

**Abd-el-Krim's guerrilla war against Spain and France in North Africa:
An adventure setting for screen melodramas**

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Abstract

The Rifian rebel leader Mohammed Abd-El-Krim Al-Khattabi (1882-1963) became an important early guerrilla leader by successfully initiating extensively organized resistance in the Moroccan Rif against Spanish and French imperial power in the early 1920s. The Rif war triggered a wave of adventure films since the 1930s. This paper will look at some of these, especially *Sergeant Klems* (1971) and *The Wind and the Lion* (1975) and suggest that they can be seen in terms of the wider impact of screen orientalism derived from the iconic film *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962) directed by David Lean. The paper will show that these films promoted what it terms a colonial gaze by underlining many stereotyped cinematic clichés relating to the Islamic cultural area and Abd-el-Krim's revolt that stretch back to the early history of cinema.

Keywords: Abd-el-Krim, Sergeant Klems, Rif War, Morocco, guerrilla warfare, clichés, stereotypes

Introduction:

Mohammed Abd-El-Krim Al-Khattabi (1882-1963) (Plate 1) initiated extensive organized resistance among the Berber peoples against Spanish and later French imperial power during the years 1921 to 1926 in the Rif region of Northern Morocco. He established a republic of the Rif based on its capital Adjir before it was finally ended in May 1926 by combined

Spanish and French colonial troops (see plate 2). It is a conflict that has been rather neglected in the history of European colonial rule in Africa.¹ In his report on his first Morocco mission Marshal Pétain wrote that he has been attacked unexpectedly by the most powerful and best armed enemy which France ever had to face in its colonial wars.² Starting off with the support of his family and relatively large tribe Abd-el-Krim succeeded in uniting his people against colonial powers, after a string of failures by previous leaders.

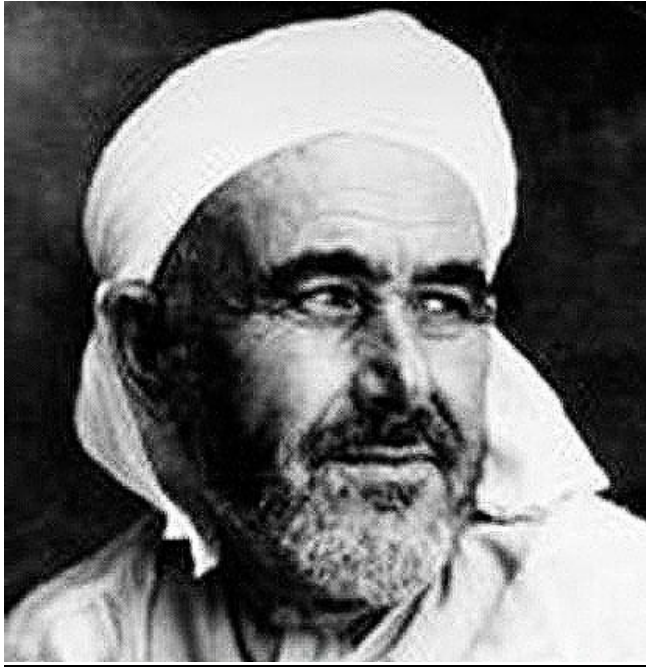
Plate 1 The Rif Republic



Plate 2 Mohammed Abd-El-Krim

¹ See e.g. R. Kunz, R. and R.D Müller. *Giftgas gegen Abd el Krim. Deutschland, Spanien und der Gaskrieg in Spanisch-Marokko 1922-1927*. Freiburg i.Br., 1990, 17

² E. Pröbster, 1925. „Die Befriedung der Berbern und der Rifkrieg“ in *Preußische Jahrbücher Volume 202*, 1925 158.



The Rif rebellion contained all the basic plot elements for adventure movies including a desert setting with rugged landscapes, camels, horses and oases; armed Arab or Berber warriors in flowing robes; beleaguered French and Spanish Foreign legionnaires; as well as huge possibilities for romantic melodramas in the heart of the burning Sahara. From 1921 until 1998 more than 20 movies had some sort of reference to the Riff including: *The Sheik* (1921), *The Son of the Sheik* (1926), *Beau Geste* (1926,1939,1966 and 1977³), *The Desert Song* (1929, 1932, 1943,1953 and 1955)⁴, *Morocco* (1930), *Renegades* (1930), *Drums of the Desert* (1940), *Road to Morocco* (1942), *Outpost In Morocco* (1949), *Ten Tall Men* (1951), *Saadia* (1954), *Sergeant Klems* (1971), *The Wind and the Lion* (1975), *March or Die* (1977) and *Legionnaire* (1998).

Not all these films are pure fantasy and some relate to actual historical events. In *Sergeant Klems* (1971), Abd-el-Krim is played by the Italian actor Pier Paolo Capponi while he is played again in *March or Die* (1977) by the British actor Ian Holmes. Long before these films were made Abd-el-Krim had captured the imagination of cinema audiences given the drama and media interest in the Rif war in the 1920s. It is possible to identify Krim in at least three major silent movies, namely *The Sheik* (1921), *The Son of the Sheik* (1926) and *The Desert Song*. Most of the films, though, misrepresented the history of the revolt as this paper will seek to show.

³ The title of the 1977 version is “The Last Remake of Beau Geste” and is a comedy.

⁴ The 1943 version does not relate to the Rif war but to the World War II.

