

ARTICLE

# Catalans and Rifis during the Wilsonian Moment: The Quest for Self-Determination in the Post-Versailles World

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Morocco and Catalonia are often mentioned as key elements in the crisis of Spanish liberalism, but little attention has been paid to the relation of these conflicts with the global developments of the 1920s. In their effort to break from Spain, Rifi rebels and Catalan separatists resorted to the League of Nations and were supported by sympathisers in British India, the United States, Latin America and Europe. Both separatist attempts utterly failed, but their campaigns provide new insights into the global connections (and dis-connections) of anti-imperialist and sub-national movements during the ‘Wilsonian moment’, and the strategies they developed to project their domestic agendas to the international sphere.

Spain was one of the European states that did not take part in the Paris Peace Conference of 1919.<sup>1</sup> Although it had remained neutral during the First World War, the country had eagerly sought to recover international prestige following its defeat in the Spanish-American War (1898) and the loss of its overseas empire. At the head of this diplomatic initiative stood King Alfonso XIII, who repeatedly offered his services to the Great Powers, especially with regard to furthering relations with his cousin, the Emperor Karl of Austria-Hungary, on behalf of whom he even proposed holding a peace conference in Madrid.<sup>2</sup> On other occasions, Alfonso XIII offered to act as the spokesman for Latin American republics in future peace negotiations.<sup>3</sup> US President Woodrow Wilson did not initially pay much attention to the Spanish offers (‘which always talk so big’, he once noted) but eventually grew tired of Alfonso XIII’s lust for renown, snapping: ‘Spain has no strength, the King of Spain no influence whatsoever. I do not think the Allies would meet his advances in any way except with polite rejection.’<sup>4</sup>

Spain’s low profile in the international arena was confirmed when, after the war ended and despite the king’s high hopes, it was not invited to join the Great Powers in Paris. Still, the signing of the Treaty of Versailles and the new world order it introduced eased the tensions that had built up during the war. Following a series of negotiations, Spain was invited to join the League of Nations as a non-permanent member, subject to re-election, and formally did so on 14 August 1919.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, the

<sup>1</sup> Margaret MacMillan, *Peacemakers: The Paris Conference of 1919 and Its Attempt to End War* (London: John Murray, 2001); Leonard V. Smith, *Sovereignty at the Paris Peace Conference of 1919* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018). For a recent survey on the literature about the Paris Peace Conference, see: Robert Gerwarth, ‘The Sky beyond Versailles: The Paris Peace Treaties in Recent Historiography’, *Journal of Modern History*, 93, 4 (2021), 896–930.

<sup>2</sup> Joseph Edward Willard to Woodrow Wilson, 11 May 1916, *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson Digital Edition* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, Rotunda, 2017) [PWW], available at <https://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/founders/WILS.html> (accessed 29 May 2020), 40, 19–20.

<sup>3</sup> Diary of Colonel House, 4 Nov. 1915, PWW, 35, 176.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Ritter to Arthur Hoffman, PWW, 20 Nov. 1915, 40, 461; Wilson to Robert Lansing, 31 Oct. 1915, 35, 144.

<sup>5</sup> On Spain’s role in the new international organisation see: Gerie B. Bledsoe, ‘Spain in the League of Nations, 1920–1931’, PhD thesis, Florida State University, 1972; Xosé M. Núñez Seixas, ‘Nacionalismo y política exterior: España y la política de minorías nacionales de la Sociedad de Naciones (1919–1936)’, *Hispania*, 55 (1995), 229–65.

seventh meeting of the council took place in San Sebastian in 1920, and the 1921 International Convention on Freedom of Transit was held in Barcelona, two events that symbolically recognised the country's diplomatic efforts during the Great War. These were modest achievements on the world stage but nonetheless constituted landmarks for a country struggling to recover international stature after the loss of its empire two decades earlier.

Spanish officials in Madrid, however, were not the only ones who turned their eyes to Geneva. Spain's self-declared enemies, foreign and domestic, also looked to the League of Nations to fulfil their political ambitions. This was the case of Rifi rebels in Morocco and separatists in Catalonia, who in the lapse of a few years sent a deluge of petitions to the new international organisation. This story has been largely neglected by historians, who have tended to study Spain's place in the post-Versailles world through the prism of international relations and the views of leading politicians and diplomats.<sup>6</sup> This article adopts an alternative, bottom-up approach that focuses on the agency of Spain's sworn enemies – domestic and foreign – and their global connections. When General Primo de Rivera staged a *coup d'état* in September 1923, putting an end to Spain's liberal parliamentary system, he blamed both the war in Morocco and 'brazen separatist propaganda' in Catalonia as reflecting the state of chaos that the general traced back to the colonial 'disaster' of 1898.<sup>7</sup> The Catalan and Rifi conflicts figure prominently in conventional accounts of the crisis of Spanish liberalism, but historians rarely compare or insert them into a broader global framework. This article will de-centre the study of self-determination movements in Morocco and Catalonia from national politics by examining how the movements were embedded in events occurring in other parts of the world at the same time. Analytically, this approach does not seek to diminish the importance of local and domestic factors, but rather to integrate them into global history debates in line with recent calls to 'globalise' national histories.<sup>8</sup>

The background and motivations of Catalan separatists and Rifi rebels differed markedly. Rifis appealed to the international community for recognition of the proto-republic they created following their victory over Spain in the Battle of Annual (1921). Catalan separatists, in turn, belonged to a small and radical group that was one of the first political organisations to rally for Catalonia's independence. Consequently, Rifi and Catalan demands emerged from very different realities, and yet they shared several common points. For starters, both were marginal actors in domestic and international politics that possessed limited financial resources and no voice in the Spanish congress or international forums. Nor could they boast of a high number of supporters, powerful friends, or the support of mass newspapers. But in their effort to break free from Spain, both the Rifis and the Catalan separatists resorted to the nascent League of Nations, and in the process managed to mobilise a wide range of supporters scattered throughout the world. Black women activists in Chicago, Muslim communities in Bombay and New Delhi, as well as Catalan migrant communities in New York and Havana were some of the groups that stood up for the Rifis and the Catalans in their respective campaigns in Geneva. The two initiatives utterly failed, but the attempts provide new insights into the global connections of nationalist and anti-imperialist movements during the period labelled the 'Wilsonian moment' by Erez Manela.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Sebastian Balfour and Paul Preston, eds., *Spain and the Great Powers in the Twentieth Century* (London: Routledge, 1999); Javier Tusell, Juan Avilés and Rosa María Pardo, eds., *La política exterior de España en el siglo XX* (Madrid: Biblioteca Nueva, 2000); Cristóbal Robles Muñoz, *La política exterior de España* (Madrid: CSIC, 2006), 2 vol. For a comprehensive account of Spain and the First World War, see: Maximiliano Fuentes Codera, 'El giro global y transnacional. Las historiografías de la Gran Guerra tras los centenarios', *Historia y Política*, 43 (2020), 389–417.

<sup>7</sup> Miguel Primo de Rivera, 'Al país y al ejército', *La Correspondencia de España*, 13 Sept. 1923, 2: 'descarada propaganda separatista'.

<sup>8</sup> See, amidst a growing literature: Sebastian Conrad, *Globalisation and the Nation in Imperial Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Patrick Boucheron, ed., *Histoire mondiale de la France* (Paris: Seuil, 2017); Jorge Luengo and Pol Dalmau, 'Writing Spanish History in the Global Age: Connections and Entanglements in the Nineteenth Century', *Journal of Global History* 13, 3 (2018), 425–55; Pol Dalmau and Jorge Luengo, 'Historia global e historia nacional: ¿una relación insalvable?', *Ayer* 120, 4 (2020), 311–24.

