

# MOROCCAN BACKGROUND

## Behind The Armies In North West Africa

Most people still want to know what the United Nations have guaranteed in North Africa and what North Africa is giving in return. This recent account of the political and economic background does not answer those questions but indicates where the answer lies. It was written by George Orwell for the London "Observer."

**B**EFORE the war French Morocco, like much of North Africa, lived partly on its picturesqueness, ultimately traceable to poverty. Except for the climate, every feature that attracted the tourist really depended on the fact that the average human being's earnings were round about a penny an hour.

The most striking thing in Morocco is its barrenness. Of its seven million inhabitants the great majority are small peasants, cultivating a soil which is little better than desert. Down the Atlantic coast there is a strip of fertile land where a million tons of wheat are grown annually, but this is owned by a French syndicate which works it with gang labour. The Arab peasant stirs his dried-up soil with a primitive plough drawn by a cow and an ass yoked together, and grows crops of weed-infested barley and lucerne. For a few months there are fitful storms of rain, and then the streams swell, the grass springs up and the miserable domestic animals put on a little flesh, but for the rest of the year water is precious enough to be a cause of feuds and murders. Just as in Biblical times, landmarks are moved and streams suddenly diverted in the middle of the night. Part of the trouble is the lack of trees.

There are date palms, pomegranates, and, where the French have settled, groves of oranges and olives, but except in the Atlas Mountains there are no wild trees at all. This is the result of hundreds of years of goat-grazing. Even in the thinly-populated Atlas, where there are forests of oak and fir, the mountain-side round each village is bare as a slag-heap, thanks to the goat.

### "Charming But Naughty Children"

Morocco differs from the majority of French colonies in that it has only recently been conquered (the fighting did not really end till 1934), and French cultural influences have barely touched it. Very few Moroccan Arabs speak French otherwise than in a sort of barbarous pidgin. In the way of education the French have done very little, and there are no universities and no class corresponding to the English-speaking intelligentsia of Egypt or India. In 1939, at any rate, there was no vernacular Press or Arab-owned French Press, nor any nationalist movement worth bothering about. The social relationship between French and Arabs is complicated by the fact of Morocco being so near Europe. Excellent motor roads run all the way from the Mediterranean shore to the desert beyond the Atlas; and the French lorry driver, carrying with him the atmosphere of Marseilles, is as ready to sit down in the wayside bistro with an Arab as with a European.

In Casablanca there is a large French proletariat, drawing low wages, and everywhere there are small traders and

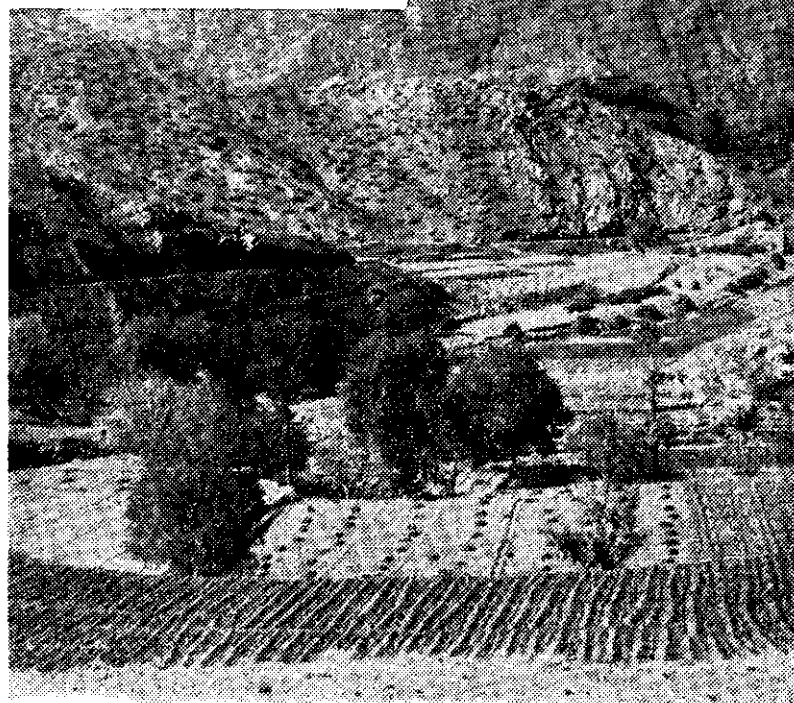
shopkeepers living among the Arabs, but reproducing as well as they can the life of provincial France. On the other hand, the business community, the bureaucracy, and the army officers live in a more lordly, Anglo-Indian style, and there is a general tendency to treat the Arabs as charming but rather naughty children. Everyone tu-toies them, and the newspapers refer to them patronisingly as "les indigènes" (natives). But the fact that the French working class have little colour prejudice—so that, for instance, French conscripts do not mind being put in the same barracks as African troops—makes for a friendly atmosphere, and has no doubt played its part in damping down nationalist feeling.

