, resulting in a prosecution against him. We do not know the outcome of the proceedings, but the convicted legionnaires were mostly transferred to the disciplinary corps. Andreas Stucki, *Violence and Gender in Africa's Iberian Colonies: Feminizing the Portuguese and Spanish Empire, 1950s–1970s* (Cham, Springer, 2019), 147.

⁹⁴ Pablo San Martín, *Western Sahara: The Refugee Nation* (Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 2010), 41–44.

against Spain, harassment of the province was entrusted to various irregular groups in Morocco and the Sahara. These groups began their attacks on Spanish-held territories as early as January-February 1961. The guerrillas easily entered the area at the poorly guarded border, where minor raids were carried out against military and civilian targets. For example, in March 1961, 11 workers from an American oil exploration company were abducted and then handed over to the Moroccan authorities. Although they later released the hostages, the Moroccans refused to take action against the guerrillas, as they were "*considered patriots who only wanted to liberate the still occupied territories of the kingdom.*" And on March 21, more than fifty gunmen from Moroccan territory invaded Spanish Sahara, where, however, the Legion stopped them and drove them back to the other side of the border. In the clash, two gunmen lost their lives and one was captured, who turned out to be a non-commissioned officer in the Moroccan Army. On March 29, another clash took place around Smara, where Moroccans were again defeated by legionaries.⁹⁵ By this time, it was already clear to the Spanish leadership that the groups attacking the province were under Moroccan control, so more soldiers were commanded to Spanish Sahara and the border section with Morocco was strengthened. The Legion, as well as the Territorial Police and Tropas Nómadas, which consisted mainly of Sahrawis, were deployed to protect the border. The "Don Juan de Austria" Regiment of the Legion and the "Saguiet-el-Hamra" Battalion of the Nomadic Forces (Smara) were responsible for the protection of the Northern District, and the "Alejandro Farnese" Regiment and the "Capitan Gandara" of the Nomadic Forces for the protection of the Southern District.⁹⁶ Despite that infiltrations and sporadic clashes continued.⁹⁷ As a result of the attacks, the military leadership set up several smaller observation posts complementing the already existing military bases – El-Aaiún, Villa Cisneros, Smara és La Güerra – in the Northern part of the area, close to Morocco. Additionally, seven forts - Echdeiria, Tifariti, Hausa, Mahbes, Aargub, Guelta Zemmour and Bir Enzaren – had been built so that legionary units could be engaged against the attackers from

⁹⁵ Piñero, Arda el deserto – 1957, 345-346. and Togores, *Historia de la Legión Española*, 516-518

⁹⁶ Mercer, *Spanish Sahara*, 226. and Hodges, *Western Sahara*, 146.

⁹⁷ Marks, *Spanish Sahara*, 7. and Piñero, *Arda el deserto* – 1957, 346.

Morocco easier and quicker.⁹⁸ Simultaneously with the construction of the forts, the Spanish authorities planned and carried out large-scale construction works, including the construction of public buildings and hundreds of flats for the Spanish and Sahrawi population in both El Aaiún and Villa Cisneros. It also signalled that Spain did not want to leave the Sahara, let alone hand it over to the Moroccans.⁹⁹ After a series of failures, the Moroccans finally realized that they could not force the Spaniards to hand over the territory by military means, so they stopped the attacks and then there was relative peace in Spanish Sahara for a decade.¹⁰⁰ During this period, the soldiers of the Legion performed mainly border protection and training duties. Attila Darvas Tóth, a Hungarian legionnaire who served in the area, wrote about the conditions and training at that time: *“First of all, it has to be understood that the Spanish Foreign Legion spoke of a lack of everything. Everyone had to survive each day with as few tools, water, food, clothes, etc. as possible. The reason for this was that the whole organization was invented to travel huge distances in the hot and dry desert without serious equipment, patrol where no one dares to go, build fortifications with his bare hands and fight with those who do not agree with the presence of Spain in the desert. Lack of bathing opportunities, absence of clean clothes and disgusting food were normal. The basic training was practically about being beaten until you learned what you needed. The beating took place mostly during formation training because it was more important than anything else. We stood at attention in cut-out neck shirts at fifty degrees, marched so fast that we had to go about three times faster than other members of the Spanish Army. But anyway, there was a lot more beating than all orders that could have been executed properly, so it took a lot of luck to get through basic training. They used live ammunition on the obstacle courses, where the “cabs” (section leaders) were shooting with the machine gun ten centimetres above your head and as you crawled through the mud and waded through the incredibly high obstacles, they screamed “bolo!” and “culo”. Explosives were also sometimes dug into pits to be blown up next to the rookies, but it did not happen to me personally.*

