

# **The Champion of North African Independence: The Life of Rabah Oussidhoum**

Hugh Goffinet

For more than three-quarters of a century, the story of the International Brigades during the Spanish Civil War has captured the imagination of historians. The thousands of volunteers from around the globe who courageously offered their lives to defend the Spanish Republic have been featured in countless books, articles, and essays. To the detriment of historical accuracy, historiography devoted a disproportionate degree of attention to volunteers from Anglophone nations. This disparate representation of the International Brigades skews our perception of the geodemographic diversity among volunteers. As a result, volunteers like Rabah Oussidhoum fell through the cracks of historical memory. Oussidhoum exemplifies those who admirably supported the Republican cause but did not conform to the perceived demography of an international volunteer.

Rabah Oussidhoum was born on November 24, 1903, in the Kabylie region of Northern Algeria.<sup>1</sup> He was first employed as a metal worker before leaving his Atlas Mountain home to serve in the French Army during the Rif War.<sup>2</sup> Oussidhoum rose through the ranks and became a non-commissioned officer tasked with commanding machine gunners. Despite being an Algerian native in the French Army, Oussidhoum was not alone. The French Army fighting in the Rif heavily relied on North African Soldiers. Their service in this conflict stems from the

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<sup>1</sup>See ACER profile “OUSSIDHOUM Rabah”

<sup>2</sup> See Drew p. 101 & ACER profile on Rabah Oussidhoum

ideas of French military commanders at the time. Many officers believed that native Africans possessed inherent abilities that made them better suited for combat, especially in climates as inhospitable as the Rif. General Charles Mangin, a famed leader of colonial troops, outlined these perceived abilities as being:

(1) an ability to live in harsher climates than other races; (2) the capacity (owing to centuries of portage and migration) to carry heavy loads great distances; (3) a nervous system that was less developed than that of 'whites', which gave them greater resistance to pain and hence more willingness to shed blood in battle; (4) the patriarchal nature of African societies, which endowed them with a sense of discipline and hierarchy that was readily transferable to military life; and, finally, (5) the 'selectionist' argument that Africans were naturally suited to be excellent soldiers, since Africa had for centuries been a 'vast battlefield.'<sup>3</sup>

Mangin's view of Africans as soldiers was inherently racist. This inherent racism created tension between the *tirailleurs*, native colonial soldiers, and the French officer class that negatively impacted unit cohesion. As a native Algerian, Oussidhoum, was frustrated by how poorly his French commanders treated colonial soldiers. This frustration led Oussidhoum to make a failed attempt to defect to the very forces he fought against: the revolutionary Riffian Army under Abd el-krim.<sup>4</sup>

During the conflict in the Rif, Oussidhoum soldiered with the imperialist government that had oppressed his people for nearly a century. That oppressive rule began in 1830 when the

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<sup>3</sup> See Lunn p. 521

<sup>4</sup> See SIDBRINT profile "OUSSIDH' HIUM, Rabbah"

French led a violent conquest of Algeria that when the Algerian revolutionary leader Abd el-Kader surrendered 17 years later. The campaign for Algeria was notoriously bloody, marked by scorched earth tactics, no quarter to el-Kader's forces, and massacres of the native population. Even after the French secured Algeria, the French government and the European settlers who became the dominant ruling class in Algeria, continued their subjugation of natives. The native Arab and Berber people were victims of a discriminatory society that viewed them as uncivilized, deprived them of quality land for farming, imposed social segregation, and sought to exclude them from participating in government. The Europeans considered the natives valueless.<sup>5</sup> This society was what Oussidhoum fought for this society while his "enemy" fought to create a North African state independent of these colonial powers. For a man whose friend and fellow volunteer, Rene Cazala, described as the "champion of North African Independence," fighting against an army aiming to create an independent North African state likely created a personal dilemma for Oussidhoum.<sup>6</sup> Not only were his values compromised, but he was abused by the very men chosen to lead him. His defection failed because he was wounded on the wounding on the day he attempted to defect. Had he succeeded, Oussidhoum would have not only been guilty of high treason, but with the eventual defeat of the Riffians his post-war outlook would have been bleak. Oussidhoum's inability to carry out his defection may have prolonged his life.