<sup>9</sup> Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

### 'We Are the Heirs of 1714': Catalan Nationalism under Wilson's Allure

Wilson's statement of the Fourteen Points for world peace, pronounced on 8 January 1918 to the US Congress, not only created high expectations in Egypt, China, India and Korea.<sup>10</sup> Hopes rose in Spain too. This was particularly the case in Catalonia, where the promise of the US president to make national self-determination one of the pillars of the new international order found an enthusiastic audience.<sup>11</sup> The conservative Catalanist party *Lliga Regionalista* had launched a campaign in the Spanish congress to obtain political autonomy. The strategy went beyond a merely defensive ploy for greater prominence in the region, aspiring to transform Spain into a modern state, capable of undertaking a 'civilising mission' abroad.<sup>12</sup> In his memoirs, the leader of the *Lliga*, Francesc Cambó, described the effect of the US president's words on the expectations that their ambitions would be fulfilled: 'Every idealism, all dreams and each passion thought their time had come. Wilson's 14 Points . . . had inflamed the entire world. All humankind experienced one of the most intense moments of its history.'<sup>13</sup> The enthusiasm led to numerous expressions of sympathy towards the US president: Barcelona's city council declared Wilson an honorary citizen, while other towns in Catalonia, such as Figueres, Granollers and Vilafranca del Penedès, followed the example of Paris by naming streets after him.<sup>14</sup> These symbolic initiatives conveyed the aspirations that the Allied victory in the Great War stirred in Catalonia and other parts of Spain.<sup>15</sup> In fact, Cambó sent his right-hand man to Paris with the hope of meeting the man of the moment. Basque nationalists sent representatives to the French capital with the same aim, as well as a telegram to the US president congratulating him on the Allied victory.<sup>16</sup>

Far from an isolated occurrence, petitions of Basques and Catalans were part of a global moment: in the first months of 1919, Polish, Czech, Egyptian, Armenian and a long list of other activists from different parts of the world flocked to Paris seeking national recognition. Among them stood a young Ho Chi Minh (then known as Nguyen Ai Quoc), working at the time as an assistant chef at the Ritz Hotel, who submitted a petition entitled 'Demands of the Annamite People'.<sup>17</sup> These examples reveal the extent to which the political discourse of Catalan and Basque nationalists did not develop in some vacuum, or in rejection of internationalism, but rather understood their struggle as integral to the new world order being negotiated in Paris.<sup>18</sup>

However, the high expectations of Catalan and Basque nationalists for help in the international sphere rapidly vanished. A rumour spread that France's premier, Georges Clemenceau, responded to Catalan petitions with an abrupt '*Pas d'histoires, messieurs, pas d'histoires*'. Although the veracity of this episode is unclear, there is evidence that the Spanish delegate in Paris, José Quiñones de

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Xosé Manoel Núñez Seixas, *Internacionalitzant el nacionalisme. El catalanisme polític i la qüestió de les minories nacionals a Europa (1914–1936)* (València: Universitat de València, 2010), 49–57.

<sup>12</sup> Enric Ucelay Da Cal, *El imperialisme catalán. Prat de la Riba, Cambó, D'Ors y la conquista moral de España* (Barcelona: Edhasa, 2003); Eloy Martín Corrales, 'El nacionalismo catalán y la expansión colonial española en Marruecos: de la guerra de África a la entrada en vigor del protectorado (1860–1912)', in E. Martín Corrales, ed., *Marruecos y el colonialismo español (1859–1912)* (Barcelona: Bellaterra, 2002), 167–215.

<sup>13</sup> Francesc Cambó, *Memories (1876–1936)* (Madrid: Editorial Alpha, 1981), vol. 1, 295.

<sup>14</sup> *La Vanguardia*, 1 Nov. 1918, 12 and 24 Oct. 1918, 7; Maximiliano Fuentes Codera, 'Volver a la Gran Guerra: sobre la relación entre los debates políticos e intelectuales y su impacto en la sociedad española', in Carlos Sanz and Zorann Petrovici, eds., *La Gran Guerra en la España de Alfonso XIII* (Madrid: Sílex, 2019), 188–9.

<sup>15</sup> Francisco J. Romero Salvadó, *Spain 1914–1918: Between War and Revolution* (London: Routledge, 1999); Maximiliano Fuentes Codera, *España en la Primera Guerra Mundial. Una movilización cultural* (Madrid: Akal, 2014); Xosé Manuel Núñez Seixas, 'Catalonia and the "War of Nations": Catalan Nationalism and the First World War', *Journal of Modern European History*, 16, 3 (2018), 379–98.

<sup>16</sup> Alexander Ugalde Zubiri, *La acción exterior del nacionalismo vasco, 1890–1939: historia, pensamiento y relaciones internacionales* (Oñati: Instituto Vasco de Administración Pública, 1996), 261.

<sup>17</sup> Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment*, ix and 3.

<sup>18</sup> Glenda Sluga, *Internationalism in the Age of Nationalism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013); Xosé M. Núñez Seixas (ed.), *The First World War and the Nationality Question: Global Impact and Local Dynamics* (Leiden: Brill, 2021).

León, pressured (and obtained guarantees from) French and US diplomats that Catalonia's demands would not be taken up in the peace talks.<sup>19</sup> Newspapers in Madrid were quick to ridicule the Catalan nationalists' oversized ambitions, while journalists questioned Wilson's idealism, calling it 'The Fourteen-Point Swindle'.<sup>20</sup> The high expectations fuelled by Wilson's proclamations rapidly soured not only in Spain but in other parts of the world as well. Still, and as Erez Manela has argued, the greatest impact of the 'Wilsonian moment' on world politics did not consist in the high hopes it created but in the intellectual ammunition it provided to anticolonial nationalist uprisings that swept the Middle East and Asia in the spring of 1919.<sup>21</sup>

Notwithstanding this impact, historians have pointed out numerous shortcomings of Wilson's vision, precepts and impact. Some, while recognising that Wilson's agenda was 'absolutely critical' for the creation of the League of Nations, have qualified its impact as ambiguous, and some accounts of his life approach hagiography.<sup>22</sup> Other scholars argue that the 'Wilsonian moment' label risks over-emphasising Euro-American centred narratives to the detriment of indigenous intellectual traditions.<sup>23</sup> Historians have also stressed Wilson's decision to limit the principle of national self-determination to Europe, and the bias of its application to Entente allies over the vanquished. Ultimately, the US president's ingenuous idealism represented 'an invitation to transform the violence of the First World War into a multitude of border conflicts and civil wars'.<sup>24</sup>

In Catalonia, disillusionment with Wilson's vague promises coincided with deepening social conflict as a result of post-war inflation and the Russian revolution, which led the *Lliga* to set aside their demands for home rule. It was in this context that a small, radical nationalist group, the Pro-Catalonia Committee (*Comitè Pro-Catalunya*), gained visibility by its attempts to internationalise Catalan demands with a more radical message than home rule – namely, splitting from Spain. The group sent its first petition to the Allies as the war was reaching its end on 11 September 1918, under the title 'What says Catalonia' (sic). The petition consisted of a two-page pamphlet, printed in French and English, that provided historical background for Catalan nationalism.<sup>25</sup> The petitioners portrayed the Peace of Utrecht (1713) as having put an end to Catalonia's long-held historical liberties along with ending the War of the Spanish Succession (1701–14).<sup>26</sup> Over the course of the nineteenth century, Catalan nationalism turned this European conflict into an 'invented tradition', based on the myth of Catalan resistance against Spanish-centralist attempts, as embodied in the siege of Barcelona by Bourbon troops on 11 September 1714.<sup>27</sup> This historicist understanding of the nation led the Catalan separatists to call for the abolition of the Utrecht treaty, a demand that in practice amounted to a petition for self-determination. As if they were endorsements of their claims, the militants' booklet included a partial reproduction of Wilson's Fourteen Points and Article 14 with its plan for a 'general Society of Nations'. The document ended with a final request, presented in large characters next to a full-colour reproduction of the US flag: '*Catalony begs of the victorious Entente, for Right and Liberty of Peoples, the revision of Utrecht's treatise. Hurrah for the Entente! Glory to Wilson! Justice!!!*'.

