

A Review of: “Western Sahara: Reasons for Extemporaneous Colonization and Decolonization 1885-1975”

by Jesús Martínez-Milán and Claudia Barona Castañeda¹²

János Besenyő³

In late 2020, a conflict known as the Guerguerat crisis erupted with Sahrawis protesting against the Moroccan occupation of Western Sahara. The Sahrawis blocked the movement of trucks from Morocco to Mauritania and south on National Route 1, preventing them from proceeding. On 13 November 2020, the protesters were driven away by the Moroccans with armed force and were also shot at. The nearby Polisario gunmen reciprocated the fire. Fortunately, there were no fatalities in the short-lived clash, yet the Polisario Front denounced the ceasefire since 1991 and launched attacks on a fortification system built by Moroccans to protect the occupied territories from the displaced natives. (UNSC 2021) In the period since then, there have been low-intensity clashes in the area, in which Moroccans have also deployed drones. (Lebovich 2021) The clashes have once again drawn attention to the world’s last colonial territory, where indigenous people are still unable to exercise their right to self-determination and decide to live in their own independent country or autonomously within Morocco. Unfortunately, the peacekeeping operation set up by the United Nations, MINURSO, is unable to achieve the goal of organising and conducting a referendum for indigenous peoples for which it was set up, so its activities are limited to maintaining the status quo that has existed since 1991. Perhaps thanks to this, the issue of Western Sahara has once again been addressed at several conferences and several publications have been published on the fate of the area. These include the book “Western Sahara, Reasons for Extemporaneous Colonization and Decolonization 1885-1975” published by Nova Science Publishers at the end of 2021 and noted by Jesús Martínez-Milán⁴ és Claudia Barona Castañeda⁵.

¹ DOI: <https://doi.org/10.59569/jceeas.2021.1.4.71>

² Martínez-Milán, Jesús and Castañeda, Claudia Barona, *Western Sahara: Reasons for Extemporaneous Colonization and Decolonization 1885-1975*. New York: Nova Science Publishers, 2021. ISBN: 978-1-68507-334-3. pp. 177.

³ Head of institute at Africa Research Institute, School on Safety and Security Sciences, Óbuda University, Budapest, Hungary; ORCID: 0000-0001-7198-9328.

⁴ Senior Lecturer in Economic History/Lecturer in International Relations, University of las Palmas of Grand Canary, Spain; University of the Americans, Puebla, México. Degree in Geography and History (History section) from the University of Salamanca in 1983. Doctor in Contemporary History from the National Distance Education University (UNED) of Madrid, in 2000. Area of Knowledge: History and Economic Institutions. Main lines of research: Colonisation and Decolonisation. Spanish investments in Morocco and Western Sahara in the 19th and 20th centuries. Public company and mining.

⁵ Professor and Social Science Research specialist, Department of International Relations and Political Science, University of the Americans, Puebla, Mexico. Doctorate in Philosophy with a specialization in Arab and Islamic Studies and International



The well-structured and detailed book deals with the Spanish colonisation of Western Sahara and the Spanish period, followed by the withdrawal of the Spaniards, which is essential to understanding the current conflict. The authors present in a short introduction the reason for the choice of topic, the research they have carried out and the structure of the book. From this, it turns out that a lot of material has been kept in Spanish archives that could not be researched until now. Furthermore, several people who were themselves active shapers of the daily life of the former Spanish Sahara and then the organisers and executors of the Spanish departure were interviewed. The book is already a curiosity for that reason alone, and because the Spanish archival material researched on this topic has not been published in English yet.

