

On the attempt to raise rebellion in the Spanish zone of Morocco in September 1938 and the ramifications thereof

Antonio Vidal Arabi

August 20, 1938

In the putting together of this report, I have had, for the most part, to delve into my memories for the required details, since most of my archive, which is to say, most of the copies of my entire correspondence, coded orders and the like, traded with my superiors ever since I joined the foreign intelligence [service] of the High Command of the Land Forces of the Spanish Republic, was left by me in the care of my superior, Señor Aransay, with an undertaking that I could later have it back. Once said documentation had been handed over, he spirited it away, with the best of intentions I imagine, despite his undertaking. There was some talk, I think, about its being sent on to Barcelona. Since I was nothing I could do, being under arrest and given how the war finished, I think that gentleman's actions may have been for the best as they pre-empted the potential for greater damage being done. That being the case, my memory might just let me down on some of the earlier dates, but everything that I am about to set out will be wholly truthful and, now that the war is over, there is no reason for me to leave out anything ever left unmentioned in my communications with my superiors on account of the war and any moral inhibition on my part.

In order to set the context for the events I am about to recount, I shall hark back in time a little, albeit briefly, so as to explain the roots of my activities in Morocco by way of background.

The army revolt [July 1936] caught me in Santa Cruz de Tenerife where I was living; at the time I held a post on the Defence Committee of the Confederal Organisation, the latter being the only force in Tenerife with any prospect of organising resistance at the time. For reasons we need not go into here, things did not go as we would have wished and the view was that we needed to spell out our situation to the government along with the chances of our succeeding against the rebels right across the province. At a meeting it was agreed that a delegate should set out immediately for Madrid and I was the one selected, with another comrade to accompany me.

Surmounting all of the difficulties, I reached Barcelona (with my companion staying behind in Oran for a time) twenty days after setting off from Santa Cruz.

To kill time, on arrival in Barcelona I reported to my Organisation and in confidence told the secretary of my desire to be introduced to the government's representative and for the radio to report my arrival in the peninsula that very night (using a pre-arranged formula of words) so that my comrades in the islands might know that I had achieved my first target. The report was broadcast and I was afforded "fast track" access to speak to the Secretary for War, who was at that point (mid-October) Juan Garcia Oliver, who went on later to serve as Minister of Justice.

I reckon he took me for a crackpot (something which has often befallen me in dealings with various persons during the war, something I put down to the lack of geographical knowledge on the part of many of them). And he gave me to understand that I was wasting his time and wasting my own time too.

I approached the Regional [Committee] for assistance in getting to Madrid and was issued with a train ticket out of state funds, plus 25 pesetas in cash (I had just arrived in the peninsula in a lamentable physical condition and semi-clothed).

It took me two days to get to Madrid. Countrymen of mine had raised a Battalion and there I came across some old friends. I immediately had a word with the islands' representatives in the Cortes – Junco and Toral from Gran Canaria, and Castro Diaz and Sosa Acevedo from Tenerife.

Aplatanamiento, as we call laziness over there, or lack of vision was either a factor or maybe it was because I wore myself out dropping into government offices, meeting no one who could understand my point, one of the factors most crucial to our success. (The Canaries supplied the enemy with 50,000 fighting men, and virtually all the fuel needs of his army, plus tobacco and fruit galore. And facilitated access to Ifni, the possessions in the Sahara and in the Gulf of Guinea, from where he was receiving large stocks of various materials).

I decided to turn to the CNT National Committee which was then based in Madrid and to its secretary Horacio Prieto. He had no need to tell me where he was born, for I could tell that he was born a long, long way from the sea.

A Canaries Antifascist Committee was immediately set up and it agreed to seek direct intelligence from the comrades left behind in the islands and to funnel financial help to them so that they could resist whilst lobbying continued at the highest levels. This new mission was entrusted to me and I left the country.

Having gathered that intelligence, I returned to Madrid in late November. The deputies had other irons in the fire and did not feel that the time was right for broaching the matter with the government.

With the prime reason for my having come to the peninsula having met with failure, I made my way back to Catalonia and enlisted as a militia with the Sur-Ebro Column (later the 25 th Division). A few weeks later, I was summoned by the Canaries Committee to Valencia, to where it had relocated and was once more commissioned to gather intelligence in the islands with an eye to mounting a venture with material backing from the Navy Minister.