⁹⁸ Salvatore Garfi, *An Archaeology of Colonialism, Conflict, and Exclusion: Conflict Landscapes of Western Sahara*, Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy (Norwich, University of East Anglia, School of Art History and World Art Studies, August 2014), 96-97.

⁹⁹ More about this project: Pablo Rabasco, „Laayoune, Sidi Ifni and Dakhla: Ramo’n Estalella’s modernist projects in Spanish West Africa, 1961–1969,” *Planning Perspectives*, 2015, Volume 30, Number. 3, 311–337, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02665433.2014.989452>

¹⁰⁰ Mercer, *Spanish Sahara*, 227.

There were serious injuries every day, and it also happened that someone was paralyzed or died during training. Everyone was glad it wasn't him and that's it. The lives of the legionaries did not worth much, and this was accepted by all. That sounds cruel, but would say it was toughness. "Viva la Muerte" (Long live death!) everyone said this at such times, and the matter was forgotten. I say it's more about toughness because by the end of basic training, they had developed incredible self-confidence and perseverance as Legionnaires. The job of the non-commissioned officers was nothing more than to break the rookies, and they knew how to do this job very well. The basic training was inhuman, that is the truth, but that is how it went then. That if someone didn't survive the next day wasn't big news in the Legion."¹⁰¹ In addition to the hard training, the legionnaires also had time to take advantage of their duty-free service to engage in various commercial and economic activities in their spare time.¹⁰²

However, in addition to the Moroccan attempts, the Spanish leadership also faced the Sahrawi people's desire for an independent state, who founded their own political organization in 1967, the Sahrawi Liberation Movement (Harakat Tahrir saguia el-Hamra wa Oued ed-Dahab), whose first leader was the Mohamed Sidi Ibrahim Bassiri, working as a teacher. The leaders of the movement wrote an open letter to the Governor of Spanish-Sahara. In June 1970, although they were fighting for independence, they wanted to achieve it through negotiations. First they asked for autonomy from the Spaniards, and then they wanted to operate as an associated state and only after 10-15 years (when the appropriate framework had been established) would they have become an independent state without harming Spain's interests. The Spaniards did not respond and, in fact, were preparing to liquidate the organization when the Sahrawis staged a huge series of demonstrations on 17 June 1970 protesting that the area still belonged to Spain. The movement was, in fact, a counter-demonstration organized against an event announced by sheikhs loyal to the Spaniards, sympathizing with the "motherland". The two demonstrations in the Zemla district of El-Aaiun were mixed soon, and fervent verbal duel began between the

¹⁰¹ Besenyő János, „Magyarok a Spanyol Idegenlégióban,” *Századok*, 153. évfolyam (2019) 4. szám, 818.