<sup>19</sup> A detailed analysis of this question in Núñez Seixas, 'Nacionalismo y política exterior'.

<sup>20</sup> *El Imparcial*, 3 Dec. 1918, 1; Luis de Tapia, 'El timo de los catorce puntos', in Fernando Soldevilla, *El año político de 1918* (Madrid: Imprenta de Julio Cosano, 1919), 469–70.

<sup>21</sup> Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment*, 5.

<sup>22</sup> Mark Mazower, *Governing the World: The History of an Idea* (London: Penguin, 2012), 118–19.

<sup>23</sup> Thomas Maddux, ed., 'H-Diplo Roundtable Reviews', X, 7 (2009) (<http://www.h-net.org/~dipl/roundtables>, accessed 5 Jun. 2020), 3 and 8; Hussein A.H. Omar, 'The Arab Spring of 1919', *London Review of Books*, 4 Apr. 2019, respectively.

<sup>24</sup> Robert Gerwarth, *The Vanquished. Why the First World War failed to End, 1917–1923* (London: Penguin, 2016), 213–14. See also: Volker Prott, *The Politics of Self-Determination. Remaking Territories and National Identities in Europe, 1917–1923* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

<sup>25</sup> League of Nations Archive, Geneva (LoN), R1639/41/8504/5953.

<sup>26</sup> Trevor J. Dadson and J.H. Elliott (eds.), *Britain, Spain and the Treaty of Utrecht, 1713–2013* (Oxford: Legenda, 2014).

<sup>27</sup> Henry Kamen, *La Invención de España. Leyendas e ilusiones que han construido la realidad española* (Barcelona: Planeta, 2020), 371–88; Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

The Pro-Catalonia Committee was an organisation created in July 1918 to internationalise Catalonia's campaign for independence.<sup>28</sup> The committee consisted of a reduced though very energetic group that grew out of the so-called 'Catalanist Union', which was a Republican umbrella group for several different Catalanist organisations.<sup>29</sup> Their social base consisted of the urban middle class and the *petite* bourgeoisie who rejected any type of involvement in Spanish politics. The Catalanist Union believed that home rule would never be achieved through cooperation with Madrid, a belief they based on the failures of past attempts.<sup>30</sup> Rather, they called for Catalonia's independence, albeit without excluding possible federation with other Iberian regions. Indeed this vague formula was present in most of their publications.<sup>31</sup>

To draw attention to their political demands, the Pro-Catalonia Committee launched a propaganda campaign in international decision-making spaces. Some members, for instance, travelled to Paris during the peace negotiations, where they met briefly with one of Wilson's secretaries at the Hotel Crillon, who accepted their leaflets while remarking on the many grammatical mistakes contained in them.<sup>32</sup> This episode is illustrative of the amateurism of the group that represented a small radical faction that compensated for limited resources with boundless energy. One of the myths on which their propaganda built involved Catalan volunteers who fought in the French army. The pamphlet sent to the Allies insisted that: 'Fifteen thousand of our ones did fight for you. More than ten thousand died at Dardanel, at Macedoin, at Serbia, on the fields of battle of France, from Iser to Verdun. In their name, in name of bloodshed, we beg the help of you'.<sup>33</sup> Historians have discredited any account of 15,000 Catalan volunteers. In reality, only 954 Catalans (out of 2,191 Spanish volunteers in all) fought in the Great War, and many for motives that were more prosaic than idealistic.<sup>34</sup> In other pamphlets, Catalan separatists employed the same strategy in other directions, by depicting King Alfonso XIII as a fervent Germanophile, for instance, or claiming that Spain's national anthem was of Prussian origin.<sup>35</sup> All these stratagems were aimed at convincing the Allied powers that while Spain had remained neutral, Catalans had fervently supported the Allies from the outset, and had paid for their support in human losses – an argument that was presented as justifying the concession of minority rights status and the holding of an independence referendum.<sup>36</sup> A red bloodstain printed in one of the pamphlets was meant to stress the message.

On other occasions, Catalan separatists sought to instrumentalise international congresses to attract international public opinion. This was the case during the League of Nations conference held in San Sebastian from 30 July to 5 August 1920. The Committee sent several letters to the Council and the Secretariat, requesting once again the revision of the Utrecht Treaty.<sup>37</sup> They undertook an even larger,

<sup>28</sup> Joan Crexell, *L'origen de la bandera independentista* (Barcelona: editorial El Llamp, 1984), 85–9.

<sup>29</sup> Jaume Colomer, 'La Unió catalanista i la formació del nacionalisme radical, 1895–1917: l'obra del doctor Martí i Julià', PhD thesis, University of Barcelona, 1984; Joan Esculies, 'El nacionalismo radical catalán (1913–1923)', *Espana Contemporanea*, 43 (2013), 7–28.

<sup>30</sup> 'La claudicació dels regionalistes', *La Lucha*, 12 May 1918. Reproduced in David Martínez Fiol, ed., *El catalanisme i la Gran Guerra (1914–1918). Antologia* (Barcelona: La Magrana, 1988), 108–111.

<sup>31</sup> See, for instance, the first edition of *L'Intransigent. Periòdic nacionalista de joventuts, adherit a la Unió Catalanista*, 1 Sep. 1918, 1–3.

<sup>32</sup> Josep Castanyer, 'Comitè Pro-Catalunya. Impressions d'un nacionalista català per terres de França. Maig de 1919', CAT ANC1-276, Fons Comitè de germanor amb els voluntaris catalans, Arxiu Nacional de Catalunya (ANC), Sant Cugat del Vallès. See also: Joan Esculies Serrat and David Martínez Fiol, *12.000! Els catalans a la Primera Guerra Mundial* (Barcelona: Ara Llibres, 2014), 203–10.

<sup>33</sup> LoN, R1639/41/8504/5953.

<sup>34</sup> Esculies Serrat and Martínez Fiol, *12.000!*

<sup>35</sup> 'La marche royale espagnole, hymne prussien'. LoN, R1639/41/8504/5953. On the origins of Spain's anthem see: Javier Moreno Luzón, 'The Strange Case of a National Anthem without Lyrics: Music and Political Identities in Spain (1785–1913)', *Journal of Iberian and Latin American Studies*, 23 (2017), 367–82.

<sup>36</sup> 'La préalable déclaration du droit de la Catalogne à son Indépendance si un plebiscit formel et sérieux démontre que la plupart de ses fils désirent l'Indépendance de leur Patrie'. LoN, R1639/41/8504/5953, 17 Nov. 1920.

<sup>37</sup> LoN, R1639/41/5953/3953, July 1920; Núñez Seixas, 'Nacionalismo y política exterior', 237.

more coordinated campaign four months later, when they sent the following message to the League of Nations:

Gentlemen, Yet once again, as she did at the end of the war which has just been brought to a successful conclusion, Catalonia, ventures to bring to your notice her earnest and legitimate ambition, which is all the more justifiable in that she is one of the few white races still subject to an alien yoke. . . . This is not merely a petition from the ‘Pro-Catalonia Committee’; for a real plebiscite has been taken. The League of Nations will receive many appeals in support of the petition made by this Committee; these appeals will emanate from all parts of the world, since in all countries there are Catalonians zealous on behalf of the freedom of their country, as well as of the country in which they reside. . . .

We venture to ask that the rights of Catalonia to independence may be seriously considered; that the Treaty of Utrecht may be revised; that the ‘Case of the Catalonians’ may be studied by scientific jurists of any nationality not excluding Catalonia.