When I got back to Spain in April '38 with all of the data I had been asked to gather, I found that the venture had been given up as a dead duck, in the estimation of the then Chief of Navy Staff, Señor Ubieta, who was always unsupportive, even though Señor Prieto gave it his full attention, holding nothing back.

For reasons of comradeship, I, together with those of my countrymen involved in the previous venture, joined the Naval Auxiliary Services and on one trip to Valencia I was asked by an old friend of mine, Gonzalez Inestal, to report to the Land Forces' Head of Military Intelligence who had read the reports I had brought back from the Canaries. He invited me to present him with

an ongoing briefing in writing. My thinking proved acceptable and I joined the Service, leaving immediately for abroad.

I am enthusiastic about my work, with encouragement from my superiors, but there is a bureaucratic side to my work that does not suit my temperament. I was presented with an opportunity to operate on a grand scale in the enemy's rear, made my report and this was acceptable to my superior. Shortly after that, I availed of my freedom of action to pop over to Tangiers. I sized up my task from close quarters and asked for leave to go to Valencia to put a wide-ranging schedule of work to my superiors.

It turned out that my superior officer was Colonel Estrada and Señor Aransay was the superior of my attaché. Aransay's intentions did not all fit in with the schedule of work I put to him but they were feasible, and I returned to Tangiers on a mission from the Service in Andalusia and Extremadura (there were, in addition, other agencies run by persons not on the Army payroll) and, informally, in Morocco as well.

Tangiers was a sort of a paradise where those who could strike a "Red" pose could count on high earnings as payment was made in the form of gold. There was real corruption everywhere and – with honourable exceptions – well-heeled civilian and military personnel kept up the 'Tangiers Front' myth, cashing in on some silliness that cost five or six poor unfortunates their lives.

Still isolated from all our people, I found it very easy to work and, as was later shown during the Trial, the enemy never found out about my activities from the incidents in the report until he was informed by non-military agents of the Service.

I built up a relationship with the Nationalist leader, Sidi el Jalak Torres. I made a thorough study of the Cazorla-Baraibar Plan [see endnote]. I made the acquaintances of native bigwigs. I probed various aspects of the situation in the zone and came up with a final proposal for an uprising, showing up in Barcelona with an Arab delegate (see attached report of 1/5/38).

On my arrival I found that Aransay was on leave, having had an accident and his post had been filled by Emilio Estrada, the brother of the Colonel, my commanding officer. In writing and by means of the spoken word, I explained to him the reasons behind my trip. I was left to wait for a few days and then, finally, had it from his own lips that his brother, the Colonel, saw nothing of interest in it and that I could go back to Tangiers.

Realising that everything in that direction was going to come to grief, I made up my mind to brief my friend Gonzalez Inestal who at the time held high office in the War Commissariat. He introduced us to the Prime Minister's Under-Secretary who had oversight of Morocco and the Colonies. Señor Prats, who paid close attention to us, passed us on to the Under-Secretary for War, Zugazagoitia. Insofar as he was able, that gentleman raised the matter with the Prime Minister (who was at that point away, in the Centre region) Fearing that, for all that gentleman's concern, obstacles might crop up to abort my plan (I had had the previous experience of the Cazorla-Baraibar falling through) and on the basis of what had happened regarding the Canaries, I asked the minister in charge of Public Education (a comrade and friend of mine) to lobby the prime minister.

Then I was off again, back to my post, convinced that the government would have no problems with my getting on with things. I also found out that the Prime Minister was dealing with the matter and that the Colonel had been consulted about the matter, but the problem was that the prime minister left it up to the colonel to sort the thing out. So when I went along to say my goodbyes at the Service, I caught on immediately to the mistake made by whoever had updated

him on things. I was read a memo setting out all the government's counter-proposals to the suggestions put forward by X, leaving me to report live to the very same X. I requested a written copy but this was refused me, so I made notes. As had happened in connection with the Canaries project, failure was around the corner, even if the minister was well-disposed.

