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Poison Gas in Warfare

**Part 1: Chemical Weapons in Spain's War in Morocco
(1921-1927)**

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1. Spain's colonial policy in northern Morocco

Until the end of the 19th century, Morocco had remained relatively untouched by colonialism. However, this was to change dramatically in the 20th century. Morocco had natural resources and was strategically located on the Mediterranean and the Atlantic.

In the north of Morocco, two small enclaves had already been in Spanish possession: Melilla since 1497 and Ceuta, previously under Portuguese control, since 1668.

However, Spain fought several wars to expand its territory in northern Morocco. In the Spanish-Moroccan War in 1859 and 1860, the Kingdom of Spain fought against the Sultan of Morocco for the first expansion of Spanish possessions in North Africa.

The Rif War of 1893 between Spain and the Berber tribes of the Rif mountains in northern Morocco was ended by the Treaty of Fes, then the capital of Morocco, in 1894.

This was followed in 1909 by the Rif War, which also took place between the Berber tribes of the Riffians and Spain and in which Spain succeeded in expanding its territory slightly. Berber is a collective term for many ethnic groups in the Maghreb. The original inhabitants of the Rif region called themselves Amazigh.

The Sultan of Morocco now attempted to consolidate his rule over the Rif region. These Berber tribes revolted against him and went to war, allowing France to take advantage of this and intervene militarily in Morocco. Germany also had an interest in Morocco; after all, the Mannesmann Group had many mining concessions and other legal titles throughout Morocco, especially in the Rif Mountains, where rich mineral resources were suspected. As in the First Moroccan Crisis (1904-1906), Germany once again intervened politically, which led to the Second Moroccan Crisis, but later had to allow France's dominant influence in Morocco.

Following the Treaty of Fes on 30 March 1912 between the Sultan Moulay Abdel Hafid of Morocco and France, the protectorate of French Morocco was established; although the Sultan remained head of state, he lost a great deal of power. Under the subsequent Franco-Spanish Treaty of 27 November 1912, Spain was awarded the coastal area on the Mediterranean and the Rif Mountains in northern Morocco as well as a small area around the city of Tarfaya in the south. In this treaty, France ceded 5% of Moroccan territory, i.e. around 20,000 square kilometres, to Spain. Spain established the protectorate of Spanish Morocco with Tétouan as its capital. This was also the beginning of the resistance of the Riffians against the Spanish and triggered a conflict that would drag on for years.

2. The second Rif War

From 1920 onwards, Spain attempted to extend its rule to the entire colonial territory granted to it after the First World War. This was because France threatened to add the north of Morocco to its protectorate. The Spaniards conquered the city of Chefchaouen, also known as Chaouen or Xauen, in the west of the Rif. It was a city with a large Jewish population. The conquerors also attacked the local mosques and treated the Rifkabylians - the indigenous, predominantly Sunni Berber tribe in the Rif mountains - with contempt.

3. Abd-el-Krim

From 1921, Spain hastily attempted to advance further. However, they did not reckon with the locals, who were anxious to preserve and defend their own authority and culture. This led to the unification of several Berber tribes under Mohammed Abd al-Karim al-Khattabi. He belonged to the powerful Beni Urriagel tribe. Before the First World War, he was the *cadi* (Islamic judge) of Melilla and worked for the newspaper *El Telegrama del Rif*, where he initially took up a position for Spain as protector and investor in the Rif region. However, he was later imprisoned for a year for high treason because he propagated independence from Spain. By 1921, Abd-el-Krim had united six tribes to fight against the Spanish. On 22 July 1921, the Rifkians under his leadership directly attacked the Spanish troops at Annual in north-eastern Morocco. The battle at Annual lasted three weeks, with over 13,000 Spanish soldiers killed according to official figures, and there are even reports that 35,000 men died. Much military equipment was lost to the Riffians. The strength of the Riffians, who only had a few thousand armed fighters, was due to their knowledge of the terrain and their high level of motivation. The organisation and tactics of the guerrilla fighters of the Riffians are considered to be one of the sources of the theory of guerrilla warfare and are repeated in various conflicts of the 20th century. Che Guevara (Cuba), Mao Zedong (China) and Ho Chi Minh (Vietnam) are said to have been inspired by the guerrilla tactics of the Riffians.

This led to a domestic political crisis in Spain and a change of strategy by the Spanish under King Alfonso XIII. A large number of troops, around 150,000 soldiers, and new weapons were sent from Spain, including tanks, aeroplanes and an aircraft carrier. The Spanish air force launched aerial bombardments in the Rif region at the beginning of 1922. These aerial bombardments caused great losses among the Rif population. From mid-September 1921 to 11 January 1922, the towns of Nador, Zelouan and Monte Arruit were recaptured by Spanish troops, meaning that the western part of the protectorate was once again under Spanish control.