¹⁰² Josefina Domínguez-Mujica; Beatriz Andreu-Medierob and Nadia Kroudou: „On the trail of social relations in the colonial Sahara: a postcolonial reading,” *Social & cultural GeoGraphy*, 2018, Vol. 19, No. 6, 752.

participants. Then tribal leaders loyal to the Spaniards and Legionaries performing law enforcement duties were stoned. To this end, Captain Diaz Acocha, the officer in charge of the Legionaries, ordered his soldiers to fire for effect as a result of which more than twelve dead and hundreds of wounded were counted by his men.¹⁰³ Several members of the movement, including sixteen Sahrawi soldiers serving in Spain, were imprisoned or deported to the Canary Islands, and their leader simply disappeared after his arrest and never came back. The Spaniards said Bassiri had been transported to Morocco on June 27 and after that he was released from prison. This is contradicted by the fact that several Spanish soldiers,¹⁰⁴ and even then-governor Pérez de Lerma, claimed that the Sahrawi political leader was executed by soldiers of the Legion and then buried in the desert outside El-Aaiún. After the demonstration, the colonial leadership took a very tough line against the Sahrawis. According to a legionnaire then serving in the area, several smaller settlements were destroyed because of the fear of a possible uprising. As a result, many Sahrawi refugees fled to Morocco and Mauritania. Nothing happened for a year and a half, and then on 7 March 1972, further anti-Spanish protests erupted in the cities of El Aaiún and Villa Cisneros, killing 10 Spaniards and 8 Sahrawis, resulting in the arrest of hundreds of protesters. Subsequently, members of the Sahrawi tribes and Moroccans taking advantage of the tense situation carried out several raids against the smaller Spanish garrisons, so the legionary units, with the support of nomadic troops, carried out anti-guerrilla operations (Operación Alcazaba) in Amasin, Itgui, Auleitis y Bu-Craa-Lenlu districts between 2nd and 4th February 1972. In the framework of another operation (Operación Jeromín) reinforcements were sent to Smara and Echdeiria garrisons between 26 and 28 May.¹⁰⁵ On 17 May, another armed clash took place in El Aaiún between the Sahrawis and the Spaniards, as a result of which more Sahrawis fled to the surrounding states.¹⁰⁶ After this, locals increasingly came to the view that peaceful means could not achieve the goal, so more and more people supported groups fighting

¹⁰³ Pazzanita and Hodges, *Historical Dictionary of Western Sahara*, 467-468. and Hodges: *Western Sahara*, 155.

¹⁰⁴ Enrique Solé León, „Comparative analysis of the decolonisation of the Spanish Protectorate in Morocco and the frustrated attempt in Western Sahara (1945-1976): Cultural clash, inhabitants and administration,” *Maatschappijgeschiedenis / History of Society*. Retrieved from <http://hdl.handle.net/2105/49930> p. 71.

¹⁰⁵ Togores, *Historia de la Legión Española*, 522-523.

¹⁰⁶ Mercer, *Spanish Sahara*, 227-228.

the Spaniards.¹⁰⁷ The leadership of the colony decided to deploy the Legion and the nomadic formations, which launched several operations between 1972 and 1973 - Operación Jaque Mate II, Operación Relámpago, Operación Itgui, Operación Alcazaba II, Operación Contragolpe, Operación Gémines I against the Moroccans and the Sahrawi Army. However, since the opponents decided to fight in the rarest of cases, the operations had only yielded limited results. Moreover, the Spanish leadership tried to conceal these events, so only a few became aware of them.¹⁰⁸

Meanwhile, on 10 May 1973, the Sahrawis set up the Polisario Front (Frente Popular para la Liberación de Saguia El-Hamra y Río de Oro) with the aim of liberating Western Sahara with armed struggle. The new organization carried out its first action ten days later, on 20 May, when its members attacked a Spanish military checkpoint in El-Khanga.¹⁰⁹ Several other raids were soon carried out against smaller military stations such as Mahbas, Echderia, Bir Lehmar, Tifariti, Hauza, Amgala or Guelta Zemmour, and several times the phosphate mines in Bou Craa were attacked and the phosphate transportation system linking the mines with the port was damaged.¹¹⁰ As a result of the successful attacks, the Sahrawi Liberation Organization grew rapidly to 500 men, mostly armed and trained by Libya, but also received support from Algeria.¹¹¹ The Spaniards, enraged by the attacks, mobilized Army units to destroy the new armed group. Operation Aarred-El-Jam was launched in late January 1974, Operation Mathal-La in February,¹¹² and Operation Barrido in March, during which combat helicopters were deployed against Polisario militants in addition to Legion, Policía Territorial and Tropas Nómadas units. Although the organization suffered heavy losses, they could not be destroyed, and more and more Sahrawis joined them, several of who had previously served in the Legion or who served in military and police organizations recruited from locals. By the end of the year, the organization

¹⁰⁷ Jeremy Keenan, *The Sahara: Past, Present and Future* (London, Routledge, 2007), 328. and San Martín, *Western Sahara: The Refugee Nation*, 77- 82.