Taking the films listed above it is possible to put them into three main categories. In a majority of the films, the lead characters are threatened by apparently “uncivilized” and “savage” Rifis and hence their central task is to survive the ordeal they face. In this category the Rifis effectively disappear as serious characters and are reduced to little more than film stereotypes or “evil Arabs.” In the second category, Western lead characters are on the side of the Rifis, who are portrayed in this instance as generally incompetent, backward or superstitious. Nevertheless the benevolent white characters do seek to help the Rifians defeat the invading foreign powers. The third category comprises films where the lead characters play local leaders, whose leadership skills are limited to abducting Western women – a category which Jack Shaheen labeled as “sheikhs” with all the accompanying erotic imagery that went with this cinema trope stretching back to the silent films of Rudolf Valentino such as *The Sheikh* (1921).⁵

The Rif war:

Krim’s family was the most numerous and powerful tribe in the Rif.⁶ Abd-el-Krim and his brother, Si M’hammed (1893-1967) were raised up in a religious family⁷. While Abd-el-Krim pursued Islamic studies at the University in Fes, Si M’hammed became a qualified mining engineer in Spain.⁸ The Rifis never accepted the decision of the Sultan to permit the Spanish and French to establish protectorates in their region. Their relationship towards the foreign invaders was anything but amicable. A German ex-legionnaire reported: “On the next day, our troop’s task was to collect taxes from a rebellious Arab tribe. This took place under conditions of difficult clashes requiring very high losses, as the tax evaders resisted desperately. Some of the German comrades made here their last breath.”⁹

Abd-el-Krim criticized the protectorate by writing articles in which he clearly requested the colonial powers to stop applying unfair practices to his people, and also argued that no

⁵ Jack C. Shaheen, *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies People*. London: Interlinks Books, 2015.

⁶ C.R. Pennell, *A country with a government and a flag: the Rif War in Morocco, 1921-1926*, Cambridgeshire: Menas Press, 1986, 237; Abd-el-Krim, *Memoiren, Mein Krieg gegen Spanien und Frankreich*. Dresden: Carl Reissner Verlag, 1927, 10-11.

⁷ Abd-el-Krim, 39.

⁸ Ibid.,10.

⁹ Zaeper A. *Unter der Glutsonne Marokkos gegen Ab del Krim*. Leipzig: Verlag Wahrheit, Ferdinand Spohr, 1932, 24. This incidence took place at the end of May 1925.

economic progress was achieved.¹⁰ In 1915, when questioned by his employer, Abd-el-Krim gave a written declaration stating his opposition against all oppressors of Islam, his support for the Turks and his plans to establish an independent Rif in the unoccupied territories.¹¹ Consequently, he was dismissed from all his posts, imprisoned for eleven months and used as hostage against his father. He was released after his father agreed to cooperate with the Spanish. The uneasy relationship finally ended in 1918 when the Spanish continued to subjugate more tribes. Together with his brother, Abd-el-Krim continued to pursue negotiations with other tribes to form an alliance against Spain. In April 1921 he was elected by fifty *Shaikhs* as their military leader.¹² On the 2nd of June 1921 Krim attained two victories on a single day: In a surprise attack launched on Dhar Ubarran and Sidi Idris, the majority of Spanish troops were killed.¹³

These victories encouraged more and more men to join Abd-el-Krim's troops. However, none of these successes were as triumphant as the one attained in Anwal on the 17th July which had lasted for five days. The estimated numbers for the Spanish troops range between 25,000 to 30,000¹⁴ and for the Rifis 3,000.¹⁵ The Spanish death toll - including General Silvestre – according to one source was at least 10,000.¹⁶ Others set the death toll higher, at up to between 13 000-19 000 fatalities including captives.¹⁷ This defeat was perceived as an “absolute miracle” (as Krim's brother called it) by the Rifis, though for the colonial forces it was viewed as a disaster. The reconquest of the areas lost in the past continued and the Rif Republic was proclaimed on 1st February 1923. In July 1924 the Spanish experienced another crushing defeat in Chaouen¹⁸ losing some 10,000 soldiers.¹⁹ As in 1921 this was a surprise

¹⁰ G. Ayache, *Les origines de la guerre du Rif*. Rabat/Paris, Société marocaine des éditeurs réunis/Publications de la Sorbonne, 1981,182.

¹¹ Ibid, 217.

¹² D.M. Hart, *The Aith Waryaghar of the Moroccan Rif. An Ethnography and History*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1976, 373.

¹³ Pennell, op. cit, 81.

¹⁴ Hart, op. cit 374.

¹⁵ In particular concerning numbers there are great disparities in the literature; See e.g. F. El-Asrouti, F. *Der Rif-Krieg 1921-1926: Eine kritische Untersuchung des gesellschaftlichen Transformationsprozesses unter Muhammad ibn Abd al-Karim al Hattabi*, Klaus-Schwarz-Verlag, 2007 61, 92, 95. The total number of the Rifi army (regular and local) is estimated to have been around 80 000, see D.A. Woolman, 1968. *Rebels in the Rif: Abd-el-Krim and the Rif Rebellion*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1968, 149.

¹⁶ El-Asrouti op cit 61). Another writer says 8 000. See D. Sasse, *Franzosen, Briten und Deutsche im Rifkrieg 1921-1926: Spekulanten und Sympathisanten, Deserteure und Hasardeure im Dienste Abdelkrims* Oldenbourg Wissenschaftsverlag, München: Oldenbourg Wissenschaftsverlag,2006, 40.

¹⁷ Hart op. cit 374.

¹⁸ B. Terhorst, *Feuer am Rif. Zwei Jahre unter Rifkabylen*, Berlin, Berlin: Neufeld und Henius, 1925. 177 & 179.

¹⁹ There are significant disparities in the existing literature concerning the death toll at both sides. This number is based upon the analysis by Pennell op. cit, 176.

attack where the Spanish had to give up one post after another, securing even more influence to Abd-el-Krim who effectively established a short-lived Rif Republic (see plate 2)

In early 1924 the Rifis began to observe problems relating to the French: The Ouergha valley, one of the most fertile regions of the Rif was of considerable interest to France. Food became short in the Rif due to contaminated soil caused by the Spanish resort to using chemical warfare agent S-Lost (Yperit) between 1924-26 dropped from planes: the first use in fact of aero-chemical warfare in history.²⁰ Not only were the guerilla fighters their target but also villages and water resources.