4. The Rif Republic

After the spectacular victory in Annual, Abd-el-Krim expanded his power by founding an Islamic republic, the Rif Republic, with a government and a centralised administration in 1923. He created a parliament consisting of the tribal leaders, which also elected a government. Law was administered according to Sharia, Islamic law. Abd-el-Krim fundamentally reformed the social structure of the Rifkabyles. Other Berber tribes joined him and he put an end to the rivalries between them.

This Rif Republic was a challenge for the European colonial powers. There were repeated battles between the Rif Republic and the Spanish, but there were also repeated battles between the various Riffian tribes. However, Abd-el-Krim's troops liberated the city of Chefchaouen in 1924. This conquest and the retreat of the Spaniards were a great victory for Abd-el-Krim.

5. Chemical weapons against the Rif Republic

Spain had long had a filling station for chemical warfare agents in Melilla, which had been supplied by France. This was initially only equipped for tear gas and irritants for the nose and throat.

Germany had already given modern weapons to Spain in 1920, as a pretext allegedly for a military museum. In 1921, Spanish military personnel contacted German authorities in order to obtain chemical weapons.

On 20 August 1921, Spain applied for the delivery of mustard gas from Germany to the Spanish military via Dr Hugo Stoltzenberg, who was in charge of dismantling chemical weapons in Germany. The production of such weapons in Germany was banned by the Treaty of Versailles of 1919, but there were still many remaining stocks. The first delivery was made in 1923, and in June 1922 Spain commissioned Dr Stoltzenberg to build a chemical weapons factory near Madrid, in Marañosa, to produce poison gas itself.

Germany also had other military contacts with Spain: Planning for a factory for hand grenades and bombs came from the Carbonit company in Germany, and gas masks from the Auer company were also supplied to Spain. The German companies Junker and Dornier built aeroplanes for the Spanish military. Junker flying boats were used in the Rif War in Morocco from 1922 and also flew gas attacks. German lorry companies also supported the Spanish armaments.

In September 1923, after a civil-war-like violence, General Primo de Rivera staged a coup d'état. With the support of the king, he became the new head of state of Spain. He developed a new strategy in the Moroccan War. He ordered the Spanish to retreat behind established lines. Then the use of chemical bombs began. Mustard gas was used for the first time in July 1923 at the Battle of Tizi Azza. Mustard gas was dropped from aeroplanes for the first time in attacks from June 1924, exactly one year before the Geneva "Protocol for the Prohibition of the Use in War of Asphyxiating, Poisonous or Similar Gases and of Bacteriological Agents" was signed. Various chemical substances were now used on a massive scale: Phosgene, diphosgene, chloropicrin and, above all, mustard gas. Some 127 bombers were used in the campaign, dropping around 1,680 bombs a day. A total of over 500 tonnes or 10,000 containers of mustard gas were used. The main targets were the souks, i.e. the markets and other busy places where the civilian population gathered. But farmers working in agriculture were also bombed.

The warfare with poison gas achieved its goal. The gas remained in the valleys of the Rif Mountains for longer and had a much greater effect than when it was used on flat plains. At first it was barely noticeable, so that people could not defend themselves against it. For the victims of the poison gas attacks, the poison gas caused burning pain and wounds that were difficult to heal and usually fatal. The mustard gas stuck to food. Eating it caused ulcers on the digestive organs and ultimately led to death. And the Riffians did not know how to get rid of the contamination.

This poisoning strategy with mustard gas was planned by the German chemist Dr Hugo

Stoltzenberg for the Spanish military. He also developed the poison gas with ingredients so that it would stick for weeks. To avoid becoming victims of these poison gas attacks themselves, the Spanish withdrew far out of the country. The central Rif was cleared by members of the Spanish army until the beginning of 1925, as was the west near Tétouan up to a fortified line.

Abd-el-Krim had asked the Red Cross in Geneva to help the victims of the poison gas war. However, Spain denied any use of poison gas, so that a mission of the Red Cross was ultimately not realized.