¹⁰⁸ Togoës, *Historia de la Legión Española*, 523-524

¹⁰⁹ Boukhars and Roussellier, *Perspectives on Western Sahara*, 16.

¹¹⁰ H. Micheal Tarver and Emily Slape, *The Spanish Empire: A Historical Encyclopedia, Volume 2* (Santa Barbara, California, ABC-CLIO, 2016), 39, 194, 249-250. and San Martín, *Western Sahara: The Refugee Nation*, 89.

¹¹¹ Marks, *Spanish Sahara*, 10. and Ignacio Fuente Cobo and Fernando M. Mariño Menéndez, *El conflicto del Sahara Occidental* (Madrid, Ministerio de Defensa, 2005), 34-35.

¹¹² Togoës, *Historia de la Legión Española*, 528.

had strengthened so that they were able to carry out further attacks.¹¹³ Between 17 and 19 December 1974, an attempt was made to occupy a base in the municipality of Tifariti, for the release of which the Legion's Special Operations Unit and three companies of the 9th Battalion arrived on helicopters.¹¹⁴ There were losses on both sides during the clash. In the end the legionaries not only drove out the attackers, but also captured five of them.¹¹⁵ One of the most talented leaders of the Saharan guerrillas was Lahbib Ayub, of the Reguibat tribe, also known as the Saharan Giap. Ayub and his small groups launched attacks on various Spanish military outposts and then tricked the pursuers into traps, pretending to flee. If the pursuers were stronger, they tried to flee back to the Algerian territory, where the Spaniards could no longer chase them, or simply hid so well that the colonial troops could not find them. This also happened in March 1975, when a battalion-sized unit consisting of a Legionnaires and other subunits Northwest of Edcheiría tried to eradicate the Sahrawi guerrillas operating there, but they evaded the direct military contacts and hid, making the Spanish unable to find them even with the help of helicopters. Thus the Spaniards retreated to El Aaiún without success.¹¹⁶ The raids continued after this: on May 12, Polisario militants had already attacked the outskirts of El Aaiún, but managed to escape the Legionnaires who launched a counterattack, suffering three wounded in the clash. On 3 July the base of Hausa base was attacked, regaining of which was again a local victory of the Legionnaires.¹¹⁷ The constant raids and the permanent readiness wore out the legionnaires most deployed against the Sahrawis, who were particularly enraged by the activities of the “ghost fighters”.¹¹⁸ The most spectacular action of the Sahrawis took place in June 1975, when, with the support of the local Sahrawi police and a section of the civilian population, they occupied Guelta for a short time, which they had to give up as soon as legionaries hurried to liberate the town arrived.¹¹⁹ Eventually, the Polisario Front became strengthened to such an extent that the Spanish

¹¹³ Bowen and Álvarez (eds.), *A Military history of modern Spain*, 133 - 134. and Hodges, *Western Sahara*, 161.

¹¹⁴ Togores, *Historia de la Legión Española*, 530-538.

¹¹⁵ Antonio Rodríguez, „Mahbes el éxito olvidado,” *Revista de Militaria y Cuerpos*, No. 30. March. 1998. 56-61. http://web.lamilienelsahara.net/revistas/150326_Mahbes/63_Mahbes.pdf

¹¹⁶ Cobo and Menéndez, *El conflicto del Sahara Occidental*, 35-36.

¹¹⁷ Rodríguez, *Mahbes el éxito olvidado*, 56-61.