The French began to build blockhouses and military posts around the Ouergha valley which was largely spared from the contamination. Abd-el-Krim saw no other solution than to initiate a war against the French as well as the Spanish. He later admitted that this was a great strategic error as he had not foreseen that the two imperial powers would unite their manpower and resources to destroy the Rif revolt. Initially the French were in a desperate position like the Spanish and suffered significant losses. They then united their forces with the Spanish against Abd-el-Krim, who now faced some 200,000 Spanish troops along with 160,000 French soldiers supported by modern armour, airpower and artillery. By contrast the Riffian troops consisted of about 60,000 to 80,000 men.²¹ The territories lost were gradually re-conquered and on the 26th May 1926 Abd-el-Krim had no choice but to surrender to the French forces. He was then exiled to the island La Réunion, though in 1947 he managed to escape on his way to France and lived in Cairo until his death in 1963.

The Rifis as villains:

The fact that so many adventure films were set in the Rif war can be seen as confirming that the Rif rebellion was one of the more dangerous uprisings of the early twentieth century. In some of the films Krim's achievements are made visible by the spoken word without the presentation of any extensive battle scenes. This is particularly true in the film *March or Die* (1977) where Foster (Gene Hackman) - already traumatized by the war with the Rifis in the

²⁰ Kunz und Müller op. cit.

²¹ Sasse, 2006, op. cit., 51. Pröbster op. cit., 154. Pröbster makes the following statement concerning the number of troops on each side: "On the 9th July 1925 the French decided to increase the number of their troops to 150 000. The Spanish army consisted of about 100 000 Soldiers. In contrast the number of the Rifis were at most 40 000- 50 000. The aim of the Franco-Spanish army consisting of a quarter million men was to destroy the Rif republic founded by Abd-el-Krim." With regard to the number of Rifi troops Pröbster who adds: "Marshal Pétain estimates this figure to be between 30 000 and 40 000".

battle of Annual – is forced to use his soldiers to protect a group of archaeologists working in the Rif. The French are hoping to find a treasure that is worth several times more than their war expenditure in a burial site sacred to the indigenous people. The Foster declares that nobody could control Abd-el-Krim and that he went there with 800 men but returned with 200. Throughout the film Foster emphasizes his admiration for Krim and eventually, much to the dismay of the archeologists, he gives the treasure they have managed to excavate to Abd-el-Krim, whom he considers is its rightful owner. Nevertheless, Foster still justifies the presence of the French with the argument that they only want to bring twentieth century civilization into the region. The response he gets from Krim is that their civilization has brought nothing but misery and devastation and this is born out in the film's battle scenes where the Rifis mown down by machine guns and artillery: battle tactics far from Abd-el-Krim understanding of guerilla war. In practice, the Rifis avoided open confrontation as far as possible and the tribesmen tended to use the ambush, sneak attack and hit and run tactics which were mainly conducted at night.

Along with the presentation of some historic events some of the films do depict something of the cultural as well as military struggle in North Africa. In *March or Die* General Foster advises Abd-el-Krim to give the French whatever they want (such as permitting them to build schools and streets) in return for food and medication. Krim's dismissed this though as French cultural colonialism: "Streets with French signs, schools in which French is taught, French food and French medication administered by French doctors? No. This would be a desecration of our heritage." He considered this too high a price for friendship with France.

Abd-el-Krim, like his father, was not against the modernization of the country; he saw that building a road network would be a major advantage militarily as it would facilitate the transportation of confiscated heavy artillery.²² In 1921 the road between Ajdir and Aït Kamara was built under the supervision of Si M'hammed,²³ while in July 1922 about 60 Germans, mostly deserters from the French Foreign Legion, took over the supervision and management of further roads.²⁴

The films tend to show atrocities committed only by the Rifis. Several characters in *Sergeant Klems* (1971) mention that the Rifis castrate the enemy during their captivity. In one scene the

²² Sasse. Op cit, p. 125.

²³ Ibid., 126.

²⁴ Ibid., 127.

Rifis are shown throwing the decapitated head of a legionnaire to the French camp. Similarly, in *March or Die* (1977) Abd-el-Krim shows to Foster's men captives who have been blinded and their tongues cut out. A later film scene shows the body of the youngest legionnaire - stretched between two poles next to Abd-el-Krim - being mutilated. Not a single scene in these films shows similar atrocities by colonial soldiers, despite numerous historical photos showing them posing with decapitated heads of Rifis (see plate 3)²⁵

Plate 3 Spanish Soldiers in the Rif with decapitated heads



European Men Leading the Rifis

Some of the films attempt to ascribe Abd-el-Krim's successes in the Rif to a European figure modelled . "Lawrence of Arabia" and this would later spill over into cinema. Well before David Lean's iconic 1962 film of Lawrence there had been several films suggesting that Arabs usually needed some form of European assistance. *The Desert Song* (1929), for instance, suggested that this Arab dependency on European was racially superior. The film's

²⁵See the pictures in Kunz and Müller op. cit. Abd-el-Krim states in his memoirs that the death toll of his enemies would have been much higher had he not given the strictest orders and threatened with death penalties those of his followers who killed prisoners (see Abd-el-Krim, p. 72. Pennell 1986, pp. 81).

“The Red Shadow” is also the first character in the film history to be associated with Lawrence of Arabia: “the mysterious Red Shadow” who is really an amalgamation of Rudolf Valentino, Lawrence of Arabia, and Krim in the way he helps the Rifians rise against French colonial rulers.”²⁶

The Desert Song is set in Morocco 1925 and the main focus is on a Frenchwoman Margot, who falls in love with the masked Rif leader the “Red Shadow”. The latter character is in reality Pierre, the son of General Birabeau, the governor of Morocco. When the Rifis seize the Government House, Red Shadow rescues Margot and takes her to his polygamous friend Ben Ali’s palace in the desert. Margot is held captive by Ben Ali though Margot confesses to Pierre her wish to be kidnapped by Red Shadow. Just as he is about to kidnap her, General Birabeau enters the scene and challenges him to a duel. Red Shadow refuses and compromises upon his role as Rif leader.