In the first chapter, we get to know the region, the period before the arrival of the Europeans, the society of the people living there, the activities of the different tribes, and the operation of trans-Saharan trade. In the second chapter, the authors present the processes leading to the Spanish colonisation and the occupation of the area, as well as the relations between the Spaniards and the natives between 1885 and 1933. They make it clear that the Kingdom of Spain, which had already gone far beyond its peak at the time, occupied the Río de Oro peninsula in what is now Western Sahara. This was only to give the Canary Islands greater security against other European powers ready to colonise and to protect the interests of the Spanish fishermen operating there (p. 22). Therefore, the Spaniards preferred to occupy the shores of Western Sahara for economic reasons and did not wish to expand inland. However, the new colony did not live up to expectations and only made a loss to the treasury. Moreover, in 1898, the Spaniards were defeated in the war for Cuba by the United States, resulting in the loss of a significant portion of their colonies. (Nunez 2015, pp. 195-196) The authors mentioned that both the British and the French wanted to annex the territory to their own colonial empires (p. 28-30), but this did not happen, and the territory remained in the hands of the Spaniards until 1975. Interestingly, the authors do not mention that Compañía Transatlántica, which used the commercial station Villa Cisneros in 1899, with the approval of the Spanish leadership, offered to lease the area to the Austro-Hungarian Colonial Society (Österreichisch-Ungarische Kolonialgesellschaft), founded in 1895, for 30 or 90 years. The issue reached the highest level of the Austro-Hungarian state formation, and after the approval of the political leadership, negotiations began on the lease of the area. The Foreign Minister of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy instructed the Consul in Tangier, Count Gilbert von Hohenwart, to gather as much information as possible about the area, which he did conscientiously. His report confirmed that Río de Oro was only making a loss for the Spaniards, but nevertheless believed the Monarchy could make the area profitable. According to one paragraph of the report, *“the Spanish colony consists of 1 captain, 1 lieutenant, 1 non-commissioned officer, 2 corporals, 27 soldiers, 1 physician, 1 engineer, 1 fireman, and 5 employees of the Spanish naval artillery, a total of 40 people. The indigenous colony consists*

Mediterranean Studies, Autonomous University of Madrid. BA in History, National School of Anthropology and History. Area of Knowledge: History of Africa, national identity social movements tribalism and colonisation state and society. Western Sahara and social movements in Western Sahara and the Sahel.

of 54 to 60 fishermen in 12 families and 7 Sudanese Negroes". (HU_MNL_OL_W253_N_0028 and HU_MNL_OL_W253_N_0029) These data coincide with those in the table prepared by the authors, which shows the evolution of the population of Villa Cisneros between 1897 and 1909 (p. 33). The count saw a good opportunity in the development of ports and fishing, and also wanted to play a more active role in the trans-Saharan trade. The Monarchy was so excited by the possibility of a possible colonial acquisition that even an expedition was launched into the area to learn as much as possible about it. Meanwhile, the Spaniards prepared an amendment to the law to hand over the area, and a working group worked out the conditions for leasing the area. The Spanish company, which operated the site, transferred the exploitation rights to a consortium until 31 December 1899, which was responsible for the sale. The consortium was led by Juan Bautista Somogy, a representative of Hungarian origin, who wanted to sell, but rather "lease", the area to a foreign trading company so that the Spanish crown would retain control over the area. However, the negotiations stalled due to the differences between the political and economic leadership of the Monarchy, and at the end of 1899 the Monarchy withdrew from the business that had been very important to it until then. (Besenyő 2020a, pp. 71-78) After this, the Spaniards decided to keep the area, although in the following years there was still a motion to "trade" it with the French. This did not happen, however, and they even began to slowly develop the area (pp. 31-39). In this chapter, we can also trace the Spanish-French negotiations and border agreements that form the borders of Western Sahara today. The policy of the Spaniards towards the Sahrawis, whom they were trying to win over with regular annuities and gifts within the policy of "peaceful penetration" or "sugar pylon", is very interesting. This practice confirmed in the natives that the Spaniards came to the Río de Oro not to colonise but to trade (p. 40-46, 141).

In the next, third chapter, we learn about the French and Spanish interests and counter-interests, how the two colonial powers competed and, if necessary, cooperated against the natives who carried out attacks on French forces stationed in Mauritania from Spanish territory (p. 52). As a result, several conflicts arose between the colonial powers, which led to the Spaniards being forced to cooperate with the French and to make certain improvements in their colonies. However, spectacular developments took place during the period marked by the reign of Franco (1940-1973), which are dealt with in the fourth chapter. It can be seen from this that the area became more valuable to the Spanish leadership, under which the administration has been restructured and economic developments have been carried out, leading to an increase in the population (p. 66-71, 79-83). Meanwhile, independence aspirations in the surrounding states also emerged in Spanish-Saharan Africa, moreover, neighbouring Morocco claimed the territory. The Spaniards therefore sought to get the natives on their side and to placate the Moroccans by handing over the Tarfaya zone (p. 75). However, this yielded only temporary results, which led to the idea of the creation of an independent Sahrawi state under Spanish patronage (p. 78-79). Some indigenous peoples were dissatisfied with this and established their own liberation organisations, the Advanced Organisation for the Liberation of the Sahara (AOLS) and the Polisario Front (p. 83-94). The authors documented what was happening very thoroughly at the time, but when they write



