

SPAIN'S LEGIÓN

Partly modelled on France's iconic Foreign Legion, this elite Spanish outfit has been on the frontline of colonial conflicts and internal upheaval for nearly a century

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Left: A member of the Spanish Legion, while on exercise with NATO forces in Sardinia, Italy

Spain's debacle in its 1898 war with the US came as the final nail in the coffin for the country's armed forces. For three centuries, the Spanish army had held sway over Europe as the continent's dominant military force. The steady loss of Spain's overseas colonies gradually undermined this image of invincibility. The final blow of 1898 saw the last of these possessions – Cuba, the Philippines, Guam and Puerto Rico – fall into American hands.

The once mighty Spanish army, celebrated on canvas in Diego Velázquez's 17th century masterpiece *The Surrender Of Breda*, had sustained a mortal blow to its prestige. The army's role was now reduced to domestic issues, such as putting down workers' revolts,

mainly by anarchists – actions that effectively marginalised it from Spanish society.

At the turn of the 20th century, Britain and most notably France turned their gaze south towards Africa. The carve-up of vast tribal lands of what is today the Kingdom of Morocco constituted a largely uncharted and tempting prize. The Anglo-French 'entente cordiale' of 1904 acknowledged Spain's strategic position in the region, which was of particular interest to Britain to maintain her dominion of the Strait of Gibraltar. Spain was not a signatory to the original treaty, however in 1912 the Franco-Spanish agreement established the Rif, a mostly mountainous area in the northern part of Morocco, as a Spanish protectorate. The lion's share went to France, thanks to a pact negotiated

with the UK that gave Britain a free hand in imposing colonial rule in Egypt.

In September 1921 the Rif's 550,000-strong Berber population rebelled and proclaimed their independence from Spanish occupation, under their leader the legendary tribal warrior Mohamed Abd el-Krim, who was proclaimed head of state in 1923 when the Republic of the Rif was formally constituted. In spite of being the birthplace of the term 'guerrilla' during the Peninsular Wars, Spain's regular armed forces were not up to combating an insurgency like the one they now faced in Africa. In steps Lieutenant Colonel José Millán-Astray, a career officer who had served with distinction in the 1898 Spanish-American War. This charismatic officer, much-esteemed by those who served under him in the Philippines and North Africa,

Legión troops photographed before going into action near Tizzi-Aza, Morocco, in 1924, during the Rif War

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'LONG LIVE DEATH! DOWN WITH INTELLECTUALS!'

In 1926 Millán-Astray was promoted to Brigadier, an honour that helped mitigate the grief of having lost his right eye as well as his left arm in two separate engagements with the Rif guerrillas. His disability once became the target of a vitriolic attack, at what is arguably the most celebrated public speaking confrontation in modern Spanish history. As an orator Millán-Astray was renowned for his ability to mesmerise audiences in Spain and across Europe.

In 1936, a few months after the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, Millán-Astray shared a platform at the University of Salamanca with its chancellor, the Basque novelist and philosopher Miguel de Unamuno. At one point, an outburst of patriotic, pro-Franco slogans echoed through the auditorium. This was the cue for Millán-Astray to leap to his feet and shout, "Long live death! Down with intellectuals!" as a retort to a jibe by Unamuno at his opponent's physical disabilities. "General Millán-Astray is an invalid. There is no need to say this with whispered tones. He is an invalid of war." He followed this up by saying, "You will win. But you will not win over. To do that, it is necessary to persuade." This, he insisted, Millán-Astray was incapable of achieving. At that, Unamuno stalked out of the hall, on the arm of Franco's wife Carmen Polo. He was placed under house arrest and died ten weeks later. Millán-Astray lived on as a national hero until 1954.

General Millán-Astray (right) and Francisco Franco, leader and deputy of the Spanish Legion



identified the need for a Spanish equivalent to the French Foreign Legion, which had been serving their country since 1831. The objective was to provide an effective frontline force in what was becoming an increasingly difficult and expensive colonial war. A second motivation was to raise a force of well-trained troops to substitute for regular army conscripts.

In Millán-Astray's own words, "A long career in Africa, serving with the indigenous police force, the regular army and the Serrallo Infantry Regiment [headquartered in Spain's Ceuta protectorate where the Legion was raised], gave rise to the idea of creating a Foreign Legion, taking into account the results obtained by the French Foreign Legion after the First World War. One might add a note of self-confidence, in that we believed ourselves capable of achieving equal success." The new corps was originally known as the Foreign Tercios, a name that was not to the liking of Millán-Astray, who proposed using the name Legion. He remained an officer of unshakable beliefs throughout his career. "The State," he said, "is absolutely sovereign within the confines of its national borders and can do whatever it deems necessary to safeguard its interests. Recruiting foreigners into the ranks is a corollary of this principle."