The government's counter-proposals (see document 2, attached) plainly betrayed a determination to abort the entire proposal as unacceptable and hare-brained. The spirit behind Article 1 was to pick up on a suggestion made by X when our dealings with each other began; in order to dispel any doubts I might have had about him, since there were those opposed to him, reports from the minister Señor Prieto del Rio, in which, right at the start of the revolt, being unfamiliar with Morocco and under pressure from popular factions, he failed to place any store by the offers being made by X who promptly volunteered his services to the government of the Republic. Had Article 1 been accepted and acted upon, (it would have been easily achieved, given the money), the whole thing would have come to nothing, having attracted the attention of the enemy. [The enemy] was utterly convinced that we had no capability to operate in the area and the (civilian) agents of the second Attache and of the Delegation were forever spreading rumours of repeated disturbances to order just to justify their wages and clientele. [Rumours of] batteries being set up along the coast, of German and Italian armies, etc., regarding which my boss was forever asking to see confirmation and which I, unfortunately, was obliged to be forever denying or showing to be of no consequence. Which just went to show how disorganised and incompetent we were and on that basis we were looked upon as harmless. Because of that prevailing attitude, I was able to get on with my work in the field unhindered. One significant factor in favour of an uprising was the enemy's cocksureness about himself and Morocco. The area was undermanned and overlooked, so much so that he used it as a training ground for men bound for the peninsula. Evidence of his negligence was the ease with which foreign tourists could move around, even inside the cities in which he was sovereign.

(Everything set down in this report is a transcription from an original copy made by MH17, agent of the Spanish Republican Land Forces' Intelligence Service).

Next, a transcript of REPORT 1/5/38, as cited above:

By way of a conclusion to the negotiations carried out by me, with his official knowledge (Report 21/2/38, No 4) regarding the report from our Agent MH17 (page attached to said Report No 4), I was invited by X to his private dwelling in order to finalise everything that had been mooted through our agent. In our conversation, X endorsed everything that had been said previously and appointed Agent MH17 to put his proposal to the RG [Republican Government]. Since the time allowed for us to respond was of necessity limited, being no later than the 10th of this month, I am obliged to report to you together with the afore-mentioned representative, in the absence of your leave, and acting on the basis of the permission received by telegraph on 24/11/37 (telegramme No 329). I must point out to you that I have acted solely as a simple go-between and that the success with which I have met is entirely down to Agent MH17, civil servant and great enthusiast of our Republic, which he has done great service.

X's OFFER (translated from the Arabic)

To raise rebellion among the Kabyles of Anyera, Yebala and Gomara. In the El Ajmas sector of Gomara. He already has links established with various native chiefs in the Zone, having a firm undertaking from them all that they will rise up against the rebel authorities. X would launch his move at a time and date to be established by the High Command and in the following locations:

ANYERA: El Ajmas, the city of Xauen and Gomara.

The Anyera operations would cover the area between Ceuta and Tangiers, including the whole of the frontier area.

In El Ajmas: including all of the garrisons in the area, Xauen included.

The Gomara operation would cover the area between Ceuta and Villa Alhucemas on the northern side and into Kabylia, to Beni-Said, Beni-Jaled, Bab-Taza and into the region around Alcazar-Kebir on the border with the French Zone. Among the support on which X is counting is the renowned DH from the Bab-Taza uprising that was put down by General Capaz and whom the Republic held in prison for two years; it was in deference to the great standing this DH enjoys in Yebala, he was not shot.

IN ORDER TO IMPLEMENT ALL THAT HE HAS OFFERED AND SPELLED OUT, X ASKS FOR THE FOLLOWING:

1. FIRST – That 500 rifles with 300 rounds apiece be delivered to him in Tangiers.
2. SECOND – A sum of French currency equivalent to two million francs.
3. THIRD – That he have no dealing other than with the individuals with whom he has dealt thus far and those on the ground.
4. FOURTH – A G[overnment] promise to afford moral and material aid once the uprising is under way.
5. FIFTH – The uprising will be invested with the character of a holy war, with X and the Supreme Commander, agreeable right from the outset to a High Command and advisors appointed by the Government.

For his own part, he undertakes to rise up in arms no later than one month from the date on which he receives all that he has asked for.

The 10th inst. has been suggested as the latest at which he can expect a final answer, because two days after that Easter is marked. In order to mark Easter, the rebel authorities allow groups from the Darqawi brotherhoods to leave the city; these will be going to Tangiers with gifts for the Ch,[Cherif?] an unmissable opportunity for orders to be issued to all from whom X has a commitment.

That, in sum, is the content of everything that has been proposed. Should its response be favourable, the Government could immediately dispatch someone to take charge of finalising the implementation of all ancillary matters.

Respectfully at your orders.

ABI

Deputy Head of Intelligence for the High Command of Land Forces, Barcelona.