about the fate of Bassiri Muhammad wuld Hach Brahim wuld Lebser, the head of AOLS, they write: “According to the provincial government version, Bassiri was released on the border with Morocco (Barbulo 2002, 68-72). To date, there is no data confirming either hypothesis.” (p. 89). This is contradicted by the fact that several Spanish soldiers, (León 2019, p. 71.; de Riquelme 1991, p. 610) and even then-governor Pérez de Lerma, claimed that the Sahrawi political leader was executed by soldiers of the Legion and then buried in the desert outside El-Aaiún. (Besenyő 2020b) In the fifth chapter, we can see how the Spanish government sought to exploit the area’s natural resources. What developments were made in the fisheries sector (p. 96-102), how phosphate fields and other valuable minerals were discovered and how they benefited from them. However, they succeeded in achieving this only to a limited extent (p. 102-118). In the sixth chapter, readers can learn about the last two years of Spanish colonial rule, when Franco, who ruled Spain with an iron fist, is pushed back by his illness. Those who wanted to inherit did not really know what to do with the Sahrawi colony. They first wanted to give autonomy to the natives (p. 120) and then asked the Arab League to make decisions about the fate of the area (p. 121-122). However, none of these materialised, as Morocco's demands for the area were supported by the United States and France. The Polisario Front, representing an increasing number of indigenous peoples, launched an armed struggle against the Spaniards to force them to leave the area (p. 123-124, 136-137). However, this led the Spaniards not to carry out the decolonisation of their former colony, but to hand it over to Morocco and Mauritania (p. 144), who occupied Western Sahara with arms against the will of the natives, resulting in a 16-year war.

In addition to the well-written chapters, the index created by the authors and the various tables and diagrams help the readers to find their way. Unfortunately, this is less true of maps, the size and quality of some of which leave something to be desired in several cases (p. 2, 28, 34, 50, 106, 110). It would also have been useful to publish a list of the maps and other figures and diagrams at the beginning of the book. The literature used by the authors is very impressive, but I miss from the English literature John Mercer’s book *Spanish Sahara*, which is one of the most basic sources on Spanish-Sahara alongside Tony Hodges’ book. However, these do not detract from the value of this gap-filling volume that I recommend to anyone who is studying African studies, political history, security policy, and history, or to those interested in the Maghreb region.

Bibliography

- Besenyo, J. (2020a) *Magyarország és a nyugat-szaharai válság* [Hungary and the crisis in Western Sahara], Budapest: Monarchia Kiadó.
- Besenyo, J. (2020b) ‘The role of the Spanish Legion in the Spanish possessions of Ifni, Tarfaya and West Sahara’, *Revista Digital de Historia Militar*, ISSN 2254-3619, July 15. Available at <https://historiamilitar.es/the-role-of-the-spanish-legion-in-the-spanish-posessions-of-ifni-tarfaya-and-west-sahara/?fbclid=IwAR1-kEALBT65hDyxbenRlpRC9B6yiDi1VtUqtpwnCvNb22W7ye4agSr6jvw> (Accessed 30 November 2021).

del Riquelme, J. P. P. (1991) *Historia de los saharauis y crónica de la agresión colonial en el Sáhara Occidental* (PhD dissertation). Universidad Complutense de Madrid. Available at <https://eprints.ucm.es/id/eprint/1768/> (Accessed 30 November 2021).

Hungarian National Archive, HU_MNL_OL_W253_N_0028 and HU_MNL_OL_W253_N_0029.

Lebovich, A. (2021) 'Crisis to watch: Western Sahara', *Italian Institute for International Political Studies*, December 22. Available at <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/crisis-watch-western-sahara-32768> (Accessed 30 November 2021).

León, E. S. (2019) *Comparative analysis of the decolonisation of the Spanish Protectorate in Morocco and the frustrated attempt in Western Sahara (1945-1976): Cultural clash, inhabitants and administration*. Erasmus University Thesis Repository, Maatschappijgeschiedenis/History of Society. Available at <http://hdl.handle.net/2105/49930> (Accessed 30 November 2021).

Nunez, X.-M. (2015) 'Nation-Building and Regional Integration: The Case of the Spanish Empire (1700-1914)' in Miller, A. and Berger, S. (eds.) *Nationalizing Empires*. Budapest/New York: CEU Press.

UNSC (2021) 'S/2021/843 Situation concerning Western Sahara, Report of the Secretary-General', *United Nations Security Council*, October 1. Available at https://minurso.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/unsg_report_october_2021.pdf (Accessed 30 November 2021).