Scholars have disputed who the main character “The Red Shadow” represents. Some authors suggest it is Abd-el-Krim,²⁷ though others claim that Romberg was inspired by the life of the German Josef Klems (1893-1938), alias Caïd el Haj alemán, who deserted from the French Legion to join the Rif revolt.²⁸ Klems’s life story captured media attention during the course of the Rif war, possibly because Klems’s acted as an interpreter with journalists interviewing Abd-el-Krim who could not speak French.²⁹ Klems not only translated when Krim was interviewed but also accompanied the journalists on visits to the Rif. Thus it was not altogether surprising that quite a lot of information about Klems’s character and life among the Rifis leaked to the outside world. This helped to create the myth of Klems as a sort of German “Lawrence of Arabia.”³⁰ Indeed at points it even appears that the Red Shadow excels over the real-life T.E Lawrence since Klems, for a period, emerged as the undisputed leader of the Rifis. This is certainly supported by Everett who wrote “He (Klems) is completely accepted for his military prowess and inherent knowledge of Arabian ways, unlike the real-life Lawrence of Arabia, who garnered only a partial following.”³¹

²⁶ Everett, op. cit 158.

²⁷ Bradley, Edwin M. 2004. *The First Hollywood Musicals: A Critical Filmography of 171 Features, 1927 Through 1932*. London: McFarland, 2004, 169; Thomas S. Hirschak 2009. *Broadway Plays and Musicals: Descriptions and Essential Facts of More Than 14,000 Shows through 2007*. McFarland.

²⁸ Sasse, 136, 153.

²⁹ Furneaux, 235.

³⁰ Sasse, 136.

³¹ Everett, op. cit 168.

The Klems story served as a continuing source of inspiration for novelists. In 1934 P.C. Wren the author of *Beau Geste* wrote a story centred on Klems entitled “*Port o’Missing Men*” which claimed to be “the true story of the life of a very remarkable man.”³² Another novel on Klems “*Il Sergente Klems*” was written by the Italian writer Paolo Zappa in 1935: it was this book which formed the base of the film *Sergeant Klems* in 1971.³³ Both the novel and the film deal with the ambiguous identity at the heart of Klems’s character in a manner comparable to the self-doubting T.E. Lawrence, though in Klems’s case this appears to have been mainly due to the fact that he was a German who ended up fighting in the French Foreign Legion only a few years after the bitter conflict of the First World War. The Italian action film portrays him as a German soldier taking on the identity of the dead German sergeant in order to prevent himself from being shot by the French for desertion after the battle of Artois in 1918. He manages however to persuade the French that he is Sergeant Klems and is saved from execution only to be then sentenced to serve in The Foreign Legion in Morocco.

After five years of service in the legion Klems lays himself open to blackmail by a homosexual French lieutenant after he refused to shoot a Moroccan Spahi escaping into the Rif. Expecting even more trouble after helping local women from being raped by a group of French soldiers Klems escapes. A Rifi soldier finds him lying unconscious in the sand and takes him as captive to his tribal area. Klems provides first aid to Leila, a cousin of Abd-el-Krim, who gets wounded from an explosion caused by the entirely unprofessional handling of an artillery shell before his eyes.

At this point Krim wants to extradite him as he does not want to harm the relationship with France but his daughter strongly opposes this and fortunately Klems shows himself to be an expert in the firing of modern artillery and can train Rifis to mount artillery attacks on Spanish forts. Krim takes up the offer and Klems helps the Rifi guerrillas secure their first victory over the Spanish as well as later the French. Klems comes to be admired as a hero by Abd-el-Krim and the tribes and converts to Islam in order to **marries** Leila. Abd-el-Krim **has then surrenders** to the French but Klems continues the struggle despite dwindling support from the Rifis. Eventually though Klems is recognized by a French officer after a gun duel between Rifis and Spahis of the French foreign legion. He is taken off to be sentenced and we

³² P.C. Wren, *Stories of the Foreign Legion*. 1947 First edition in one volume. Available at: <http://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks07/0700341h.html#c301>

³³ Sasse, op. cit 136.

later hear that he died on the French penal colony of Devil's Island in French Guiana some seven years later in 1933. Here was a European hero of the Rif who was apparently betrayed by his own father in law and suffered terrible consequences.

The historical reality is rather different. Sergeant Klems proved to be just another, rather tawdry cinema myth: he appears to have had little sense of justice or valour as portrayed in the film. He was an ex-criminal since, before joining the French Foreign Legion, he was sentenced in Germany for several months for theft and embezzlement.³⁴ He deserted from the German army in 1913 after only eight months of service and joined the French Foreign Legion in 1914. During the First World War he was first in Algeria and then from July 1916 onwards in Meknes in Morocco: all very different to the way he is portrayed as serving in Artois in the First World War. During his service in the legion he was not a "German Super-soldier," but a quartermaster and canteen manager.³⁵ In January 1922 he was promoted to sergeant but in March 1922 degraded back to private and relocated to another regiment in Missouri for forgery.³⁶ When he found out in summer 1922 that one of his brothers had been convicted back in Germany, he refused the shoveling work assigned to him by his superiors.³⁷ Klems himself confessed to a journalist that he had a fight with his captain, who insulted him by calling him a 'Boche.'³⁸ The ensuing disputes led him to escape in August of the same year, taking a gun and ammunition with him.³⁹

Klems's life hereafter suggests he was little more than a serial imposter. He was taken captive by a Rif tribe but managed to be released: but this is not because of his abilities to teach the tribes how to use artillery but through his abilities in looting four more guns from his previous camp.⁴⁰ Klems then escaped to join another tribe in the Atlas Mountains. Here, too, he managed to earn the tribe's trust by stealing a herd of cows and one gun.⁴¹ In order to integrate more closely with the tribal community Klems invented yet another big lie, notably that he had been on a pilgrimage to Mecca, so earning himself the title El Hadj.⁴² He proved so successful that the tribal chief gave Klems his daughter Mimouna in marriage.⁴³

³⁴ Ibid 136.