Despite his rocky experience in the Rif, Oussidhoum's military service allowed him to leave Algeria and immigrate to Metropolitan France in 1926. Despite France's continued development of North African colonies, Metropolitan France still provided more opportunities

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<sup>5</sup> See Evans pp. 29-37

<sup>6</sup> See ACER profile "OUSSIDHOUM Rabah"

for employment than his Atlas Mountain community. Upon his arrival, Oussidhoum settled in the Paris suburb of Boulogne-Billancourt where he worked at the Renault factory on the Seine River's Île Seguin. His time as an industrial worker prompted him to become involved with the General Confederation of Labor (GCT), a leftist French labor union. In 1928, he joined the French Communist Party (PCF). His newfound commitment to the Communist ideology led him to help organize the fledgling Algerian Communist Party (PCA), an offshoot of the PCF.<sup>7</sup>

When the Spanish Civil War broke out in July 1936, the Spanish Republic was left politically isolated. Despite Spain being a democracy, the western democracies adopted a policy of non-intervention out of fear of provoking the Fascist nations of Italy and Germany. Only the Soviet Union provided meaningful support for the Republic. They supplied aircraft, advisors, armor, weapons and most notably helped facilitate the Comintern's call for international volunteers. These volunteers, eventually numbering around 40,000, became known as the International Brigades and fought in most of the major engagements of the Spanish Civil War from the Siege of Madrid through the Battle of the Ebro.<sup>8</sup>

On November 16, 1936, a month after the International Brigades first formed, 32-year-old Rabah Oussidhoum volunteered for service in Spain. His opposition, the Nationalist Army, included the Spanish Army of Africa, which comprised the Moroccan Regulares. The Spanish people's brutal experiences at hands of the Moroccans created a rather negative impression of North Africans. Oussidhoum desired to dispel what he deemed a misinterpretation by proving that there were North Africans who would take a stand against Franco and fight against the forces of Fascism. This goal ultimately influenced Oussidhoum's decision to volunteer with the

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<sup>7</sup> See ACER profile "OUSSIDHOUM Rabah"

<sup>8</sup> See Landis introduction p. xii

International Brigades.<sup>9</sup> Considering that over 2% of the French volunteers were of North African Ancestry, he was far from wrong in believing that Africans would rally around the Republican cause!<sup>10</sup>

The experience Oussidhoum gained during the Rif War, coupled with his strong political background with the PCF and PCA, made him a prime candidate for leadership positions within the International Brigades.<sup>11</sup> As a leader, Oussidhoum was described as having been one of the best!<sup>12</sup> Rene Cazala, who became one of Oussidhoum's company commanders, held him in especially high regards and described serving under Oussidhoum in the following tribute written in 1938: "You were always the best among us, your great political knowledge combined with your military experience from the Moroccan War you were designated as our leader and it is with pride that we serve under your orders."<sup>13</sup>

Upon joining the fight, Oussidhoum was assigned to the XIV Brigade's Henri Barbusse Battalion and appointed Machine Gun Company commander.<sup>14</sup> This was an ideal position for him because of the skills he acquired as a machine gunner during his service a decade earlier. Oussidhoum served in his capacity as company commander during the failed offensive on Lopera in December 1936 until his promotion to command the Ralph Fox Battalion on June 20, 1937.<sup>15</sup> The Ralph Fox battalion, at the time Oussidhoum assumed command, was serving on the relatively quiet Santa María de l'Alameda front, located along the Guadarrama mountain range. This quiet section of the line afforded Oussidhoum the opportunity to gain valuable experience

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<sup>9</sup> See ACER profile "OUSSIDHOUM Rabah"

<sup>10</sup> See Skoutelsky p151 and ACER profile "OUSSIDHOUM Rabah"

<sup>11</sup> See SIDBRINT profile "OUSSIDH' HIUM, Rabbah"

<sup>12</sup> Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (RGASPI) Fond. 545, Opis. 6, Delo. 1340, ll. 48-53

<sup>13</sup> See ACER Batallón La Marseillaise - Ralph Fox

<sup>14</sup> See SIDBRINT profile "OUSSIDH' HIUM, Rabbah"