Catalonia confides her interests to you, gentlemen, who stand for World-Peace, Right and Justice. . . .<sup>38</sup>

The notion of ‘race’, noted in the document above, had long been present in Catalanist discourse. Since the mid-19th century, various intellectuals argued that Catalans were akin to the Latin races, as represented by France and Italy, whereas Castilians were said to have descended from Semitic bloodlines.<sup>39</sup> This idea of race was refashioned after the colonial crisis of 1898 in terms of civilisation: the demise of the empire was described as evidence of the inward, degenerate character of the Castilian race. Catalans were better placed to lead the rejuvenation of the country because of their industrious and cosmopolitan character that made them a European people.<sup>40</sup> The ‘standard of civilisation’, so integral to colonial ideology and to the making of modern international law,<sup>41</sup> was thus coupled with an ethnic component to define Catalan identity. The ultimate hope was that Catalonia’s case would be treated comparably to other ‘white’ oppressed minorities in Central and Eastern Europe. In fact, the name ‘Pro-Catalonia Committee’ itself took inspiration from the ‘Pro-Lithuania Committee’, following cooperation between the two nationalist movements during the war.<sup>42</sup>

Still, for endorsement of their political demands before the League of Nations, Catalan separatists did not turn to their European allies but rather towards the opposite shore of the Atlantic. Telegrams were sent to Geneva from places as varied as Asunción (Paraguay), Montevideo (Uruguay), Buenos Aires and Mendoza (Argentina), Havana, Guantanamo and Santiago de Cuba (Cuba) and New York (United States). The organizers claimed to have registered as many as 765 signatures in support of a self-organised plebiscite. The telegrams of support came from Catalan communities living in Latin America (and New York) where immigrants had maintained social and cultural entities on the basis of regional identity since the late nineteenth century. Thus, Galicians, Basques and Catalans each established their respective separate spaces of sociability.<sup>43</sup> Moreover, ‘Catalan centres’ (as they were

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., R1639/41/8504/5953, 13 Nov. 1920.

<sup>39</sup> Angel Smith, *The Origins of Catalan Nationalism, 1770–1898* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 109–10; Stephen Jacobson, ‘Identidad nacional en España: el imperio y Cataluña: una perspectiva comparativa’, in Javier Moreno Luzón and Fernando del Rey, eds., *Pueblo y nación. Homenaje a José Álvarez Junco* (Madrid: Taurus, 2013), 263–82.

<sup>40</sup> Pol Dalmau, *Press, Politics and National Identities in Catalonia: The Transformation of La Vanguardia, 1881–1931* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2017), 106–7.

<sup>41</sup> Bruce Mazlish, *Civilization and Its Contents* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004); Jennifer Pitts, *Boundaries of the International: Law and Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018); Martti Koskenniemi, *The Gentle Civilizer of Nations: The Rise and Fall of International Law, 1870–1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

<sup>42</sup> Joan Esculies and Vytautas Petronis, ‘Self-proclaimed Diplomats: Catalan-Lithuanian Cooperation during WWI’, *Nationalities Papers*, 44, 2 (2016), 340–56.

<sup>43</sup> Michael Kenny, ‘“Which Spain?” The Conservation of Regionalism among Spanish Emigrants and Exiles’, *Iberian Studies*, 2, 1976, 46–8. For an updated revision on the role of regional identities and its relation to Spain’s nationalisation process see: Alejandro Quiroga and Ferran Archilés, eds., ‘La nacionalización en España’, *Ayer*, 90, 2 (2013), special issue.

often named) took on a political orientation abroad, which evolved in the 1910s from supporting Catalan autonomy to leaning towards separatism. This posture stood out starkly from the stance of Catalans residing in the Iberian Peninsula, where the demands of the vast majority of the Catalanist movement did not go beyond home rule.

The explanation for the more radical position of Catalans abroad lies in the influence of Cuba's independence in 1898. The victory of Cuban rebels over Spain, with the indispensable intervention of the United States, intensified the separatist orientation of Catalan centres.<sup>44</sup> The impact of the events in the Caribbean on the Iberian Peninsula can be read in Barcelona newspapers aligned with the Catalanist Union, which reported on the advancement of the young Cuban Republic with unhidden sympathy.<sup>45</sup> Transatlantic 'imagined communities' were thus constructed in the press, even if the limited circulation of partisan papers restricted their social impact. Another example of the fluid circulation of political imaginaries between the Caribbean and the Iberian Peninsula is the 'estelada', an explicitly separatist flag designed by Vicenç Albert Ballester in Barcelona in 1918, based on the Cuban model.<sup>46</sup> Ballester was the director of the newspaper *La Tralla*, where he published articles under different pseudonyms, such as VIC (an abbreviation for 'Long Live Catalonia') and VIC I ME ('Long Live Catalonia and Death to Spain'). Ballester combined activism in domestic politics with foreign propaganda; in fact, he was the first director of the Pro-Catalonia Committee (where he used the nom de plume Pere Rus), the same committee that appealed to the League of Nations.<sup>47</sup> By the 1920s, therefore, separatism remained a marginal political movement in Catalonia, but it claimed an active propaganda apparatus and enthusiastic support from migrant communities in the Americas.

### Forged in the Ashes of War: The Rif Republic and the Quest for International Recognition

Although Spain was their common enemy, the background of Catalan separatists and the Rifis in Northern Morocco differed radically. The Rifis did not seek to gain independence in the future like the Catalans; they sought international recognition for the de facto independence they obtained on the battleground in the 'Disaster of Annual' (1921). At an official estimate of 13,912 casualties, the Rifis dealt Spain one of the biggest defeats ever endured by a European colonial army, even compared to Italy's in Adwa (1896).<sup>48</sup> The events in Morocco provoked a political earthquake in Spain, exacerbating the crisis of the liberal parties and setting up Primo de Rivera's seizure of power in September 1923.<sup>49</sup> Still, most accounts are Spanish-centred visions that focus on the military campaigns and their consequences on Spanish domestic politics while neglecting the effects of Annual on Moroccans. Viewed from the southern shore of the Mediterranean, rather than a military 'disaster' Annual opened a brief parenthesis during which one of the most serious – if short-lived – state-building attempts was carried out in the Rif region.<sup>50</sup> Spain's military defeat left a power vacuum that local notables seized

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For the same question in a broader European context see: Joost Augusteijn and Eric Storm, eds., *Region and State in Nineteenth-Century Europe: Nation-building, Regional Identities and Separatism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

<sup>44</sup> Xosé M. Núñez Seixas, *Las patrias ausentes. Estudio sobre historia y memoria de las migraciones ibéricas, 1830–1960* (Oviedo: Genuve, 2014), 151–2.

<sup>45</sup> 'Á la República Cubana en el tercer aniversari de la seva independència', *La Tralla*, 19/05/1904, special issue.

<sup>46</sup> J. Crexell, *L'origen de la bandera...*

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>48</sup> Douglas Porch, 'Spain's African Nightmare', *Quarterly Journal of Military History*, 18, 2006, 31.

<sup>49</sup> Pablo La Porte, 'The Moroccan Quagmire and the Crisis of Spain's Liberal System, 1917–23', Francisco J. Romero Salvadó and Angel Smith, eds., *The Agony of Spanish Liberalism: From Revolution to Dictatorship, 1913–23* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 230–54; Sebastian Balfour, *Deadly Embrace: Morocco and the Road to the Spanish Civil War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

<sup>50</sup> C. R. Pennell, *A Country with a Government and a Flag: The Rif War in Morocco, 1921–1926* (Boulder: MENAS, 1986); René Gallissot, ed., *Abd el-Krim et la République du Rif: actes du colloque international d'études historiques et sociologiques* (Paris: Maspero, 1976); María Rosa de Madariaga, *Abd el-Krim El Jatabi. La lucha por la independencia* (Madrid: Alianza editorial, 2011), 412–23.

upon to establish a proto-state that drew the sympathies of anti-colonial activists in British India, Europe and South America, the support of minorities in the United States, and a more ambivalent response from Catalan nationalists.