³⁵ Ibid 137.

³⁶ Furneaux, op. cit 143.

³⁷ Sasse, op. cit 137.

³⁸ Furneaux op cit 142.

³⁹ Sasse, op. cit 137.

⁴⁰ Ibid 138.

⁴¹ Ibid 138.

⁴² Furneaux, op. cit 143.

⁴³ Sasse, op. cit 139,141. Furneaux, op. cit 142-143.

Klems joined Abd-el-Krim in August 1924 in Ajdir. He ended up marrying multiple times until 1925 although most Berber Rifis were monogamous at that time.⁴⁴ It is hard to say whether Klems converted out of conviction either or simply to marry since he renounced Islam after his capture and committed suicide with a gun stolen from a prison guard on the 9th October 1938.⁴⁵ This is all very different to his apparent lonely death on Devil's Island. Under Krim, Klems often behaved in a brutal way by carrying out executions and Krim himself later remarked in his memoirs that Klems was in reality "a disgusting person."⁴⁶ The film, by contrast, presents Klems as if he was very dear to Abd-el-Krim who felt bound to intervene to secure the commutation of the death sentence to life imprisonment. In reality this commutation was due to a deal between the French and German governments in return for the release of a French military spy.⁴⁷

Klems was also not much of an expert in the use of modern weapons – after ten years in the army he succeeded in losing three fingers from incorrectly handling a hand grenade in 1926.⁴⁸ Moreover, some of the guns, tanks and even aircrafts needed repair.⁴⁹ No Rifi was trained for this purpose and European deserters as well as volunteers were used for this task.⁵⁰ In contrast to the image in the film Krim was actually very keen to get whatever modern technology he could and even planned to start a small air force in the Rif.⁵¹ An agreement for the purchase of four military planes was made with a French company but only one could be smuggled into the Rif from Algeria in December 1923.⁵² The film presents Klems as a kind of super hero. In one late scene he manages to bring down a small plane during an air-raid where he is the only survivor and his wife and young baby are left dead. There is no historical reference to this incident though it appears that the rebels managed to shoot down a few airplanes.⁵³

⁴⁴ Furneaux, op. cit 143; Sasse, op. cit 141; Woolman, op. cit 25.

⁴⁵ Sasse, op. cit 153. In the film Klems death is stated as 16.10.1933 which is most likely the date of death of a namesake. Thus Klems was still alive when Zappa published his novel in 1935.

⁴⁶ Abd-el-Krim, op. cit, 96.

⁴⁷ Sasse, op; cit 153.

⁴⁸ Ibid 140, 150.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 199.

⁵⁰ Ibid.,130 & 133.

⁵¹ Abd el Krim, op. cit 103.

⁵² Sasse, 196.

⁵³ Sasse 199; *Encyclopedia of Insurgency and Counterinsurgency. A New Era of Modern Warfare* 2013 Abc-Clio, op. cit 477.

The Rif was a large region that lacked the main features of a modern state. Daniel Rivet has described the Rif Republic as not being not so much a state with an army but an army with a state.⁵⁴ The guiding principle behind power in this proto or quasi state appears to have been the possession of weapons in a manner not too dissimilar to some modern warlord formations. Between 1926 to 1930 no less than 124,269 rifles, 232 machine guns, 128 artillery pieces with 4549 grenades, seven mortars, were collected from the Rifis by the Spanish.⁵⁵ The great achievement of Abd-el-Krim was thus to create the nucleus of an army modelled to some degree on western standards. This was also **achieved the uniting** of the various independent and quarrelsome tribes in the Rif to the point where he could field an army of some 65 000 men.⁵⁶ Each region was under the leadership of a general.⁵⁷ Being vital for the success, Krim's best warriors never fought jointly against the enemy. Each used to take leadership responsibilities for subgroups of warriors during a military operation and were under direct control of Abd-el-Krim.⁵⁸

Ascribing the efforts and achievements of these people to one individual, such as Klems, is thus highly inaccurate. Klems was the only European advisor in the General Staff of Abd-el-Krim.⁵⁹ He played an important role as chief of artillery and was the only European who had assumed the leadership of a unit consisting of European deserters. Further tasks assigned to him included map-making, photographing, and translating.⁶⁰ Klems also helped to set up a telephone network.⁶¹ *Sergeant Klems* briefly alludes to this by showing a couple of times a transmitter operated by Leila. She thanks Klems for teaching her that women should not stand idly but do something for their country. The task of setting up a telephone system was by no means accomplished by Klems alone since it was done in cooperation with Riffians who had gained experience from the Algerian telephone services as well as other Europeans.⁶²

Rifi leaders as Abductors

A recurring pattern in most films set in the Rif rebellion involves rescue scenes in which a white woman is kidnapped by a local and very degraded Arab and eventually rescued by a

⁵⁴ Daoud, Zakya, op. cit 1999. Abdelkrim. *Une épopée d'or et de sang*, Paris, 155 cited in Sasse, op. cit 96.

⁵⁵ Woolman op. cit 213; Shannon E. Fleming. *Primo de Rivera and Abd-e-Krim: the struggle in Spanish Morocco, 1923-1927*. New York: Garland Publishing, 1991, 226; Sasse, op. cit 203.

⁵⁶ Abd-el-Krim op cit 94; Hart op cit 388.

⁵⁷ Sasse op. cit, 96 provides their names as well as the regions they were responsible for.

⁵⁸ Abd-el-Krim op. cit 94 and Hart op. cit 388.

⁵⁹ Sasse, op cit 135.

⁶⁰ Furneaux, op. cit 116, 142-143.

