

# THE RIFF WAR OF INDEPENDENCE

By ALLEN HUTT

“**T**HE Tunisian is a woman, the Algerian is a man, but the Moor is a lion.” So runs the picturesque old Moorish proverb : and the fortunes of war in the Riff have grimly underlined it. A handful of Berber highlanders, armed only with rifles and a few machine guns, have not only kept at bay, but are actually pressing hard the mighty war machine of a first-class imperialist Power. Despite the severity of the French censorship and the guarded or artificially optimistic character of the *communiqués*, the true facts are leaking out.

France has been forced to evacuate the long line of blockhouses north of the Wergha valley so carefully erected last year. Revolt is seething among the formerly “loyal” tribes—the heather is in truth ablaze under the feet of the French invader. This has enabled the Riffs to break the French front at several points, to come within an ace of cutting the Fez-Taza railway (the line of communication between Morocco and Algeria), and even to threaten seriously Fez itself, the capital and French G.H.Q. Important French fortified posts, such as Wezzan at the western extremity of the front and Taza at its eastern extremity, are in a precarious position. Fighting is practically continuous over a 200-mile front : and the situation, from the French point of view, is at best one of stalemate, as *The Times* frankly admits. It would be truer to say that, so far, the honours are with the Riffs.

Just how grave the situation is it has been possible to gather from a number of recent incidents. There is, for instance, M. Painlevé's aeroplane flight to Morocco ; there is the appointment of a new Commander-in-Chief to supersede Marshal Lyautey in the actual conduct of the war ; lastly, and most significant of all, we have learnt of the immediate<sup>1</sup> French evacuation of the Ruhr, and the transfer of the Moroccan troops so released to the Riff front. Jacques Doriot, in his article in *THE LABOUR MONTHLY* for June,

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<sup>1</sup> This was written on July 15.

prophesied that "Lyautey has a tough job before him . . . The war will be long and deadly." Events have proved the correctness of his prediction up to the hilt.

Events have brought even more striking confirmation of the justice of Doriot's contention that the war in Morocco is simply a classical instance of a colonial war, a war of imperialist aggression. For, by great good fortune, there has fallen into the hands of our friend a confidential document of a kind that only sees the light of day once in a generation : this he read in the Chamber of Deputies, and its authenticity is attested by the fact that its author, M. Vatin-Pérignon, the chief of Marshal Lyautey's personal staff, immediately resigned. The document is in the form of a private letter from M. Vatin-Pérignon, at Fez, to M. Pierre Lyautey, nephew of the Marshal, in France. It is dated May 25, 1925.

The letter denies that the French were "surprised" by Abdel Krim, and affirms that "the Marshal was so well informed and had so thoroughly foreseen what was to happen that, from January, 1924, on (see his reports to the Government) he was preparing for war." The line of blockhouses north of the Wergha (which served the useful purpose of keeping the Riffs out of the fertile Wergha valley and enforced the French prohibition of trade between that valley and the Riff) was constructed—

in May, 1924, while Abdel Krim, his attention taken up by the Spaniards, could not react. . . . This front was established on a strategic line . . . without striking a blow. After May, 1924, this front was reinforced, fortified and its communications with the base secured by a system of roads, bridges, and railways.

This system, it is explained, was intended to "hold" the enemy until the arrival of reinforcements.

These reinforcements were arranged for and ready either in Algeria, or in France. That is a secret of general mobilisation which has not been and must not be revealed.

It is foolish, the letter continues, to talk of "surprise" and "lack of foresight." "We were not surprised by a sudden attack." The question is then raised of what is to be done with "the enemy, as we cannot invade his territory," *i.e.*, by reason of it being in the Spanish zone.

Either he will treat with us. But what will be the value of that for the future? Or he will continue to attack us, now on one point, now on another: which means a perpetual state of war. Or, in agreement with the other Powers, we can invade his territory, and that is a very big business (*c'est une très grosse affaire*).

M. Vatin-Pérignon concludes by stating that:—

The Marshal is entirely and fundamentally in agreement with the Government, and the latter is doing all that it can, all that it should. The duty of all good Frenchmen, who do not forget that our future in Morocco, that is to say, our future in the Mediterranean (Algeria, Tunis), is at stake, is to support the Government on this point with all their strength.

He adds significantly:—

As for personal matters: contact with Herriot and Boncour is assured. Blum, as you say, is in touch with Berthelot,<sup>1</sup> and this contact is bound to become closer. For to-day I say no more.

The remainder of the letter is occupied with a highly revealing description of the business of securing "opportune comments" in the Press (including the Radical Press) and a flattering characterisation of the "good bunch" of war correspondents at Fez, who "have the right ideas" and whose dispatches will "dissipate certain misunderstandings and certain legends."

As M. Vatin-Pérignon sapiently observes, the war in Morocco "is a very big business." And in whose interest? The answer is simple. In the interest of the *Banque de Paris et des Pays-Bas*. Imperialism, the era of monopoly, is especially distinguished by the export of capital to the "backward" countries. This is naturally the case in Morocco: and out of a total of 483 million francs of French capital in Morocco, the *Banque de Paris et des Pays-Bas* controls over a half. It controls a capital of 198,250,000 frs. directly, through having its directors on the boards of the principal Moroccan concerns: and a capital of 48,000,000 frs. indirectly through subsidiary companies.