The man who seized the moment and proclaimed the 'Rif Republic', or *Dawlat Yumhūriya Rīfiya* (State of the Rif Republic), was the Berber leader Muhammad ibn Abd al-Karim El-Khattabi (1882–1963), commonly known as Abd el-Krim.<sup>51</sup> In an interview given to an Egyptian newspaper in 1927, he declared that his purpose had been setting up a 'republic', or *jumhuriya*, 'with a resolute government, firm sovereignty and strong national organisation'.<sup>52</sup> Although 'republic' is a misleading term to define the political structure created in the Rif on 18 September 1921 that lasted until a joint French-Spanish invasion put an end to it in March 1926, it did change local life. New taxes were levied, and the administration of justice was strengthened. Considerable effort was made to improve roads and telephone lines were laid between main localities. The position of women in society also underwent some changes, as the new government recruited some to perform jobs traditionally reserved for men.<sup>53</sup> Still, the depth of the reforms was conditioned by what C.R. Pennell called 'the practicalities of resistance': repelling the European invaders remained the most pressing aim of a centralised power fully aware of its uncertain chances for survival.<sup>54</sup>

Precisely because of this reason, the Rif Republic, whose capital was Ajdir, launched an active diplomatic campaign for international recognition. The regional and global contexts appeared favourable: in Egypt, Palestine and Tunisia, revolutions had arisen against European colonial powers in 1919, a wave soon followed by similar upheavals in Iraq, Syria and Sudan.<sup>55</sup> In Libya, a new 'Tripolitanian Republic' had been proclaimed in November 1918, taking advantage of Italy's persistent difficulties in the region and the withdrawal of Ottoman and German forces after the Great War.<sup>56</sup> It was in this volatile supra-regional context that Abd el-Krim published an open letter, entitled 'To the Civilised Nations', in 1922. As the document stated,

. . . It is now high time that Europe, who, in this twentieth century claims that she stands to uphold the standard of civilisation and to uplift humanity, should carry this noble principle from the domain of precept into that of practice and should stand up in defence of the aggrieved against the aggressor, and for the vindication against the strong, of the rights of the weak . . . The Spaniards believe that they have been entrusted by Europe with the work of reformation and civilisation in Riff, but the Riffians ask: 'Does reformation consist in destruction of habitations by the use of forbidden weapons, does it consist in interference in religion, or in usurping others' rights?'. . . All she [The Rif Republic] wants is relief from Spanish oppression, from military aggression and the establishment of her own local government, with the administration resting in her own hands. Does Europe find in this anything prejudicial to her interests? Or affecting the rights of her communities? Is it any racial or national prejudice that makes her close the doors of her political circles against those who are suffering from the Spaniards?<sup>57</sup>

The document contains several elements worth stressing. Firstly, no references were made to Wilson or to the principle of self-determination. As a matter of fact, the cry for help was not even

<sup>51</sup> Madariaga, *Abd el-Krim El Jatabi*.

<sup>52</sup> Pennell, *A Country*, 230.

<sup>53</sup> C. R. Pennell, 'Women and Resistance to Colonialism in Morocco: The Rif 1916-1926', *The Journal of African History*, 28, 1 (1987), 112.

<sup>54</sup> Pennell, *A Country*, 232.

<sup>55</sup> A comparative analysis of these insurrections is in: Giorgio Poti, 'Imperial Violence, Anti-colonial Nationalism and International Society: The Politics of Revolt across Mediterranean Empires, 1919-1927', PhD thesis, European University Institute, 2016.

<sup>56</sup> Ali Abdullatif Ahmida, *The Making of Modern Libya: State Formation, Colonization, and Resistance* (New York: SUNY Press, 2009), 106.

<sup>57</sup> 'To the Civilised Nations', LoN, R591/11/23217/12861, 1-5.



addressed to the League of Nations, but to the more reduced group of 'European civilised nations'. Unlike Catalan separatists, Rifis could not afford to spend time paying homages to Wilson or evoking his Fourteen Points speech, so they voiced a desperate cry for help in the context of total war. Indeed, Spain resorted to brutal warfare to crush local resistance, including reprisals against civilians and intensive air raids.<sup>58</sup> As dead bodies piled up on the blistering earth while terror rained from the sky, the Rif Republic's chances of survival hinged on the immediate intervention of the old colonial powers, not on vague promises from the US president.

In addition, Abd el-Krim's letter reveals how current the long-standing standard of civilisation remained in the world order of the early 1920s, even among the anti-colonial leaders who suffered it. In fact, focusing on Rifi diplomatic action affords a view of the League of Nations from the margins, moving beyond the perspective of Western diplomats to reveal instead the agency of colonised people and the strategies they implemented to appropriate Western international law for their political causes.<sup>59</sup> Whereas Spain invoked the 'civilising mission' to justify its military intervention in northern Morocco, the Rif Republic appealed to protection of the weak as one of the moral obligations of the self-referenced civilised nations. The chances of success of this strategy were remote, however, as the reference that Abd el-Krim made to 'racial or national prejudice' reveals. After all, 'protection' was the very concept that European powers had invoked in November 1912 for the establishment of Spain's and France's protectorates in Morocco.<sup>60</sup>

Distrust in the actual chances of European intervention led the Rif Republic to redirect its pleas for international recognition to the League of Nations. The fledgling organisation marked a substantial shift from the nineteenth-century legal regime towards the colonial world, as evidenced by the mandate system for the administration of the former territories of the German and Ottoman empires.<sup>61</sup> Still, Abd el-Krim's primary aspiration remained the elimination of the French and Spanish protectorates and sovereign rule over the Rif. To this end, he sent a memorandum to the General Council informing it that the 'Government of the Riff' was ruling the region in full accordance with the principles of the League of Nations. The document accordingly informed the council that a representative government had been elected, comprising deputies from forty-one tribes of the Riff and Yomara, that professed openness to foreign trade and assured protection for foreign nationals and Jewish inhabitants. The ultimate aim was 'to give proofs and guarantees that we can govern the country in the interest of peace', as evidenced by the willingness to reach a peace agreement with Spain.<sup>62</sup>

The promises made to the League of Nations were overstated so as to adapt local idiosyncrasies to Western standards. As Abd el-Krim later explained, his idea of state consisted in reality of '... independent tribes in an alliance, and not a representative state with an elected parliament'.<sup>63</sup> Moreover, his authority as emir was contested by recalcitrant tribes and he only managed to keep his position through control over both the army and the flow of smuggled weapons from the French protectorate. As British informants put it, 'Abdel Krim is now a dictator and rules by force'.<sup>64</sup> On the domestic front, meanwhile, the Rifi leader called for holy war or *jihad* against 'the servants of the cross and

<sup>58</sup> Porch, 'Spain's African Nightmare'.

<sup>59</sup> Arnulf Becker Lorca, *Mestizo International Law: A Global Intellectual History, 1842–1933* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Andrew Arsan, "'This Age Is the Age of Associations': Committees, Petitions, and the Roots of Interwar Middle Eastern Internationalism', *Journal of Global History*, 7, 2 (2012), 166–88. On the renewed interest in the League of Nations, see: Susan Pedersen, 'Back to the League of Nations', *American Historical Review*, 112 (2007), 1091–1117.

<sup>60</sup> José Luis Villanova, *El Protectorado de España en Marruecos. Organización política y territorial* (Barcelona: Bellaterra, 2004), 53–70.

<sup>61</sup> Mazower, *Governing the World*, 166; Susan Pedersen, *The Guardians: The League of Nations and the Crisis of Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

<sup>62</sup> 'The General Council of the League of Nations', 6 Sept. 1922, LoN R591/11/23217/12861.

<sup>63</sup> Pennell, *A Country*, 257.

<sup>64</sup> Arnold Robertson, 'Memorandum', 7 Mar. 1924, FO 174/303/76, Foreign Office Records, The National Archives, London (TNA), 3–4.

the worshippers of idols'.<sup>65</sup> The legitimate source of his power thus had little to do with the elected government that Abd el-Krim presented to the League of Nations. Clearly, when it came to convincing a Western-based institution, it struck him as better to leave out local idiosyncrasies and rely on the detested language of civilisation for international recognition.