⁶¹ Sasse, op., cit 122.

⁶² Ibid 117-119 and 122-123.

morally superior Western hero.⁶³ Such imagery was often been used in some films in the period before World War Two to reinforce the notion that western colonial powers had a moral right to rule in such territories with such apparently degraded populations, though in the case of Hollywood there was a rather more pecuniary interests in fostering a romantic appeal of the romantic Sheikh on horseback carrying off an apparently willing white woman desperate for adventure and escape from the narrow confines of western society. This was the theme of Rudolf Valentino wildly popular film *The Sheikh* (1921) where he abducts the British socialite Diana and taken to his tent. Eventually Diana gets released but, when kidnapped by desert bandits, she admits her feelings towards Ahmed. Just at the right moment Ahmed comes and rescues her. Diana finds out at the end that ethnically Ahmed has nothing to do with Arabs and that he is the son of an English Lord. This way, as it is also the case in *The Desert Song*, the taboo subject of interracial romance is overtly clarified. The theme of *The Son of the Sheik* (1926) is very similar to the first one, except the scene where Yasmin is implied to have been raped by Ahmed. In practice the Sheikh films had little to do with any of the conflict in the Rif. The journalist Georg Ward Price of the English newspaper *Daily Mail* was only too ready to confirm this after a ten day visit to the Rif region. There were, he observed no “real, unspoiled Sheiks” of the Rif or for that matter any English women available for them: in any case they would not have any interest for each other.⁶⁴

Abd-el-Krim and his relationship towards women

Most of the films associated with Abd-el-Krim were nevertheless of a romantic genre even though little is known about his private life. There is little evidence that he had anything to do with foreign women and he appears to have had only one wife. Woolman though writes that at the time of his surrender Abd-el-Krim had two wives called Thaimunt and Fatima.⁶⁵ In addition some biographers have associated Krim with a Spanish woman.⁶⁶ Few scholars though consider this important enough to beyond a brief mention in passing though it appears the woman concerned was actually an 18 - year-old Spanish girl called Isabella ransomed from slavery from another tribe in the Rif. It is suggested that Abd-el-Krim paid 20,000

⁶³ Everett, op. cit 162-163. E. Shohat, *Gender and Culture of Empire: Towards a Feminist Ethnography of the Cinema, in Visions of the East: Orientalism in Film*. New Brunswick (NJ): Rutgers University Press, 1997, 39.

⁶⁴ Furneaux (1967) pp. 108-109.

⁶⁵ Woolman, op. cit 207.

⁶⁶ Friedrich Jarschel, *Abd el Krim. So kämpfte der Löwe des Atlas*. Zeitbiographischer Verlag. Limburg/Lahn, (ZbV-Zeitbiographien; 1) 1961.

Pesetas to free her.⁶⁷ Sasse goes as far as saying that Isabella was from his own harem and that he had appointed her as maid for Klems.⁶⁸ Referring to his life before the actual war, a prominent researcher of the Rif war writes “...he enjoyed the “good life” of Spanish-Jewish society in Melilla, acquiring in the process a Spanish novia.”⁶⁹

The true story behind Isabella’s liberation from slavery was very different. Abd-el-Krim did seek the abolition of slavery though one Rif tribe, the *Sanhaga*, was notorious for kidnapping women from Moroccan cities and using them as slaves.⁷⁰ The new Rif government freed these women and married them off to unmarried soldiers.⁷¹ At the end of the battle of the Annual about 800 Spanish soldiers including a few females fell captive to the Rif. Four women in particular are mentioned: Cipriana, Isabella alias “La Rubia” (the blonde), and the sisters Adriana and Maria.⁷² Very little is known about these women though one was a worker in the commissariat. Abd-el-krim placed Cipriana under the care of his wife - for her own protection as she claimed - where she helped with child care for five years. At the end of the war she was released and returned back to Spain. That Abd-el-Krim wasn’t a womanizer is confirmed especially by Cipriana: in 1948 Abd-el-Krim received a letter from her in which she thanked for the kind treatment during her stay in his house.⁷³ Maria was married to a Rifian but her husband was killed during the war. Together with her sister she was also repatriated to Spain. Before her capture Isabella was working as entertainer in the Spanish officers’ cabaret.⁷⁴ Abd-el-Krim is said to have accommodated her in his house where she worked as housemaid.⁷⁵ When Mowrer asked Isabella whether she was afraid, she replied ‘afraid of what?’ and added that she was treated well and that she had no complaints.⁷⁶

Following the two Sheikh films and *The Red Shadow* several other movies were produced, which replicated the theme of Arab men kidnapping Western women within the context of the Rif war, especially *The Winding Stair* (1925), *King Cowboy* (1928) and *We're in the Legion Now* (1936). It would re-emerge several decades later with an Arab rebel leader from the Rif in the adventure film *The Wind and the Lion* (1975). Once more we see an endorsement of the

⁶⁷ Sasse, op. cit 141, Furneaux, op, cit 142.

⁶⁸ Sasse, op. cit 141.

⁶⁹ Fleming, op. cit .

⁷⁰ A. Youssoufi, *Les Institutions de la République du Rif. Abd el-Krim et la République du Rif*, 1976, 94.

⁷¹ Ibid 94.

⁷² Furneaux, 90-92; Sasse, p. 141.

⁷³ Furneaux, 90.

⁷⁴ Ibid 90, 142.

⁷⁵ Sasse, op. cit 141.

⁷⁶ Isabella died shortly before the end of the war (see Furneaux, op. cit 91; Sasse op. cit 141).

idea that Arab men enjoy kidnapping, though perhaps in this instance we are seeing the tail end of a long-standing genre than the emergence of anything substantially new.