¹¹⁸ Besenyő János, „Hungarians in the Spanish Legion?” *Studia Politicae Universitatis Silesiensis*, 2019, T. 26, 33.

¹¹⁹ Cobo and Menéndez, *El conflicto del Sahara Occidental*, 38.

Government entered into secret negotiations concerning the transfer of the territory to them and the following cooperation between the potential Sahrawi State and Spain.¹²⁰ Interestingly, not only the Spanish leadership, but several of the legionnaires serving in Spanish Sahara believed that the natives had the right to live in their own independent state and that the territory should be handed over to them by the Spaniards and not to the Moroccans.¹²¹

At the same time, Morocco reiterated its claim to the Western Sahara, which was again rejected by the Spaniards, who sent reinforcements to Spanish Sahara, significantly improved the equipment and supplies of its military personnel stationing there. Furthermore, the Spanish conducted two major military exercises, not only to defend against guerrilla warfare, but to prepare for a possible armed conflict with a neighbouring state. All this was done in order to deter Morocco from possible military aggression, but at the same time two regiments of the Legion were assigned to protect the northern border zone.¹²² Although Morocco built up high concentrations of troops along the Moroccan-Spanish-Saharan border in 1974, it did not initiate an open military confrontation yet. Instead, the “Front for Liberation and Unity” (FLU) was created in February 1975. Its Moroccan and Sahrawi members have carried out several terrorist attacks against Spanish soldiers and Sahrawi civilians¹²³ in the Sahara. FLU members were not only trained by the Moroccan Army, but Moroccan soldiers were also involved in their attacks in the Sahara. One of their groups attacked Echdeiria base, but as it was desperately defended by the Legionnaires, so the Moroccans withdrew. Two unarmed Spanish reconnaissance aircrafts were attacked by Moroccan Air Defence Units in late June. Later on mines were laid near the town of Tah on the patrol route used by legionaries, killing five of them.¹²⁴ The Spaniards, who also fought the Polisario's militants, were less and less tolerant to the Moroccan

¹²⁰ Bowen and Álvarez (eds.), *A Military history of modern Spain*, 134.

¹²¹ Andreu Navarra Ordoño, “La arena y el remordimiento: el Sáhara Occidental en el memorialismo español contemporáneo,” *Conference of Casa Árabe of Madrid*, 20th December 2012, 9. http://www.africafundacion.org/IMG/pdf/Andreu_Navarra_-_La_Arena_y_el_remordimiento-2.pdf

¹²² Mariñas Romero, Gerardo, „El Sahara – Despliegue del Ejercito Espanol an la crisis 1974- 1975,” *Revista Ejercito* n° 577, 81-86, https://www.lamilienelsahara.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/AP_038_Despliegue.pdf

¹²³ Lanuza, África Occidental Española, 135-136. and Pazzanita and Hodges, *Historical Dictionary of Western Sahara*, 173-175.

¹²⁴ Marks, *Spanish Sahara*, 12. and San Martín, *Western Sahara: The Refugee Nation*, 99.