Quite unexpectedly, Spain's 20th century history began in Morocco. In 1909, an army column was ambushed near the North African protectorate of Melilla, causing more than 1,000 casualties among Spanish troops. Defeat at the hands of an emerging superpower

"THE LEGION'S FOUNDER LAUDED THE FUTURE DICTATOR OF SPAIN AS 'THE MOST DISTINGUISHED LEGIONNAIRE'"

like the US was one thing – the massacre of a Spanish army unit by a band of tribal guerrillas constituted a humiliation that revealed a woeful lack of training and proper equipment. There was mounting resistance throughout Spain to young, inexperienced recruits being shipped off to defend a North African enclave that meant little if anything to the populace at large.

It was this unpopular war that paved the way for Millán-Astray's initiative. One of his closest associates was a 28-year-old soldier named Francisco Franco, who was shortly to become Europe's youngest army general. Franco travelled to Madrid from his headquarters in the northern city of Oviedo in late 1920 to meet with Millán-Astray, who appointed him the Legion's second-in-command. The Legion's founder lauded the future dictator of Spain as "the most distinguished Legionnaire". Recruitment posters began to appear in railway stations, public squares and markets, proclaiming, "Enlist in the Foreign Tercios! Spaniards and foreigners, those who love the armed forces and its glory, those who want to partake in campaigns – join up!"

The only requirement for enlistment was a maximum age of 40 and good health. No proof



Spanish Legion troops and armour during the Rif War, in 1925

A soldier of the Legion during the 'Cristo de la Buena Muerte' in Jaen, Andalusia, Spain, 2017

of identity was needed. "We asked for no ID cards, only a medical examination," says Millán-Astray. "As for a recruit's name, real or assumed made no difference. The Legion welcomes its men and asks no questions about who they are or where they come from. If anyone has regrets or fears death, let him make it known in his medical by saying 'I have a sore throat.'" It is noteworthy that the title of the Legion's hymn is 'The Betrothed Of Death'. Foreign volunteers initially made up a fifth of the ranks. They came from France, Germany, Italy, Bulgaria and other European countries, as well as from many South American former colonies.

The Legion's baptism by fire was the seven-year Rif rebellion, a war that gained international notoriety, to the extent that in 1925 Mohamed Abd el-Krim was featured on the cover of *Time* magazine. This messianic Berber warlord successfully routed the Spanish at the Battle of Annual in 1921, almost always referred to in Spain as the Disaster of Annual. Spanish losses were estimated at some 10,000 troops. He then pursued a dogged but exhausting guerrilla campaign which eventually drew in French African units as well, until his surrender in July 1927.

Until 1925 the Spanish Legion, under the command of Millán-Astray and later Franco, was always in the vanguard of defensive campaigns. In that year, the Legion joined forces with their French counterpart and fought side-by-side until the end of hostilities in 1927. Noteworthy among these actions were the defence of Melilla, the bloody withdrawal from

the Diebalan highlands and the successful amphibious landing at Alhucemas Bay. It was this last campaign in 1925, the first amphibious landing in history involving the use of tanks and massive seaborne air support, that spelled the beginning of the end for the Berber resistance. The Rif War was a highly costly conflict for the Legion, which suffered some 8,000 dead and wounded, about 39 per cent of the corps' total manpower for that period.

There was no doubt about where the Legion's sympathies lay during the three years of civil war in Spain. They were unflinchingly behind the military uprising that eventually crushed the government of the Republic. It could hardly be otherwise – Franco commanded the best-trained, most battle-hardened troops of the Spanish army, the 47,000 soldiers of the Legion as well as the contingent of Moorish troops. Even before the July 1936 rebellion, the Legion had proven itself willing to act decisively in 1934 when Asturian miners who

Below: Spanish foreign Legion troops celebrate the relief of Tifarutin, Spanish Morocco in 1923

Spain's Legion sought to emulate the success of the country's elite Tercio infantry



REBIRTH OF THE TERCIO

Tercio (literally 'third') was the name used by Spanish infantry regiments in the 16th and 17th centuries. The Legion's original name was Tercio de extranjeros (literally 'Tercio of Foreigners'), which changed to Tercio de Marruecos (Tercio of Morocco) in 1925. In 1940, the name 'Foreign' was dropped and the corps acquired its definitive title of Legion.

The idea was to link this fighting force with the mighty army that dominated European battlefields in the glory days of the Spanish Empire. The name was created by the warrior King Carlos I of Spain, the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V. The first Tercio was raised to protect Spanish interests in Italy and the Mediterranean. These were

feared units, deemed invincible until Spain's defeat by the French at the Battle of Rocroi in 1635. After that, Spain abandoned the Tercio system and began using linear battalions like other European powers. There are numerous theories on the origin of the name Tercio. A widely-accepted explanation is that it was inspired by the Roman Legions, who gave the name Tercia to their troops deployed in Hispania. Other historians claim that the Spanish army in Italy was organised into units of 3,000 men each in Lombardy, Sicily and Naples. Still others point to the fact that the Spanish Tercios were composed of three types of fighters: pikemen, shield-bearers and crossbowmen. The Legion's modern coat-of-arms displays its three historic pieces of kit, which are the halberd, crossbow and arquebus.