The Wind and the Lion was not a big budget movie, costing a mere \$4.6 million to make and marked a re-entry by Hollywood into the apparently exotic terrain of Morocco and North Africa at a time when the conventional war movie was in eclipse. The film was directed and scripted by John Milius, who also wrote the script for Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979). *The Wind and Lion* is set in the past during the era of Teddy Roosevelt's presidency in 1904 and is loosely based on a real incident when a man called Ion Hanford Perdicaris, widely believed at the time to be a US citizen, was kidnapped in Tangier by a bandit called Mulai Ahmed er Raisuli. Perdicaris was a wealthy businessman whose father had emigrated to the US. Perdicaris's son fell in love with Morocco and chose to live there even though this was a weak state run by an ineffective Sultan and riven by warring bandits and tribal chiefs. This was also a time of expanding European imperialism and a number of powers, including France, Britain and Germany, looked with greedy eyes on Morocco as another terrain ripe for colonial annexation. By 1911 it would indeed end up as a French Protectorate.

In this unstable situation Raisuli's quite brazen kidnapping of Perdicaris on May 18 1904 was bound to escalate tensions, especially as back in the United States Teddy Roosevelt was seeking re-election as the Republican presidential candidate. Roosevelt was an enthusiastic exponent of overseas US adventurism and imperial expansion. He had taken over the presidency after the assassination of the equally imperialist William McKinley in September 1901, and had a brash military record as one of the commanders of the 1st US Voluntary Cavalry or "Rough Riders" who had gone into Cuba in 1898 to help secure the country's independence from Spain. He was generally seen as a gun-toting showman with an unquestioned belief in Anglo Saxon racial supremacy and the US imperial mission – one that Milius came keenly to admire at a time of an increasing crisis of self-belief in the US given its debacle in Vietnam.

At the time of the shooting John Milius had established a reputation for simple dialogue and relatively uncomplicated plots and *The Wind and the Lion* served as a good example of this as it recreated something of the political atmosphere in both the US and Morocco at the time of the Perdicaris kidnapping. However, in the interests of making this a popular film, Ion Perdicaris became changed into a woman Eden, played by Candice Bergen, while the Arab brigand Raisuli is played by the Scottish actor, and former James Bond star, Sean Connery. The idea that a white British actor could play an Arab "sheikh" was certainly becoming rather outdated by the mid-1970s though Connery's performance has still managed to attract a number of film fans.⁷⁷

Raisuli is a really an example of a noble Arab character straight out of a pre-war *Boys Own* adventure story. Despite the dramatic kidnapping of Eden in which Arab horsemen ride into her house and garden in Tangier, killing the servants and visiting British consul as well as

⁷⁷ See for instance H. Kendall, "Epic Film of The Wind and the Lion" www.http://kendall-h.hubpages.com/hub/Epic-Saga-of-the-Wind-and-The-Lion. Accessed 8 January 2015.

looting it, Raisuli goes to great lengths to show that he is not an evil man but one driven by a faith in God and a wish to steal on behalf of the poor – in effect a “Robin Hood of the Rif”. He does not harm Eden’s two children who are kidnapped along with her, though he is not averse to dispensing strict justice in the form of beheading his victims with a scimitar. The real motive, we learn, for his kidnapping Mrs Perdicaris was a simple wish to “embarrass” his uncle the Sultan, who is a “bought dog of the European armies.”

So Raisuli is at heart a simple nationalist and not really all that different to the equally nationalistic Teddy Roosevelt back in Washington. Roosevelt comes to be identified in the course of the film with a huge grizzly bear that he has stuffed and put on display at the Smithsonian: like Raisuli, Roosevelt is a form of noble animal, though one conveniently linked to a bear that happens to be at the top of the food chain in the wild. Roosevelt knows he cannot be seen to be doing nothing in the face of the kidnapping and a squadron of war ships was sent to exert pressure on the Moroccan Sultan to secure Ion Perdicaris’s release. On June 1, however, Roosevelt learned from the US embassy in Athens that Perdicaris was no longer a US citizen, and the strategy turned into a rather more careful one of putting behind the scenes diplomatic pressure on the Sultan, involving Britain and France, to get him to accede to Raisuli’s demands. For public consumption, the Secretary of State John Hay sent a telegram to the US consul in Tangier declaring “The Government wants Perdicaris alive or Raisuli dead”: sentiments that appear to have gone down well with US voters. But, in the end, Ion Perdicaris was freed after the payment of a \$700000 ransom suggesting that Raisuli in reality had no real interests beyond the financial.⁷⁸ Roosevelt had also effectively backed down for all his bluster, though the real truth about the Perdicaris’s non-American citizenship would only emerge in the 1930s.⁷⁹

Strictly speaking, there was not much here to make a particularly patriotic American movie. Milius, however, proved more than able to turn a relatively small-scale affair into a box office success by developing the story into a well-paced action movie that plays fast and loose with history. This is a largely masculine film with little time for female characters, though Candice Bergen manages still to portray a feisty Eden Perdicaris who is no simple pushover. But the generally flat characters of both Perdicaris and Raisuli ensure that there is little or no way that this relationship across cultures could evolve given that there is no romance. Raisuli is too much Sean Connery to begin to seem like an update of Rudolf Valentino while Eden, too, remains trapped within the screen stereotype of the would-be white female adventurer. The film thus trails off into a less than successful denouement with the return of Eden and her children to civilisation while Raisuli is left to roam the wilds of the Moroccan Atlas

The film is rather more notable for its graphic portrayal of an imagined landing of American troops to put pressure on one of the Sultan’s corrupt henchmen, the crooked Bashaw, in his palace in Tangier. For this reason alone the film came to be seen by some viewers as a cross between *Lawrence and Arabia* and Sam Peckinpah’s *The Wild Bunch* for here are Marines in

⁷⁸ According to Furneaux,(p. 36) Raisuli demanded as ransom £14,000.