Thus, out of four French directors on the board of the State Bank of Morocco, two (one of them the managing director) are directors of the *Banque de Paris*. The State Bank has a capital of 15,000,000 frs. and its average dividend of late years has been 20 per cent. We find the same situation in the Commercial Bank of Morocco. The *Banque de Paris* has four of its directors on the

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<sup>1</sup> Permanent Secretary at the French Foreign Office.

Moroccan Railways Board. It has also interests in the Franco-Spanish Fez-Tangier railway. It dominates the chief electricity supply companies, such as the *Société Générale d'Énergie Électrique*, and has formed a prospecting company for hydro-electric development.

The Bank also controls the Morocco Breweries, the Maghreb Milling Company, which virtually monopolises the flour trade of the country, and the Municipal Slaughterhouses Company, which in effect controls the whole cattle market and has the concession for constructing all slaughterhouses, markets, &c. It has interests in three important land companies, the *Société Marocaine d'Exploitation Agricole*, the *Société Agricole du Maroc*, and the Sebou River Company. It is equally interested in constructional concerns, through the Casablanca Development Company and the Morocco Lime and Building Materials Company: this latter company, whose dividends—on a capital of 14,000,000 frs.—increased from 6 per cent. in 1917 to 20 per cent. in 1920, it was responsible for founding. Two of its directors are on the board of "Civil Construction," a company which undertakes general building operations. For port and harbour works it has interests in the *Société des Ports Marocains de Mèhédia-Venitra et Rabat-Salé*. It likewise participates in the Morocco International Tobacco Company, which paid over 30 per cent. in 1922.

This picture of giant imperialist monopoly is completed by the *Compagnie Générale du Maroc* (capital 20,000,000 frs.), whose chairman is also the chairman of the *Banque de Paris*. The *Compagnie Générale* controls a dozen of the most important companies in Morocco: its objects being genially described as "all operations likely to favour the development of Morocco."<sup>1</sup> Altogether, the *Banque de Paris et des Pays-Bas* is known to control at least twenty-five companies in Morocco—probably more. And behind it stands the tremendous power of Standard Oil.

It was into the grasp of this octopus that defeated Spain handed over her nominal concessions for the iron deposits in the Riff. Now it may be true that the importance and the richness of these deposits has been over-estimated: none the less, the analogous deposits in

<sup>1</sup> These facts were made public by Jacques Doriot in a speech in the French Chamber (February 4, 1925). No attempt was made to deny them.

Algeria and Tunis produce a non-phosphoric ore containing 50 per cent. of metal ; and the mining companies in those two countries pay anything from 40 per cent. to 150 per cent. in dividends, while the value of their shares has increased seven to forty-fold. This is, indeed, to quote our admirable Vatin-Pérignon once more, "very big business" : and it gives us the real key to the war.

How has the French Labour movement reacted to this challenge? Does not the spirit of Jaurès, who was such a determined opponent of the whole Moroccan adventure, still live? It does : but not in the Socialist Party—not, that is to say, in its leaders.

While pursuing faithfully its will o' the wisp of a "left" Government—or to put it crudely, coalition with the Liberal bourgeoisie—the Parliamentary Socialist Party has been unable to escape the brutal fact that by its continued support of that Government it is actually sharing the guilt for a colonial war. The Paris correspondent of the most respectable of English Liberal newspapers has written :—

The position of the Socialist Parliamentary Party becomes daily more embarrassed. A revolt against the leadership has begun to manifest itself, particularly in the provinces. War in Morocco is extremely unpopular with the masses.

*Manchester Guardian*, May 30, 1925.

With *the best will in the world* the Socialists cannot bring themselves to support the Moroccan campaign. . . . The Socialists, in fact, are faced with a serious dilemma. . . . The Moroccan campaign is intensely unpopular in the country. Every day the party is losing adherents to the Communists. . . . The Socialists cannot any longer identify themselves with the task of Government even indirectly without compromising their principles and their future with the working class.

*Manchester Guardian*, June 18, 1925.

Even so, the Party has not had the courage or the will to vote against the Painlevé Government. On May 29, after days of crisis, it was appeased because the motion of confidence contained a phrase repudiating "every sort of imperialism involving conquest and adventure" (*sic!*). But dissension within the Party was rapidly growing. Socialist branches were passing strongly-worded resolutions of protest. A "left" wing began to form in the Party, grouping itself round the newspaper *L'Étincelle*, of which M. Maurice Maurin, a member of the national executive of the

Party, is editor. A referendum was taken of the Socialist deputies, and showed a majority of one for withdrawing support from the Government.

Yet when the day of the vote came, on June 24, sixty-five Socialists supported the Government, thirty-seven abstained, and only two voted with the Communist opposition. This, too, for a motion which "condemned" the "propaganda [Communist, of course] which imperils the lives of our troops as well as France's work of civilisation and her will to peace." On this occasion the well-known Socialist leader, M. Renaudel,

accused the Communists of having encouraged Abdel Krim to refuse the terms of peace offered by the French, declaring that French colonial civilisation, in spite of certain justifiable criticisms, represented liberty and French ideals. He went on to demand a policy which would nullify the effects of Communist propaganda.