### Politically Apathetic

There are some 200,000 Europeans in Morocco, all French-speaking, though some of them are of Spanish origin. Since 1940 few Englishmen can have seen the interior of Morocco, and one can only guess at subsequent political developments, but in 1939, at any rate, the prevailing outlook among Europeans was semi-Fascist. The loyalties of the local Press ranged from Daladier to Doriot, and the Fascist weeklies, "Gringoire," "Candide," "Je suis Partout," and the rest of them, were on sale everywhere. The Left-Wing parties had no foothold, even in Casablanca. During the Munich crisis the general apathy and cynicism,



"Picturesqueness ultimately traceable to poverty"



"It needs more trees, more irrigation . . ."

even among army officers, were very striking. Anti-semitism was common although the Moroccan Jews, who live in self-contained communities and are mostly petty craftsmen, present no real problem. Some nationalist feeling may also have increased among the Arabs as a result of the French defeat and the consequent slump in French prestige.

### Stagnant, Feudal and Poor

Morocco is now under the control of the United Nations, and merely to govern it, in the sense of preventing rebellion, is not likely to be difficult. The French have successfully ruled it through the phantom Sultan, who has already transferred his allegiance to ourselves. But whether Morocco can be brought actively into the war is another question not answerable during the political interregnum. If we have guaranteed the existing regime, then Morocco will remain what it has always been—stagnant, feudal, and desperately poor.

### The Long-Term Needs

The long-term needs of the country are obvious enough. It needs more trees, more irrigation, better agricultural methods, better breeds of animals, more schools, more hospitals. All this means foreign capital and, inevitably, foreign protection, for a weak and backward country like Morocco cannot be genuinely independent.

But it would be a great pity if a positive short-term policy, capable of enlisting the Arabs on our side, cannot be evolved. Morocco is obviously important in the strategy of the war. The road and rail communication running from Casablanca to Tunis gives us a supply route far safer than we had hitherto, and at the worst the possession of Casablanca would partly offset the loss of Gibraltar. In spite of its poverty Morocco

can export several valuable foodstuffs, at need it could also produce at least 100,000 soldiers of the highest quality. The peacetime strength of the colonial army in Morocco was 50,000, of whom perhaps half would be Arabs. They were long-term volunteers, the Moroccan Arabs, unlike the Algerians or the Senegalese, not being French citizens and therefore not liable to conscription. The equipment of these troops was and probably still is old-fashioned, but as human material they would be hard to beat.

### A Quid Pro Quo?

It seems unlikely, however, that Morocco will enter fully into the war effort unless the war can somehow be given a meaning from the Arab point of view. Basically it is a matter of economic restitution. The French exploitation of Morocco has not been particularly gross, but still it is exploitation, and any thinking Arab must be aware of this. Nearly all of the most fertile soil of the country, and all the modern industries, are in foreign hands.

The grosser injustices could be wiped out without interfering with the small French settler, though not, indeed, without bumping up against the big capitalist interests. If we want the Arabs on our side we have got to promise them either autonomy or a higher standard of living, or both. And there is also the local French working-class, whose interests are approximately the same as those of the Arabs. Whether the existing French authorities, whom we have so hastily guaranteed, will lend themselves to any genuine programme of reform seems very doubtful. But it is certain that in Morocco, as in so many other places, the mass of the people will not and cannot be actively with us unless we are ready to make deep changes in the status quo.