But similar to what happened to Catalan separatists, expectations placed in Geneva soon vanished. Whenever a document arrived from Ajdir, one of the first courses of action taken by the League of Nations was consulting Spain in its position as a state member.<sup>66</sup> The head of the Spanish delegation (Quiñones de León) responded by simply shelving the matter.<sup>67</sup> In this way, the same Spanish diplomat who pressured France and the United States during the Paris Peace Conference of 1919 to ignore Catalan demands for home rule rejected the Rifi petitions for independence. Spain's position in the international arena was perhaps modest, or at least lower than King Alfonso's aspirations, but it still provided her with a vantage point from which she could intercept the international demands of her self-declared enemies, whether foreign or domestic.<sup>68</sup>

The official League of Nations answer to Rifi petitions was that '... the provisions of the Covenant concerning the settlement of disputes apply solely to disputes between States, the status of which has been generally recognised. They may be either Members or non-Members of the League'.<sup>69</sup> The League of Nations stuck to this line of reasoning in declaring its lack of competence to intervene in the conflict, as Pablo La Porte has examined in detail.<sup>70</sup> In practice, neither Spain nor the European powers appeared interested in breaking up the protectorate system devised in 1912. Only France showed interest in expanding her own protectorate westwards should Spain withdraw from the zone, a possibility that British sources felt brought the matter into 'the field of practical politics'. Should Spain cede its protectorate, 'with the exception of the French, it is difficult to see what Power would be prepared to accept the responsibility of maintaining order in North Morocco. The League of Nations, which has not shown great zeal to seek responsibility so far, would probably be our only hope of salvation'.<sup>71</sup>

### 'The Riffians Are Not Alone': The Mobilisation of Anti-Imperialist Networks and the Making of a Global Icon

The quest of the Rif Republic for international recognition entered a new phase in the summer of 1925, when Spain and France joined forces to crush Abd el-Krim's forces once and for all. The deployment of approximately 18,000 Spanish and 20,000 French troops, coupled with the use, starting in 1923, of poison gas compounded the sheer brutality of the Rif War.<sup>72</sup> In response, the League of Nations was flooded by letters and telegrams from several continents calling for rapid humanitarian intervention. Indian Muslims from Bombay and New Delhi, for instance, sent several telegrams to Geneva in September 1925, declaring that 'thousands of mosques [in] India offer prayers for Riffian brothers victory against foreign aggressors robbing them of their liberty'. In addition, the senders asked 'whether your league intended to be combination of powers of Christian Europe . . . or guardian of liberty and protector of all nations'.<sup>73</sup> The question reveals the suspicion of Muslim

<sup>65</sup> Pennell, *A Country*, 124.

<sup>66</sup> 'Je crois impossible de rien faire sans montrer d'abord ce document à la Délégation Espagnole, et aussi à Mr. Tufton, qui saura sans doute qui est le signataire de la lettre'. Paul Mantoux, 7 Sept. 1922, LoN, R591/11/23217/12861. Charles Tufton was the British legal adviser to the League.

<sup>67</sup> 'After consultation with M. Quiñones de León, I come to the conclusion that no action is required'. *Ibid.*, 19 Sept. 1922.

<sup>68</sup> In the case of Catalan separatists, the argument used by the League of Nations to reject their petitions was that Spain had not signed a Minorities Treaty and therefore had no legal obligations in that respect. Eric Drummond to Manuel Massó Llorens, April 1924, LoN, R1639/41/35177/5953.

<sup>69</sup> Director of the Political Section to Jermain Chandler, 23 Nov. 1925, LoN, R591/11/41612/12861.

<sup>70</sup> Pablo La Porte, "'Rien à ajouter": The League of Nations and the Rif War (1921–1926)', *European History Quarterly*, 41, 1 (2011), 66–87.

<sup>71</sup> TNA, FO 174/303/76, 2.

<sup>72</sup> On the use of chemical weapons against civilians, see: Balfour, *Deadly Embrace*.

<sup>73</sup> LoN, 28 Sept. 1925, R591/11/41612/12861.

and non-Muslim Asians that the League of Nations would prove to be biased to the West,<sup>74</sup> much the way that Abd el-Krim had in his letter 'To the Civilised Nations'.

Moreover, Indian Muslims made repeated calls to the British Red Crescent to intervene in defence of the 'women and children who have been maimed or injured in the bombing operations of the Spanish aeroplanes'.<sup>75</sup> Petitioners requested a medical mission be sent to the area along with medicines and the Punjab Khilafat Committee even collected thirteen thousand rupees to such an end.<sup>76</sup> British authorities, however, felt at odds with the petitions coming from India and recommended avoiding any '... action which might possibly be interpreted by the Spanish Government as an attempt to mix ourselves up with their domestic affairs'. In the meantime, the Rif Republic sought to discredit the civilising mission that France and Spain purported to be carrying out in the region by denouncing the bombardments of poison gas before the League of Nations.<sup>77</sup> The events in Northern Morocco thus jumped to the international agenda, with articles appearing in the international press, attracting the attention of all sorts of sympathisers and profiteers.<sup>78</sup>

Another group that mobilised in support of the Rifis was from the United States. The 'Federation of Colored Women's Clubs' (FCWC) sent a short telegram to Geneva 'representing a thousand petition prayer in behalf of the rifis and moors'.<sup>79</sup> The senders belonged to the Chicago branch of a black women's platform created to project the 'values, priorities, and politics that shape both individual and collective behaviour'.<sup>80</sup> Despite the brevity of the telegram of the FCWC, it shows how a domestic plea, in this case the fight against racial segregation in the United States, was understood as part of a broader international cause.<sup>81</sup> War correspondents such as Vincent Sheean, who travelled to North Africa and interviewed Abd el-Krim, had familiarised the US public with the events. In fact, a special issue of TIME magazine was devoted to the rebel leader, one that featured his face on the famous red cover.<sup>82</sup>

Abd el-Krim was indeed becoming a global icon of anti-imperialism. Besides these groups in Chicago and Bombay, workers of African descent in Paris carried his picture in their pockets and flocked to the anti-war campaign organised by the French Communist Party in 1925.<sup>83</sup> The campaign included several demonstrations and awareness initiatives, even a failed call for a general strike in October of the same year. Moreover, the French capital's status as hub of anti-imperial networks contributed to spreading the cause of the Rif Republic worldwide. One example is the case of Ahmed Hassan Mattar, a globetrotting activist who acted as spokesman for the 'Defending Society for the Rif in South America'.<sup>84</sup> His actions paved the way for a letter published in an Argentinian journal

<sup>74</sup> Cemil Aydin, *The Politics of Anti-Westernism in Asia: Visions of World Order in Pan-Islamic and Pan-Asian Thought* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 120–32.

<sup>75</sup> Ameer Ali to Eyre Crowe, 10 Sept. 1924, TNA, India Office Records (IOR), P2636/1925.

<sup>76</sup> 7 Aug. 1925, TNA, IOR, P2636/1925.

<sup>77</sup> Anna Chotzen, 'Beyond Bounds: Morocco's Rif War and the Limits of International Law', *Humanity: An International Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarians and Development*, 5, 1 (Spring 2014), 33–54.

<sup>78</sup> Tayeb Boutbouqalt, *La Guerre du Rif et la réaction de l'opinion internationale, 1921–1926* (Casablanca: Impr. Najah El Jadida, 1992); Dirk Sasse, *Franzosen, Briten und Deutsche im Rifkrieg 1921–1926: Spekulanten und Sympathisanten, Deserteure und Hasardeure im Dienst Abdelkrims* (Munich: Oldenburg, 2006); Giorgio Poti, 'Un microcosme de l'entre-deux-guerres: La Guerre du Rif (1921–1926) et la reconfiguration du complexe impérial euro-méditerranéen', *Cahiers de civilisation espagnole contemporaine*, 18/2017.

<sup>79</sup> 30 Sept. 1925, LoN R591/11/41612/12861.