WOMEN OF THE LEGION

In spite of its image as the ultimate hardcore male redoubt, women have played a role in the Legion since its earliest days. They would accompany the columns into battle as nurses and canteen managers, often doing both jobs at once. Like the men, they suffered deprivations and never flinched from courageously bearing arms where circumstances required.

Several women held medals for bravery. Rosario Vázquez was awarded two silver crosses for heroism in the Moroccan and Asturias campaigns. Teresa González attended wounded Legionnaires of the 7th Bandera, while Vicenta Valdivia devoted her entire working life to the Legion. Millán-Astray expressed words of praise for women volunteers, "Women, when driven by a sense of honour, are not given to half measures. Women are the bastion of our race and we should be inspired by their fervent and heroic patriotism."

This was many years before 1989, when women were officially admitted into active service in the armed forces. The first woman to wear the Legion's uniform was the army medic Pilar Hernández Frutos. In 1990 she was assigned to the 7th Bandera, where she was put in charge of the battalion's medical services. She also served with a tactical unit on peacekeeping missions in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Albania in 1997.

"WOMEN ARE THE BASTION OF OUR RACE AND WE SHOULD BE INSPIRED BY THEIR FERVENT AND HEROIC PATRIOTISM"



A female soldier of the legion at a procession during Holy Week in Malaga, Andalusia



A member of the Legion takes part in a religious procession, in Andalusia, 1960

rose up against the entry of a right wing party into the Spanish government. The strike quickly developed into an insurgency that took as its role model the Soviet revolution. The strike was brutally put down by the Legion and Moroccan colonial troops, with the death toll put at around 2,000, among miners, troops and even some 33 clergymen.

The military uprising against the Republic was in fact first proclaimed in Spain's North African territories on 17 July 1936, a day before the attempted coup on the mainland. Within 24 hours, the Legion had taken Spain's overseas bases for the insurgents. Two days later, a contingent of Legionnaires was dispatched to the Peninsula under General Emilio Mola, who initially only managed to take one major city, Seville. General Franco made his way to Spain's North African enclave of Ceuta from his base in the Canary Islands, where he assumed command of the colonial forces. Franco mobilised the Legion as shock troops in his invasion of mainland Spain.

By shuttling the 5th Bandera, or battalion, across the Mediterranean, the pudgy, squeaky-voiced general from Galicia could lay claim to having organised the first air bridge in military history. Thanks to aircraft provided by his German allies, Franco eventually flew more than 23,000 men of the Army of Africa across the Strait of Gibraltar.

At the outbreak of hostilities, the Legion had six Banderas spread across Spanish North Africa. Their intervention was to prove crucial in the first months of the uprising. Franco immediately raised two new Banderas. With the help of German and Italian aircraft, they were flown into Andalucía, much of which was already in rebel hands. In less than a month, the entire Legion was fighting on Spanish soil. Franco was determined to lead his troops direct to the capital. He put together two battalions, a platoon of regulars, a company of sappers and a unit of gunners into his Madrid Column which, without much difficulty on its march north, swept away resistance in every town

in its path. By September 1936, Franco had been proclaimed supreme commander of the Nationalist army as well as the Legion.

At the end of the Spanish Civil War, most the Legion's Banderas were disbanded and the original Tercios returned to their North African bases. They would once more see overseas action, this time against the Sahara Liberation Army, before Spain relinquished control of the Spanish Sahara to Morocco in 1976, a year after Franco's death.

Along with the rest of the Armed Forces, the Legion has struggled to overcome its image in the public eye as a repressive tool of the Franco dictatorship. Spaniards today are aware that the Legion, with the end of its role in the Sahara, has adopted new functions and responsibilities, much of which involves cooperation with international fighting forces and peacekeeping duties. The Legion, which is the most enthusiastically applauded unit in Spain's annual Armed Forces Day parade, remains faithful to its traditions and its history. Although now totally integrated into the army, the corps retains its unique character. Foreign volunteers once accounted for around ten per cent of the ranks. They now number at most one per cent and are drawn exclusively from Spanish-speaking countries.

The troops are trained to deal with new tasks, from riot control to rescue operations and disaster relief. They have also accompanied the Spanish Army into combat zones abroad, such as Afghanistan, and have been involved in peacekeeping missions around the world, from Africa and Asia to Latin America. "The Legion is a unit of the Spanish Armed Forces," says Brigadier General Miguel Ballenilla García de Gamarra. "In spite of the Legion's enduring esprit de corps, which is linked to its history and legends, the public view today is that of a force prepared to confront the most demanding challenges. This in turn has an impact on the Legion's officers and rank and file, who demand more of themselves to fulfil what society expects of the Legion."