6. France's role in the Rif War

France had repeatedly supported Abd-el-Krim and the Rif Republic in order to curb Spanish influence. But now the attitude towards the Rif Republic changed because France also feared for its position in Morocco. French troops marched into the Ouerrha Valley in 1924 and defeated the Berber tribes there without much bloodshed. The Ouerrha Valley was rich in agriculture. France then cut off the entire food supply of the Rif Republic from its protectorate, which was disastrous for the Berbers in the north. Due to the chemical contamination of nature and the population, the already meagre agriculture of the Rif Republic had come to a standstill, and agricultural products had already had to be imported from the Ouerrha Valley. They were therefore dependent on this supply of food from the French protectorate zone, and a major famine was imminent. Abd-el-Krim's troops were forced to attack the Ouerrha Valley, but were defeated by the French. Abd-el-Krim's troops had once again launched a major offensive against the French zone in Morocco in April 1925 and attacked the French in the north of the Ouerrha Valley. They had come within 40 kilometres of Fes, the country's capital. They also threatened an important railway link between Algeria and Morocco, but without ever stopping it, as that was not their aim. This led to military agreements between the French and the Spanish. The French Minister of War, Paul Painlevé, met with the Spanish head of state, Primo de Rivera, in Madrid on 17 June 1925 and decided to fight together, starting with a naval blockade. The French Marshal Pétain was sent to Morocco on 13 July 1925 with supreme command of the expeditionary forces to defeat Abd-el-Krim in unison with the Spanish. Around 500,000 French and Spanish soldiers were deployed in the rest of the war with artillery, tanks and aeroplanes. The Rifkabylians of Abd-el-Krim, on the other hand, only had around 7,000 fighters. The French attacked from the south and drove the Berbers far beyond the Ouerrha Valley into the Rif Mountains. Thus began a war on two fronts for Abd-el-Krim, with the mighty France becoming the main belligerent. And Abd-el-Krim had to deploy forces in the south and thus weaken the north.

7. The landing at Al Hoceïma

Spanish and French troops had advanced far after major attacks in the summer of 1925. On 8 September 1925, Spanish troops landed in the bay of Al Hoceïma, known as Alhucemas in Spanish, in north-eastern Morocco with the help of the French fleet and the air force. It was the first airborne operation in history. It is considered a precursor to the Allied boat landings in Normandy during the Second World War. More than 10,000 Spanish soldiers landed during these days. One of the commanders was Colonel Francisco Franco, the later dictator of Spain from 1936 to 1975, who had been deputy

head of a Spanish foreign legion in Morocco since 1920. He was to have a major influence on the Spanish victory in Morocco.

This landing at Al Hoceïma was the turning point of the Rif War and the end of Abd-el-Krim's political influence. At first, there were many battles between the Spanish and Abd-el-Krim's troops. On 2 October, however, the Spanish troops marched into Abd-el-Krim's capital Ajdir, also spelled Axdir, which was only 7 km away from Al Hoceïma. They destroyed the main mosque and plundered the city. Every captured Riffian was executed. On 10 September 1925, Marshal Pétain's troops launched an offensive from the south into the entire Rif region. The following year, the Spanish also advanced further into the Rif region. The intense battle lasted a year and ended with the victory of the French and Spanish armies over the forces of Abd-el-Krim.

On 27 May 1926, Abd-el-Krim surrendered to the French in Targuist. But the war continued, including the use of poison gas. On 10 July 1927, the last tribe of Riffians ended the battle. The Spaniards had won. Abd-el-Krim was sent into exile by the French to the island of La Réunion, from where he fled twenty years later on a transport to Egypt, where he died in 1963. He did not return to Morocco, although King Mohammed V of Morocco invited him back after independence in 1956. This was because Abd-el-Krim still saw Morocco's strong connection to the former colonial power France.

The protectorate of Spanish Morocco only existed until 1956, after which the Spanish troops withdrew to Ceuta and Melilla.

8. Effects of the poison war in the Rif

The massive use of poison gas in the Rif War served Mussolini's fascist Italy as a model for its brutal war against Abyssinia from 1935-1941, with massive use of poison gas against the Abyssinians under Haile Selassie.

The effects of the use of poison gas in the Rif region of Morocco a hundred years ago can still be seen today. Contamination with mustard gas means that the area around Al Hoceïma still has a high rate of lung cancer. The Moroccan "Association for the Defence of Poison Gas Victims in the Rif" (ADVGT) believes that the toxic effects of the bombings in the Rif region are still having an effect today, almost 100 years later, or that mutations caused by the chemical weapons are leading to this. However, no scientific study has yet been carried out on the connection between the use of chemical weapons and the known extraordinarily high cancer rate in the region, especially lung cancer. This would be important, however, as 60 per cent of patients at the cancer centre in the Moroccan capital Rabat come from the Rif region, where the war took place 100 years ago. Many are descendants of victims of the Rif War. It is also unclear whether poison is still having an effect or whether mutations caused by the poison gas contamination are to blame.

On 7 September 2005, the Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya party submitted a bill to the Spanish Congress of Deputies demanding that Spain recognise the systematic use of chemical weapons against the population of the Rif Mountains. The bill was rejected by 33 votes to three in the Constitutional Committee of the Congress on 14 February 2007.

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