<sup>80</sup> Carmen Victoria Walker, 'An Analysis of the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs 1896–1935' (2008), ETD Collection for AUC Robert W. Woodruff Library. Paper 37.

<sup>81</sup> Mazower, *Governing the World*, 165.

<sup>82</sup> TIME. *The Weekly News-Magazine*, 17 Aug. 1925, vol. VI, no. 7; Vincent Sheean, *An American among the Rifis* (New York: Century, 1926).

<sup>83</sup> David H. Slavin, 'The French Left and the Rif War, 1924–25: Racism and the Limits of Internationalism', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 26, 1991, 5–32; Michael Goebel, *Anti-Imperial Metropolis: Interwar Paris and the Seeds of Third World Internationalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 159.

<sup>84</sup> Ahmed Hassan Mattar, 12 Dec. 1925, LoN R591/11/41612/12861. On the trajectory of this activist, see: Goebel, *Anti-Imperial Metropolis*, 149–50, 162–3.

entitled ‘A Message from Abd el-Krim to the Peoples of America on the Centenary of Ayacucho’. The message, written in Spanish by the Rifi leader himself, called for fraternity between the anti-imperialist movements in Morocco and Latin America. In it, Abd el-Krim compared the Rif War to the wars of independence that American colonies fought against Spain in the 1820s, and hailed an imagined brotherhood that united the two peoples across the Atlantic:

The heroic Moroccan people fights for the same ideals that moved Miranda and Moreno, Bolívar and San Martín. We have always loved and admired these heroes of your peoples . . . I address you as brothers, because the Spanish blood that runs in your veins is largely Arab, as is the blood of all the Spaniards from the south of the peninsula who emigrated from Palos, Sevilla and Cádiz to plant the Arab soul in your America . . . <sup>85</sup>

The synergies between Morocco and Latin America attest to the rich map of transnational contacts that united anti-imperial activists in the early twentieth century. These are but a small sample of a wider set of anti-imperialist networks that had their hubs in European metropolises such as London and Paris, and which converged during particular ‘global moments’.<sup>86</sup> Born and eventually buried in the ashes of war, the case of the Rif Republic illuminates the strategies that Global South actors implemented in the post-Versailles world to gain international attention. The false expectations that the new international order created in many parts of the planet is a key element for understanding why activists in Buenos Aires, Chicago, Paris and New Delhi rallied together in support of Abd el-Krim and turned him into a global icon of anti-imperial resistance – an image that he actively encouraged and exploited.

### Civilisation and the Limits of Internationalism

Still, sharing an internationalist ideology did not always result in cooperation and solidarity between far-flung activists. Contrary to the adage that ‘the enemy of my enemy is my friend’, the past frequently unfolded in more complex and intricate ways.<sup>87</sup> Despite sharing a desire to split from Spain and recourse to the League of Nations, Catalan separatists never came to see their fight as aligned with that of the Rifi. From the outset of the armed conflict in Morocco, the Catalanist press vociferously argued against military intervention, mainly because of the Catalan lives that would be lost.<sup>88</sup> But criticism of Spanish colonialism was one thing, while criticism of imperialism was quite another. The importance of the distinction became manifest even among the most radical strands of Catalan nationalism, which were divided at the time into several small organisations but of which *Acció Catalana* represented the leading voice.<sup>89</sup> *Acció Catalana* was a centre-left party created in 1922 by youth activists and republican intellectuals unhappy with the collaboration of the *Lliga Regionalista* with Spanish cabinets. One of the most prominent leaders of *Acció Catalana* was Antoni Rovira i Virgili, whose criticism of the military intervention in Morocco stood out. In his view, the war was an alien conflict that would only concern ‘the Spanish and the Moors’ were it not for the Catalan blood and money that went into it.<sup>90</sup> However, none of Rovira i Virgili’s criticism

<sup>85</sup> Quoted originally in Spanish in: Martín Bergel, ‘Un caso de orientalismo invertido. La Revista de Oriente (1925–1926) y los modelos de relevo de la civilización occidental’, *Prismas*, 10 (2006), 116.

<sup>86</sup> Goebel, *Anti-Imperial Metropolis*, 151; Mark Matera, *Black London: The Imperial Metropolis and Decolonization in the Twentieth Century* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015). An excellent overview of recent works on anti-imperialist connections in: Daniel Brückenhaus, ‘Challenging Imperialism Across Borders: Recent Studies of Twentieth-Century Internationalist Networks against Empire’, *Contemporary European History*, 29, 2020, 104–15.

<sup>87</sup> Ucelay da Cal, ‘Els enemics dels meus enemics. Les simpaties del nacionalisme català pels “moros”: 1900–1936’, *L’Avenç*, 29 (1980), 409–20.

<sup>88</sup> María Rosa de Madariaga, *En el barranco del lobo. Las guerras de Marruecos* (Madrid: Alianza, 2005), 197–202.

<sup>89</sup> See: Montserrat Baras Gómez, *Acció Catalana (1922–1936)* (Barcelona: Curial, 1984). On the atomised character of Catalan separatism during these years, see J. Esculies, ‘El nacionalismo radical . . .’.

<sup>90</sup> ‘Els moros i els espanyols’, *La Publicitat*, 22/8/1923, reproduced in: Antoni Rovira i Virgili, *Catalunya i Espanya* (Barcelona: La Magrana, 1988), 405.

of Spanish colonialism left an opening for joining forces with the Rif Republic. Nowhere in his abundant writings did this Catalan nationalist leader express any sympathy for Abd el-Krim and his followers.<sup>91</sup>

Such lack of solidarity towards the Rifi cause, which stands in stark contrast with the solidarity expressed by movements in such distant places as Argentina, France, the United States and British India, points at the limits of internationalism in the post-war era. To prominent theorists of Catalan nationalism, not only Rovira i Virgili but also Prat de la Riba, 'civilisation' was a prior requirement for any people seeking recognition as a nation, and therefore qualifying to exert self-determination rights. As the former author put it:

The right conferred by nationality, the right to full independence, is the patrimony of peoples who have reached civil maturity. It does not extend equally to civilised and savage peoples, to peoples of high culture and miserable tribes. The error of all those who commit this confusion lies in not realizing that there exist subnational peoples to which the nationalist principle cannot be applied. This principle presupposes a national conscience, a collective will. Where is the collective conscience and will of the tribes of Morocco or the Negroes of Senegal?<sup>92</sup>

When drawing the boundaries between 'civilised' and 'uncivilised' peoples from which political rights derive, Catalan nationalists were not inventing anything *ex nihilo* but rather following the civilising mission discourse that European colonial powers had deployed since the nineteenth century. In this regard, although the experience of the First World War undermined presuppositions of Western superiority, especially among African and Asian intellectuals, the main tenets of the civilising discourse persisted, the clearest example being the 'trusteeship' principle of the League of Nations' mandate system.<sup>93</sup> For this reason, while Catalan nationalists had no qualms in criticising the futility of Spain's colonial efforts in Morocco, they worried that condemning the practice of colonialism in general would alienate foreign observers and be detrimental to their cause.<sup>94</sup>

The Rif Republic, for its part, also showed little interest in joining forces with sub-national movements in Spain. In the pleas sent to the League of Nations and in statements made to European newspapers, Rifi representatives repeatedly emphasised that their war was not against ordinary Spaniards but against the advocates of colonialism. Hence, they deplored that 'the Spanish Colonial Party sheds the blood of more of the children of Spain in order to promote their private ambitions and their imaginary pretensions', drawing a clear distinction between the so-called 'Spanish Colonial Party' and Spain.<sup>95</sup> Still, when diplomatic action was undertaken, Abd el-Krim devoted his limited resources not to cultivating the support of Spain's domestic opponents but rather to persuading the Great Powers that the Rifian government was 'established upon modern ideas and on the principles of civilisation'.<sup>96</sup> To this end, emissaries of the Rif Republic were sent to Paris and London in 1922 in a failed attempt to garner international support.<sup>97</sup>

<sup>91</sup> A compilation of the writings of this author in *Ibid.*

<sup>92</sup> Antoni Rovira i Virgili, *Nacionalisme i Federalisme* (Barcelona: Edicions 62, 1982), 159–60. For the case of Prat de la Riba, see: E. Ucelay-da-Cal, *El imperialisme catalán*.