⁷⁹ Jon Blackwell, “1904: ‘Perdicaris alive or Raisuli Dead’”, www.capitalcentury.com/1904.html. Accessed 18 March 2015.

the full battle dress of the time, suitably drilled to run through the narrow streets of Tangier, before arriving outside the Bashaw's Palace. They shoot down the palace guard before meeting the Bashaw himself, apparently unmoved and reclining on a couch. This is clearly how Milius would like to imagine the almost perfect textbook US Marine intervention, though this interlude in the film fails to transform it into any sort of proper war movie.

The life story of Raisuli is also considerably different to that portrayed in the film: Immediately before Abd-el-Krim's revolt Raisuli was leading an ardent resistance against the colonial powers in the Jibala region (Western zone of the Rif occupied by Spain) already for years.⁸⁰ Raisuli's war tactics did indeed entail piracy, in particular maritime, to fight against the social situation and the occupation of his country. Raisuli's personality has been described as having turned bitter, revengeful and brutal after being abused during imprisonment for depredation by the Moroccan authorities.⁸¹ He was first supported by the Spaniards.⁸² The Spanish even had a plan to instigate an intertribal war between Raisuli and Abd-el-Krim.⁸³ The plan became superfluous as the tragedy occurred without any foreign conspiracy.⁸⁴ When the Spaniards were forced to retreat Raisuli was confronted with the decision as to whether to work with Abd-el-Krim's forces or not. When he refused Abd-el-Krim's invitation to join him, he was captured and imprisoned.⁸⁵ Shortly after he died in 1925. With Raisuli's death Abd-el-Krim became sole authority throughout the Rif, more specifically the first man to rule Northern Morocco.⁸⁶

Conclusion

During the 20th century a significant number of films were set in the Rif war. These films can be categorized into three different groups with the first group containing the most frequent and the last two groups containing only a few films. The first group of movies are of adventure genre. Except endorsing that the Rif war was one of the most fierce and dangerous uprisings during the 20th century these films have little or no relation to reality (e.g. *Beau Geste*; *March or Die*, *Legionnaire*). The main aim of the lead characters in these films is to survive in a region plagued by war. The Rifis in these films are clear enemies and hence they are meant to be destroyed. The end of these films almost invariably herald victory for the

⁸⁰ Furneaux, op. cit 34; David M. Hart. *Qabila: Tribal Profiles Tribe-State Relations in Morocco and The Afghanistan-Pakistan Frontier*. Amsterdam: Het Spinhuis, 2001, 37.

⁸¹ Furneaux op. cit 35.

⁸² Pröbster op. cit 157; Furneaux, p. 40.

⁸³ Furneaux, op. cit 97.

⁸⁴ Ibid. 34.

⁸⁵ Ibid 133.

⁸⁶ Ibid 136, 138.

foreign forces. By no means do they allude to the fact that winning over the Rifis was, despite significantly higher number of soldiers and superior war equipment, one of the greatest challenges to the imperial powers forcing them even, in their despair, to use poison gas.

The second category of films are from the perspective of the Rifis where a Western lead character takes over their leadership against the invading imperial powers. And only two films fall into this category, namely *The Desert Song* (1929, 1932, 1953 and 1955) and *Sergeant Klems* (1971). The Red Shadow, the lead character of *The Desert Song*, plays a dual role and was identified as Abd-el-Krim as well as Josef Klems (1893-1938), a German deserter from the French legion by the film audiences of the time. In the final scene the Red Shadow decides to be with his love rather than continuing with his leadership of the Rifis. In contrast Sergeant Klems, in the eponymous film, exerts even greater efforts than Abd-el-Krim to get rid of the imperial powers. In the end though the central organiser of the Rif revolt was Abd-el-Krim who was also a considerable master of guerilla warfare.

The films in the last category are also from the perspective of the Rifis with the exception that the lead characters were playing local leaders. *The Sheik* (1921) and *The Son of the Sheik* (1926) were inspired by Abd-el-Krim. The biographical film *The Wind and the Lion* (1975) was inspired by the life of the Berber Chieftain El Raisuli (1871-1925), who like Abd-el-Krim had led a successful resistance against the foreign forces and eventually died in captivity as prisoner of Abd-el-Krim. All three lead characters in these films kidnap white women. In reality neither Abd-el-Krim nor Raisuli had ever harmed Western women.

All these films have one thing in common: they are heavily based upon orientalist clichés. Throughout the Rifis are presented as superstitious (they refuse e.g. to use the confiscated cannons as God forbids them to do so (*Sergeant Klems*); against the use of Western medication even if it is for curing an epidemic (*Saadia*); extremely cruel and unethical when it comes to the treatment of prisoners of war (*March or Die*); polygamous (*The Desert Song*); abducting and kidnapping western women (*The Sheik, The Wind and the Lion*) and raping Western women (*The Son of the Sheik*). The film makers have adapted and changed even the two biographical films, namely *Sergeant Klems* and *The Wind and the Lion*, to incorporate several aspects of the oriental gaze. Neither was Klems anything like as ethical as he is presented in the film given that he was a criminal and continued his criminal activities during his employment in the French Foreign Legion as well as with the Rifis.

The films reveal, then, a considerable bias towards Arab, Berber and Islamic cultures though it is possible to detect a slight improvement by the 1970s with *The Wind and the Lion* (1975). Here Raisuli is presented as a man with a noble character and without the demonic and lustful tendencies associated with earlier portrayals of sheikhs and Arab leaders. Even Roosevelt does not hide the fact that he admires Raisuli's courage and honor. Similarly, Americans, and thus Eden and her children appreciate that Raisuli is the true leader of his people and support him to fight the greedy European powers. This message is especially underlined in the scene when Eden's son hands over a rifle to Raisuli, galloping full speed ahead on horseback. In *The Legionnaire* (1998), a legionnaire comments briefly that the wicket ones are not their opponents but those who occupied their country. Although only a brief remark, this statement reflects an increasingly skeptical stance towards imperialism throughout the world by the end of the century as well as greater levels of sensitivity to ethical conduct between different peoples and nations.

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