attacks and acted increasingly harder against them, resulting in the loss of several of their militants. Nevertheless, the Moroccans continued to perform surprise attacks. Even before the arrival of the UN Commission of Inquiry, a military checkpoint in Haguina was attacked. A Sahrawi businessman was shot dead when he was on his way home from his shopping spree. In order to cause more confusion, three terrorist bombings were carried out in the town of El Aaiún, in which 37 people were injured.¹²⁵ Eventually, the Spanish authorities become upset by the activities of the FLU, and the commanders of the Legion began to organize preventive military action (Operación “Trapezio”).¹²⁶ A double informant, also funded by the Spaniards, took the false news to leadership of the FLU that the Spanish fort in Mahbas was guarded by barely 4-5 soldiers instead of the 120 stationed there as the others searched for Polisario guerrillas in the mountains. Since the closest Spanish military bases to the fort in Mahbas was Edcheira, 150 kilometres away, and Ben Tili, 190 kilometres away, the Moroccans were confident that the Spaniards would be unable to rush to the aid of those in the fort in Mahbas. Therefore, they decided to take the opportunity and occupy the fortress. However, they did not know that the 7th Company of the 10th Legionnaire Battalion and a platoon of the 50th Mechanised Infantry Battalion, previously stationed in the Canary Islands, had arrived as reinforcements next to the Sahrawi forces guarding the base.¹²⁷ Thus, the Moroccans have gone into the brilliantly organised trap of the Spanish, where the Legionnaires captured all the 52 members of the Moroccan attack group. The documents found at the captives proved credibly to the Spaniards that they were soldiers of the Moroccan Army – the 11th Company of the 7th Meharist Battalion - stationed in the Tan-Tan garrison. It also became clear for the Spanish, that the terrorist operations were funded and directed by the Moroccan Government.¹²⁸ The Spaniards officially protested, but the attacks continued. On August 3, Moroccan soldiers tried to occupy Hausa's fortress, which was thought to be defended only by Sahrawi soldiers and a few paratroopers. In the meantime, the 3rd Company of the 9th Battalion arrived at the fort, forcing the

¹²⁵ Pazzanita and Hodges, *Historical Dictionary of Western Sahara*, 173-175 and Cobo and Menéndez, *El conflicto del Sahara Occidental*, 42.

¹²⁶ Lanuza, *La Guerra de Ifni-Sahara (1957-1958)*, 90.

¹²⁷ Rodríguez, *Mahbes el éxito olvidado*, 56-61.

¹²⁸ Mercer, *Spanish Sahara*, 244-245; Tomás Bárbulo, *La historia prohibida del Sahara Español* (Barcelona, Ed. Destino, 2002), 203-204. and Romero, *Guerra en el desierto*, 22.

Moroccan attackers to retreat.¹²⁹ A patrol of Spanish Legionnaires liquidated another 20-man unit near Hagounia on September 22, where several FLU leaders were arrested.¹³⁰ Although the organization lost much of its talented leadership, the attacks continued. On 2 and 18 October 1975, mines were installed on the routes of two Legionary patrols, which exploded, causing one fatal and several minor injuries.¹³¹ Eventually, the Spaniards hermetically closed the Moroccan-Saharan border with legionary units and troops diverted from the Canary Islands, so the FLU could no longer perform serious actions.

Later on the Moroccan ruler tried other means. With American support, he put diplomatic pressure on the Spaniards, who still did not want to give up Spanish Sahara. In October 1975, several negotiations took place between the opposing parties, but no agreement was reached, even though it was clear to everyone that Spain should leave the territory.¹³² Nevertheless, Spanish military units stationed in Spanish Sahara were still preparing for armed resistance. On 4 October, as part of Operation Marabunta, a buffer zone was created, reinforced with barbed-wire obstacles and minefields. The Legion and other Spanish and Saharan units stationed in the area lined up along the zone. The defence of El Aaiún was also reinforced, within which three tactical groups were created with approximately 10 000 soldiers, where the most capable striking units were the legionaries. The "Lynx" unit, led by Colonel Timón de Lara, and the "Gazelle" unit, led by Colonel Gerardo Mariñas, had been tasked with stopping Moroccan units attacking from the North and East. The third unit was stationed in "Jackal" Smara, under the command of Colonel Bello Mando. A reserve force was also available in order to defend the city and for launching a possible counterattack. The Spaniards had every chance for a victory, as their soldiers were better trained, equipped, and more motivated than in previous periods. In the event of a military conflict, not only would they have successfully taken up the fight against the Moroccan units stationed along the border, but they would also have been able to

¹²⁹ Togores, *Historia de la Legión Española*, 563-566.

¹³⁰ Cobo and Menéndez, *El conflicto del Sahara Occidental*, 41-42.

¹³¹ Romero, *Guerra en el desierto*, 23.