Endnote [KSL]

Carlos Baraibar, a socialist reporter, argued that with the right funding a pro-republican revolt could be teased out of the Moors in N. Africa. He made wide overtures with the support of the Largo Caballero government in 1936–37 along with fellow socialist *Rafael Jimenez Cazorla*. They dispensed lots of funds – around 5 million francs, some say – to effect this plan and assured

everyone that a Moorish rebellion against the (by then) Francoists was imminent. It never came. Supporters of the Moroccan Nationalist Party declined to commit themselves as long as the Spanish authorities stuck to the same line as the French authorities. Baraibar seems to have been very indiscreet and, ultimately, ineffective and too sanguine in his promises that a Moroccan uprising was imminent./ The plan devised by Vidal and discussed with Moroccan nationalists was based upon the premise that the Spanish Republic would break with France, honour the promises made (but never kept) by Franco as regards rewards for Moorish support.

Appendix

On the same site (Document 69) there is a lengthy report made by the FAI Peninsular Committee in August 1939 to a Plenum of Libertarian Movement Regionals on “The Running of the War and Changes Commended by Experience”, with a section on action in Morocco which follows.

[Extract]

“(b) Action in Morocco

When it comes to fomenting division or loss of morale inside rebel territory, nothing fits the bill as well as our protectorate zone of Morocco, Ifni and the Spanish Sahara. The Islamic world is always ripe for agitation and revolt against the Christian oppressor, as long as one knows what one is doing and as long as that mind set is deftly handled.

The Kabyles of northern Morocco are impoverished, worn out and have suffered many losses to warfare. Xenophobia prevails still among the Muslims, especially among the tribes of the Rif massif. As for those areas bordering on the desert and in the actual desert itself, the inhabitants there are forever prey to ardent mystical fervours, quite apart from any uprising against the foreigner, and we might play upon both the religious sentiments and the xenophobia of the masses [and count on] the petty ambitions of the men wielding the greatest influence at feasts and gatherings, men who provide socio-political leadership to the tribes, among whom the Berber influence outweighs the Arab one. Where this is not the case, a single person, the Caïd, holds sway and he is always open to bribery and an asset to any recruitment drive. The Sahara and southern Morocco, well worked by the Germans and spiritually dominated by the Xorfa Ma el Ainin¹, have today assumed crucial significance in that they lie on the route to South America; which explains why the Germans, who control all the air bases, have already overrun those places and the Canaries. No longer will France be able to transport her West African army corps back to the metropolis. Moreover, the recruitment carried out by our enemies in the area and in the South has been considerable.. We would need to have France’s prior consent for action in Northern Morocco and in the Sahara and in Southern Morocco, even though she anticipates occupying all our territories at the first sign of trouble. Those areas, however, would need to be worked on with the formal cooperation of their native bureaux. And the Pan-Islamic Committee in Geneva, the Zionist upper echelons

¹ **Xorfa** (or Sherif) **Ma El Ainin** (1830–1910) was a Moroccan religious leader, ‘saint’ and miraculous healer who headed resistance to French incursions into Morocco. After his death his grave became a place of pilgrimage. His brother founded the Faddiya brotherhood.

in London and Paris, the Moroccan Jewish community, the main religious brotherhoods (the Darkawi, the Kaderca and the Tuyania) and local persons of stature would also need to be taken into the reckoning.

And, ruling out Tangiers, where it is impossible to operate at present, we would have to plant teams of skilled agents, good Arabists, in Uazzan, Fez, Tazza, Uxda, across the North and in Marrakesh, Agadir and St Louis de Senegal in the south, whose mission would be:

1. Gathering intelligence.
2. Spreading suitable reports and rumours around the tribes.
3. Trying to win persons of influence over to us.
4. Frustrating recruitment and targeting native units.
5. Attacks and sabotage.
6. Smuggling in and distributing arms.
7. Raising a revolt in the area and swooping on the rebel organisations and sites, capturing them for the Republic. The distribution of money, arms and munitions looks to be the best method of doing so. The patriotic and religious sentiments of the masses can be harnessed to the purpose as long as we have intelligent people to work upon them, especially people suited to dealing with such a wide spectrum of Muslims, settled and nomadic. “

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)
Anti-Copyright



Antonio Vidal Arabi

On the attempt to raise rebellion in the Spanish zone of Morocco in September 1938 and the
ramifications thereof

August 20, 1938

Retrieved on 25th March 2021 from www.katesharpleylibrary.net

*From FAI's Peninsular Committee Report to a Plenum of Regionals on the Direction of the War and
Changes Commended by Experience (20/08/1938). Translated by Paul Sharkey*

usa.anarchistlibraries.net