<sup>15</sup> See ACER profile "OUSSIDHOUM Rabah"

that was critical when all hell broke loose at Cuesta de la Reina on October 14, 1937.<sup>16</sup> The Ralph Fox Battalion, with Oussidhoum in command, was called to support the Spanish 9<sup>th</sup> Division which was losing ground to the Nationalist forces. After launching several counter attacks, the line at Cuesta de la Reina was stabilized.<sup>17</sup> Shortly after the conclusion of the fighting in the Guadarramas, the Ralph Fox Battalion was disbanded and “cannibalized” to reinforce the Paris Commune and Henri-Barbusse Battalions.<sup>18</sup> Oussidhoum was transferred and eventually assumed command of the Paris Commune Battalion in January 1938.<sup>19</sup> This, his third transfer of command, would be his last and the Paris Commune was the final body of soldiers Oussidhoum would command.

As the commander of the Paris Commune Battalion, Captain Rabah Oussidhoum faced his most difficult challenge of the war. On March 10, 1938, Francisco Franco’s army broke through the Republican defenses in the Aragon region. This offensive initiated “The Retreats,” in which the entire Aragon front was fluid for a period of about two months. As Franco pushed east, the Republican Army retreated, with occasional acts of resistance along the way at places such as Caspe and Gandesa.<sup>20</sup> Navigating the chaos of The Retreats was no easy feat, even for an experienced officer like Oussidhoum. Republican units were often surrounded, dealt with constantly exposed flanks, and endured a chronic lack of supplies, all while being aware that there was no possibility of reinforcements. Despite the odds against them, Oussidhoum and the rest of the Paris Commune Battalion took a stand on the banks of the Guadalupe River in the small town of Miraflores. Franco’s Moroccan soldiers held the plateau dominating the town. On

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<sup>16</sup> See ACER profile “Batallón La Marseillaise - Ralph Fox”

<sup>17</sup> See Skoutelsky p.96-98 and SIDBRINT profile “Batallón La Marseillaise - Ralph Fox”

<sup>18</sup> See SIDBRINT profile “Batallón La Marseillaise - Ralph Fox”

<sup>19</sup> Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (RGASPI) Fond. 545, Opis. 3, Delo. 393, ll. 51-52

<sup>20</sup> See Landis p. 409, 427-468

March 27, 1938, while relocating elements of his battalion, 34-year-old Rabah Oussidhoum was killed in action.<sup>21</sup> As only fate would have it, the same Moroccans that Oussidhoum had dedicated himself to liberating from European imperialism were the same men who violently ended his life. Cazala, who replaced Oussidhoum as commander of the battalion, wrote the following about his passing:<sup>22</sup>

You fell one morning on the plateau of Miraflores that the Moroccans had occupied. The unconscious instruments of fascism have brought down the one who had dedicated his life to their defense. Tragic destiny, the champion of North African Independence murdered by those he wanted to make free.<sup>23</sup>

Cazala was right... A “tragic destiny” it was.

Oussidhoum was an ordinary man of humble origins who selflessly gave his life for a people and government to which he had no real connection. The son of a blacksmith from the Atlas Mountains, Oussidhoum became the commander of one of the most famous battalions of the XIV International Brigade. Despite being a name that few recognize, Rabah Oussidhoum made lasting impressions on those with whom he served. Cazala summed up Oussidhoum’s sacrifice in the following claim:

[...] I made with all my comrades the oath to avenge you by struggling to the end to achieve the noble cause to which you have dedicated your life. Free Spain and the world from the fascist yoke! We will give all people, but especially the people

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<sup>21</sup> See ACER profile “OUSSIDHOUM Rabah”

<sup>22</sup> Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (RGASPI) Fond. 545, Opis. 6, Delo. 339, ll. 214

<sup>23</sup> See SIDBRINT profile “OUSSIDH’ HIUM, Rabbah”

of North Africa the opportunity to live happy and free in a world that will not know the horror of fascism.<sup>24</sup>

Oussidhoum's service in Spain represented a microcosm of the global fight against fascism that was about to begin. While Oussidhoum was unable to personally impact change after his passing, he did not die in vain. His goals were realized with the Allies' victory during World War II and the liberation of Algeria in 1962. Others built on the foundations he laid culminating in a victory over Fascism abroad and imperialism at home.

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<sup>24</sup> See ACER profile "OUSSIDHOUM Rabah"





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