¹³² Lanuza, *La Guerra de Ifni-Sahara (1957-1958)*, [91-93](#)

win a short-term border war.¹³³ However, the soldiers did not know that the Spanish political leadership was already preparing for the period after the death of Franco, who insisted on keeping the African colony at all costs. Although a small part of the political and military leadership would still have handed over the territory to the Polisario in order to retain their influence in the newly formed Saharan state,¹³⁴ the majority refused to wage war with the US-backed Morocco. Thus, by the end of October, an agreement was outlined that the area was not to be handed over to the natives but to Morocco.¹³⁵ Therefore, the Polisario Front once again became the enemy of the Spaniards. On October 28, Legion units, Marines, paratroopers and police units surrounded the districts populated by locals in the town of El-Aaiún and began collecting weapons and detaining those demanding independence. Local soldiers still in Spanish service were immediately disarmed and fired; most of whom immediately joined the Polisario Front. The governor of the area has made several provisions that are detrimental to indigenous peoples, such as banning gas stations from selling fuel to local residents. At the same time, legionary units stationed along the Moroccan-Spanish-Saharan border were withdrawn by 14 kilometres.¹³⁶

Meanwhile, the increasingly impatient Hassan II announced in early November that, with the participation of Moroccan citizens, he would launch a peaceful march to reclaim the Sahrawi territories.¹³⁷ In response, Spanish Governor General Federico Gomez de Salazar held a press conference where he openly threatened the marchers: should they cross the Spanish-Saharan border, action would be taken against them by military force. Gomez immediately put the soldiers of the Legion and other Spanish units on alert. The strength of the Legion was well indicated during a hearing before the Committee on International Relations led by Cortez on 13 March 1978, where

¹³³ Cobo and Menéndez, *El conflicto del Sahara Occidental*, 53-56. and Mariñas Romero, Gerardo, „El Sahara – Despliegue del Ejército Español en la crisis 1974 - 1975,” *Revista Ejercito* n° 577, 81-86, https://www.lamilienelsahara.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/AP_038_Despliegue.pdf

¹³⁴ An exchange of prisoners took place between the Spaniards and the Polisario Front on 25 October, when the military commander of the Spanish Sahara, General Gómez de Salazar, who did not know that the government leaders were planning to hand over the area to Morocco, promised that an independent Saharawi state would be established under the leadership of the Polisario. Togores, *Historia de la Legión Española*, 547-548

¹³⁵ José María Ortega Perucha, „El adiós al Sahara Español,” *Ab Initio: Revista digital para estudiantes de Historia*, Núm. 2 (2011), p. 189.

¹³⁶ Pazzanita and Hodges, *Historical Dictionary of Western Sahara*, 185.

¹³⁷ Lanuza, *África Occidental Española*, 213.

General Salazar made it clear: *“had the Moroccans attacked Spanish Sahara the Spanish would have destroyed their army within 48 hours. Along the border, the Moroccan army had 20 000 soldiers altogether, and the number of Spanish soldiers was similar. However, Spanish troops were much better than the Moroccans.”*¹³⁸

Even though the Spanish general was right, no matter to what extent, the Moroccan ruler also assessed the balance of power well. Spain has become so isolated internationally that it did not dare to take on an African war, even if it would have won it undoubtedly. In addition, there were more than 100 000 civilians in the Green March who could have been used by the Moroccan Army as a living shield against the Spaniards. The leadership of the Moroccan Army calculated that should the crowd reach the fortified border, at least 30 000 of them would lose their lives, which appeared to be an acceptable risk. However, this was not undertaken by the Spanish government and another tense meeting took place in Agadir, where the Spaniards eventually backed down and promised to hand over the area, sanctified by the Madrid Agreement of 14 November. According to it, the opposing parties agreed that Spain would abolish the colonial status of the territory and leave it on 28 February 1976. The Spanish military leadership immediately began preparing a plan to evacuate the 25 000 Spaniards living and working in the area (Golondrina plan). The protection of phosphate mines and major buildings was strengthened and the evacuation of garrisons in the desert - Hausa, Edchería and Mahbes - started.¹³⁹ Between 3 and 8 November, the Spaniards evacuated more than 20 000 Spanish citizens from the area by sea and air to the Canary Islands.¹⁴⁰ Spanish traders sold their stores along with supplies, and public schools closed permanently due to the lack of teachers. The Spaniards also transported the zoo animals to Almeria, and even exhumed their relatives buried in local cemeteries, and then transported the remains to the Canary Islands, where they were reburied. Therefore, by the time the Contracting Parties announced the conclusion of the Madrid Agreement, no Spanish nationals remained in the territory of the former Spanish Sahara other than members of the army and clerks. In accordance with the Madrid Agreement, the Spaniards did not legally transfer