*Daily Herald*, June 25, 1925.

M. Renaudel's "justifiable criticisms" no doubt refer to the definite military orders issued to French officers in Morocco to fire on labourers in the fields and to return only the numbers of "rebels" killed or wounded, "*without specifying age or sex.*"

The latest stage in this vulgar tragi-comedy has been the abstention of the Socialist Party in the vote of the credits (183 million francs) for the war. On this occasion M. Léon Blum observed :—

We could not, and we will not, vote against the credits. . . . We do not ask the Government to evacuate Morocco. . . . We would vote for the Government if it was in danger. . . . In spite of all, we are fighting against something which, in its essential characteristics, is an aggression, and on this ground we do not deny France the right to defend herself.

*Journal Officiel*, July 9, 1925.

We are not surprised that M. Blum is referred to in the Vatin-Pérignon letter as in "contact."<sup>1</sup>

And as with the Socialist Party, so with the orthodox leaders of Trade Unionism. M. Léon Jouhaux has written pontifically that :—

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<sup>1</sup> The same authority, it will be recalled, refers to the "assured contact" with M. Paul-Boncour, the extreme right-wing Socialist leader. On this gentleman, see the "Notes of the Month," *THE LABOUR MONTHLY*, April, 1925, Vol. VII, No. 4, p. 200.

The working class does not associate itself with the incitements of demagogues : the pretended internationalism of the Third International is merely an appeal to the narrowest nationalism. . . . The working class is against any *extension* of military operations which should have as its aim the carrying of the war into the former Spanish zone.

The Government has denied that it intends to pursue aims contrary to these : let us have confidence in it.

*Le Peuple*, May 23, 1925.

M. Jouhaux does not, therefore, oppose the war : in this he is not at one with the mass of French Trade Unionists, as the many anti-war resolutions passed by Trade Unions show.

Where, then, is the spirit of Jaurès to be found ? Not, as we have seen, among Jaurès' own Socialist and Trade Union contemporaries. To discover, eleven years after his murder, the anti-imperialist spirit of the great tribune, we must turn to the Communist Party.

The Communist fraction alone in the Chamber has stood solid against the imperialist Painlevé Government. Jacques Doriot in particular has distinguished himself : and the Berlin *Rose Fahne* very justly put up on its report of one of his speeches the proud headline—"Liebknecht Lives !" *L'Humanité*, alone among the Paris Press, has raised its voice day after day against the iniquitous war against a little people fighting valiantly for their freedom. The Communist Party alone has had over 120 of its members arrested for their courageous anti-militarist propaganda. The Communist Party alone—together with the C.G.T.U.—has taken the initiative, through the "Committee of Action," in fighting for working-class unity to end the war. The measure of its success has been visible in the recent workers' congresses in Paris and Lille, attended by hundreds of Socialists, C.G.T. Trade Unionists and non-Party workers.

The Communist Party of France has opened a new page in the history of the working-class movement. For, as a result of its efforts, we are witnessing the first organised intervention of the West European proletariat in a colonial war : the first case in which the workers of an imperialist country have, by deeds and not only by words, made common cause with one of "their" colonial peoples in revolt.

A last word on the international complications of the Riff war. Franco-Spanish co-operation is now, after the Madrid Conference, a *fait accompli*—on paper. It remains to be seen how far Madrid is really prepared to burn its fingers a third time. Italy is watching the increasing difficulties of France with scarcely concealed delight coupled with a certain alarm lest a Riff victory should have unfortunate repercussions in her own North African colonies. She is, however, at no cost prepared to submit to any such infringement of the *status quo* in Morocco as would be implied by a French invasion of the Spanish zone.

The attitude of Britain is similar. There is a singular air of smug satisfaction about the reports of French reverses in our bourgeois Press. British imperialism, in fact, is very far from sorry to see the hold of France on Morocco so seriously challenged : more especially as behind France (*i.e.*, the *Banque de Paris et des Pays-Bas*) stands Britain's greater rival, American imperialism—represented by Standard Oil. And yet—there is another side to the picture : for the last thing Britain wants is a decisive victory for Abdel Krim, which would set the whole world of Islam aflame ; which would be a standing inspiration and encouragement to the subject peoples of Egypt, Palestine, Arabia, Irak and India to go and do likewise.

Torn between these two extremes, our masters are revealed as in the grip of a typical imperialist contradiction. To-day they send a Note to Spain firmly refusing to intervene in any way. To-morrow it is almost as likely that they will, with a sudden swing of the pendulum, assist "our French and Spanish allies" in a naval blockade. One senses their desire to clear out of Tangier and so to escape any kind of obligations in Morocco. But they dread the thought of Tangier becoming a French Gibraltar. So they stand irresolute—literally not knowing where they are. The Riff war of independence has exposed, as in a lightning flash, the rent in the veil of the imperialist temple.