

Group C

European Colonialism in Morocco: Portuguese, Spanish, and French Influence

Portuguese colonialism:

During the period of Portuguese imperialism, from the 15th to 18th centuries, Portugal established an empire that included territories in what is today Morocco. In particular, Portugal claimed part of the southwestern coast of the Mediterranean and stretches of Morocco's Atlantic coastline. They maintained many fortified cities in Morocco over a period of 354 years (from 1415 to 1769), including Mazagan and Asilah.

The city of Mazagan is one example of the successes and tragedies of Portuguese rule in Morocco. A port city on the Atlantic Coast of Africa, just south of Casablanca, Mazagan was a fortified city, surrounded by stone walls built by the Portuguese in the early 1500s. The Portuguese also built a citadel, other military fortifications, and an armory, which later became a cistern to store water. The Portuguese used the fortifications to defend against the attacks of local Amazigh (Berbers), pirates operating out of Salé, and later the Moroccan monarchy.

In 1769, when local Moroccan forces drove the Portuguese out of their Moroccan holdings, the Portuguese were forced to leave Mazagan. But before they left, they mined the old town, destroying it and killing many Moroccans. The destruction was so great, and the fear of additional mines so vivid that it was some time before a new city was built on the site. The new city was given the name 'El Jadida' (meaning 'the new city'), which is what it is called today.

Meanwhile, Portuguese colonialism in Morocco had a major effect on the Portuguese too. The Battle of Alcacer Quibir (Battle of the Three Kings) transformed Portuguese dynastic rule. Further, many of the soldiers driven out of Mazagan resettled in Brazil, thus affecting South America. In other words, Portuguese imperial control of the Moroccan coast had long-lasting effects outside of Morocco as well as inside it.

Spanish colonialism:

Historically, Spain and Morocco have always been closely connected, separated by only nine miles of the Mediterranean Sea at its narrowest point. Spain often had a strong influence in northern Morocco. In 1912, Spanish rule in this part of North Africa was formalized in international law when France and Spain agreed to the boundaries of the Spanish 'Protectorate' in Morocco.

From 1921-1926, a major rebellion, under an Amazigh (Berber) leader named Abd el-Krim, broke out in the Rif region. This became known as the Rif War. The Spanish lost tens of thousands of soldiers and required the help of France to put down the revolt. Spanish troops used weapons outlawed since World War I (chemical weapons)

and other weapons/tactics that would eventually be used in World War II (tanks and aircraft used in amphibious landings).

To this day, both sides consider this war a significant part of their history. In the Spanish enclave of Melilla (one of two cities in northern Morocco that are still part of Spain), there is a memorial to the thousands of Spanish soldiers killed in the Rif War. Also the war led to instability in the Spanish government; a few years later, General Francisco Franco, a Spanish officer who became a general during his service in the Rif War, led the right-wing faction in the Spanish Civil War.

Moroccan Amazighs of the Rif region also consider this war important. On the one hand, they celebrate their struggle for independence against European colonialism. On the other, they believe that the extremely high childhood cancer rates in the Rif region today is caused by the continuing presence of chemical agents used against them during the war. (Possibly, unexploded canisters of gas that landed in the sea are breaking down after nearly a century and leaching carcinogenic chemicals into the sea near the beaches of El Hoceima.)

Both sides look to the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla as important to their national interests.

French colonialism:

Throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries, France and Britain competed to extend their control over Africa. Morocco managed to hold out until 1912, when a 'French Protectorate' was established by the Treaty of Fez. Despite Moroccan rebellions in the years leading up to and following the official French takeover, France ruled Morocco until 1956.

Under French rule, the Moroccan monarchy continued, but the sultan did not really have any independent authority. France brought some development: building roads and schools, modernizing the economy and political system. However, imperialism is designed to benefit the conquering country, so Frenchmen profited more than Moroccans.

One example is the introduction of French as the main language of education and administration. While Moroccans, up till today, benefit from fluency in a language widely spoken in Europe and Africa, the focus on French made it very hard for Moroccans to get an education. (In fact, the French educational system in Morocco was originally organized so as to "keep Moroccans in their place.") As late as the 1930s, 94% of Moroccan women and 90% of Moroccan men were illiterate. As French was the official language of government, Moroccans were also excluded from most administrative positions. There was, therefore, almost no native middle class.

Moroccan troops fought alongside the French in World War I and World War II. However, increasing nationalist agitation, ever louder demands for independence, and frequent armed revolts led France to agree to Morocco's independence in 1956.

Research Topics

1. What effects did Portuguese rule have on Morocco? (Consider both short-term and long-term effects, architectural heritage as well as political, social, and military consequences.)
2. What effects did Portuguese rule have on the Portuguese? (Consider both short-term and long-term effects, the period of Portuguese rule as well as its aftermath.)
3. What effects has the Rif War had on Moroccan and Spanish populations? (Look at the political, health, and social consequences of the war on both sides.)
4. What challenges/opportunities are faced by the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla today? (Be sure to explore how Spanish and Moroccan views of the cities' status differ.)
5. How is the period of the "French Protectorate" viewed differently by the French and by the Moroccans? (Look at the benefits Moroccans experienced due to French rule versus what they lost.)
6. Describe the relationship of France and Morocco since the achievement of Moroccan independence in 1956. (In what ways have the countries/peoples continued to be connected, and what factors have divided them?)