¹³⁸ Pazzanita and Hodges, *Historical Dictionary of Western Sahara*, 186.

¹³⁹ Cobo and Menéndez, *El conflicto del Sahara Occidental*, 57-59. and Lanuza, *África Occidental Española*, 233-234; 256-257.

¹⁴⁰ Pazzanita and Hodges, *Historical Dictionary of Western Sahara*, 184.

administrative control of the area to either the Moroccans or the Mauritians. All that was stated in the document was that the two occupying countries would operate an interim administration in cooperation with Djemma. However, this Agreement was never officially recognized as legal by the UN.

From early November, the Spaniards began evacuating their bases in the Northern areas and their troops were concentrated in El-Aaiún and Villa Cisneros., Fighting for the vacant territories immediately began between the Moroccans and the Polisario Front units, which by then had been joined by most of the Sahrawi soldiers who had previously served Spain.¹⁴¹ The Spaniards helped their former comrades in several places, and even some military leaders disagreed so much with the handover of Western Sahara that they prepared an assassination attempt on high-ranking Moroccan soldiers and politicians who had arrived to take over the administration, and stayed in Hotel Parador in El-Aaiun. Participants of Operation “Voladura” placed a bomb at the hotel. That, if it exploded, would probably have led to the outbreak of a war between Spain and Morocco. The assassination attempt was finally suspended on 20 November 1975, a few minutes before the scheduled time, after the Spanish became aware of Franco's death. Thus, the handover of the province finally took place peacefully, but not without events,¹⁴² as the 8th Legionnaire Battalion should have handed over the city of Smara to the Moroccan Army, having a common parade ceremony on 26-27 November, but Legionaries refused to do so. The legionaries held their own farewell ceremony before the Moroccans arrived and then set off for El Aaiún. On November 27, the legionnaires evacuated the forts of Hagunia, and then on December 2, Daora. Although there were no attacks on legionnaires at this time, there were several incidents of armed clashes in December.¹⁴³ On 7 January 1976, the last legionary unit also left El-Aaiún and the remaining troops were assembled in Villa Cisneros, which was abandoned by the legionaries on 12 January, who thus ended their permanent presence in the Sahara permanently.¹⁴⁴ The Legionaries were deployed to the Canary Islands, where the dissolution of the 4th Regiment began

¹⁴¹ Lanuza, *África Occidental Española*, 255-257.

¹⁴² Lanuza, *África Occidental Española*, 269-270. and de la Calle, Ángel Luis, „Operación Voladura,” *El País*, 25 February 2001, https://elpais.com/diario/2001/02/25/domingo/983072805_850215.html (accessed: 19.04. 2020.)

¹⁴³ Lanuza, *África Occidental Española*, 256. and Besenyő, *Hungarians in the Spanish Legion?*, 33.

¹⁴⁴ Tógores, *Historia de la Legión Española*, 585.

immediately. With this, the organization's activities in Africa were mostly eliminated, although some of their smaller units remained in Ceuta and Melilla. Simultaneously with the withdrawal of the Spaniards, units of the Moroccan and Mauritanian armies occupied the area. It resulted in a still unfinished war between the natives, Mauritania and Morocco, lasting until 1990.

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