<sup>93</sup> Michael Adas, 'Contested Hegemony: The Great War and the Afro-Asian Assault on the Civilizing Mission Ideology', *Journal of World History*, 15, 1 (2004), 31–63; Susan Pedersen, 'The Meaning of the Mandate System: An Argument', *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, 32 (2006), 560–82; Mark Mazower, 'An International Civilization? Empire, Internationalism and the Crisis of the Mid-Twentieth Century', *International Affairs*, 82 (2006), 553–66.

<sup>94</sup> 'We often see some nationalists . . . who defend the right to independence of uneducated, uncivilised peoples by appealing to the principle of national freedom. . . . Such nationalism – or pseudo-nationalism – causes great harm to Catalanism in the eyes of educated people, diminishing the seriousness [of Catalanism] and rendering it ridiculous.' A. Rovira i Virgili, *Nacionalisme i Federalisme*, 159.

<sup>95</sup> 'Spain and the Rif', *The Times*, 9 Jun. 1924, 11.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>97</sup> On these delegations, see: María Rosa de Madariaga, *España y el Rif. Crónica de una historia casi olvidada* (Melilla: UNED, 2000), 532–3.

One final manifestation of the limits of internationalism occurred in July 1923, when *Acció Catalana* called for the creation of a ‘Triple Alliance’ among the most radical strands of Basque and Galician nationalism.<sup>98</sup> In the following days, as the war in Morocco worsened, *Aberi*, the mouth-piece of the Basque Nationalist Party, proposed adding the Rif Republic to their union to create a ‘Fourth Alliance’. The proposal was couched in mystical tones:

. . . The Triple Alliance will be joined by a new, radiant light from the most remote lands of the south. Over the Straits and across Spain who humiliates us, will come a hardy voice, full of vigor, calling: – ‘To the Triple Alliance: in supreme moments enslaved peoples must lend each other assistance and warmth to make the sacrifice productive. To your efforts I add mine . . .’<sup>99</sup>

The ‘hardy voice’ (*‘voz recia’*) to which *Aberi* referred was, of course, that of Abd el-Krim, whom the newspaper imagined as calling for a joint uprising of the ‘enslaved peoples’ stretching from Northern Africa to the Iberian Peninsula. Catalan separatists, however, turned a deaf ear to the proposal (of which the Berber leader himself was probably unaware) and their newspapers made no mention of it.<sup>100</sup> The alliance was thus to remain within the strict confines that *Acció Catalan* first proposed; namely, a ‘new common front between the three Peninsular nationalisms against the decaying Spanish state’.<sup>101</sup>

## Conclusions

Mindful of the tendency to study the crisis of liberalism from either a nation-centred or Eurocentric perspective, this article has showed how tightly Spain became enmeshed in the global re-ordering in the wake of the First World War. Neither the loss of its empire in 1898 nor remaining neutral during the war spared this country from suffering any of its consequences. Those factors did not preclude Spain from taking an active – if clearly modest – role in the new League of Nations either. The Spanish experience also reveals the reach of the shockwaves produced by the ‘Wilsonian moment’ beyond the already thoroughly studied cases of the colonised world, Eastern and Central Europe,<sup>102</sup> affecting neutral countries as well. And yet, as the cases of Rifi and Catalan separatists reveal when examined together, the epistemological benefits of finding connections in global history can only be fully realised when global (dis)connections are also attended to.<sup>103</sup>

The case of the Rif Republic offers a good case in point. Its mere existence is often neglected in Spanish accounts that tend to portray the ‘Disaster of Annual’ as one of the main causes for the downfall of the Restoration system. In this regard, bringing the short-lived story of this fragile North African polity into focus not only opens a perspective that ‘provincialises’ European history,<sup>104</sup> but it also brings out the limits of using the Wilsonian variety of internationalism as the sole prism to explain

<sup>98</sup> Margarita Otaegui, ‘La Triple Alianza de 1923’, in M. González Portilla, J. Maluquer de Motes and B. de Riquer, eds., *Industrialización y nacionalismo. Análisis comparativos* (Barcelona: Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona), 431–41; José Luis de la Granja Sainz, ‘Las alianzas políticas entre los nacionalismos periféricos en la España del siglo XX’, *Studia historica*, 18, 2000, 149–75.

<sup>99</sup> Gudari, ‘La guerra para la paz. TRIPLE ALIANZA’, *Aberi. Órgano oficial del Partido Nacionalista Vasco*, 15 Jul. 1923, 1.  
<sup>100</sup> ‘La triple alianza peninsular’, *La Publicitat*, 26 Jul. 1923, 1.

<sup>101</sup> ‘Galícia, Bascònia i Catalunya’, *La Publicitat*, 8 Jul. 1923, 1.

<sup>102</sup> See: Larry Wolff, *Woodrow Wilson and the Reimagining of Eastern Europe* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020); Eric Storm and Maarten Van Ginderachter, ‘Questioning the Wilsonian Moment: The Role of Ethnicity and Nationalism in the Dissolution of European Empires from the Belle Époque through the First World War’, *European Review of History*, 26, 5 (2019), 747–56.

<sup>103</sup> Roland Wenzlhuemer, *Doing Global History: An Introduction in Six Concepts* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), 20–1; Jeremy Adelman, ‘What Is Global History Now?’, *Aeon*, 2 Mar. 2017, available at <https://aeon.co/essays/is-global-history-still-possible-or-has-it-had-its-moment> (last visited March 2021).

<sup>104</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

the agency of colonial actors in the post-war era. Contrary to their counterparts in Egypt or India (to mention only two well-studied cases),<sup>105</sup> Rifi activists did not appeal – not one single time – to the charisma nor to the promises of the US president in their quest for international recognition. Instead, they directed their efforts toward the new League of Nations, referring to the same familiar civilising principle that Spain and France paradoxically yielded to crush resistance to their colonial rule. But this was only one of the strategies that Global South actors pursued in the international arena. An equal – and certainly more sincere – portion of the limited resources and attention of the Rif Republic was devoted to establishing alliances with other anti-imperialist groups. In this regard, the contacts between the Rif and Latin America, as well as the solidarity campaigns that were carried out in Chicago, Paris and New Delhi, reveal the rich and multifaceted dimensions of the global anti-imperialist movement in the 1920s. Crucial to this effort was Abd el-Krim's becoming seen as an icon of armed resistance, as a symbol that would exert a powerful influence in different revolutionary movements up to (and after) his death in Cairo in 1963.<sup>106</sup>

Despite the bonds of solidarity that developed between the Rif Republic and other anti-imperialist movements around the world, the Catalan case serves as a cautionary reminder against the global historians' eagerness to find connections wherever they look. Neither their common demand for national self-determination before the League of Nations nor the shared desire to end the bloodshed of the war in Morocco were sufficient to convince Catalan separatists to make common cause with the Rifi rebels. The Catalanist indifference, for that matter, is unsurprising in at least one aspect. Catalan nationalism subscribed to a view of the right to self-determination that made 'civilisation' a prerequisite, which made it necessary to differentiate its cause from that of 'sub-national peoples' – a criterion that explains, for instance, the references to 'the white races' made in the campaigns to the League of Nations. Ultimately, the parallel – more than connected – histories of Catalans and Rifi reveal that, in the post-Versailles world where new solidarities seemed to emerge among the most distant people, the old standard of civilisation still posed a crucial, insurmountable divide – even among the groups who considered Spain their common enemy.

<sup>105</sup> Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment*, 63–75 and 77–97, respectively.

<sup>106</sup> Mevliyar Er, 'Abd-el-Krim al-Khattabi: The Unknown Mentor of Che Guevara', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 29 (2017), 137–59.