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LA CONFERENZA DI ALGECIRAS (1905 - 1906)

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The Algeiras Conference was held from the 15th January 1896 to the 7th April of the same year, marking a turning point in the Moroccan history, and constituting an important moment in the course of the relations between the European Powers (even if it didn't change this same course in a truly significant way).

This event was a picture, reflecting the rivalries and divergent interests and objectives of the main Powers of the time, integrated in the delicate and complex system of alliances born between the mid XIX century and the first years of the next century.

This system was the result, firstly, of the political and diplomatical work of Otto von Bismarck, chancellor (and creator) of the newborn German Reich: he managed to create a wave of relations which had its center in the new Germany, while, at the same time, isolating the France.

But the wave slowly came to an end after Bismarck left the power, with Germany losing its alliance with the Tsarist Russia in favour of the French Republic, and consequently forced to keep and strengthen its ties with Austria-Hungary and Italy (the Triple Alliance).

Meanwhile, France, especially under the guide of the Minister of Foreign Affairs Delcassé, successfully tried to undermine the Triple (on the Italian side), while contemporarily preparing its

advance in Morocco with a series of agreements (1900/1902 with Italy, 1904 with Great Britain, the so called *Entente Cordiale*, and 1905 with Spain).

In the same period, Italy tried to manage in order to keep an ambiguous position between the Triple Alliance and France and England, in order to maximize its possibilities in the political framework of European relations.

Morocco, the focus of the oncoming crisis, since 1844 (conquest of Algeria) was the subject of economical and political penetration from France, with the aim of expanding its nord-african empire, and other European Powers, leading to the Conference of Madrid (1880) and, after, to the series of agreements ideated by Delcassé.

The First Moroccan Crisis (the so-called Tangier Crisis) originated from this system of alliances and from the German intentions of not leaving the Sultanate to the French penetration. It was a question of prestige, since no economical or political interest of the German Reich was really involved.

Under the pressure of his Chancellor, count Von Bulow, Wilhelm II decided to land at Tangier from the cruise line ship *Hamburg*, the 31st March 1905, as a support to the independence and full sovereignty of the Sultan Abd-el Haziz. The consequence of this event was that the French government was forced to negotiate with Germany regarding the Moroccan question: but Bulow desired a diplomatic victory, so he proposed the question to be discussed in an international conference.

After the fall of Delcassé (due to the crisis and his strong anti-german position), the French Republic was forced to accept the proposal.

At the Conference all the States that have previously participated to the Conference of Madrid (except Denmark, which refused its participation) were invited.

The questions to be discussed at the Conference were:

- 1) the statute of the police in the eight main coastal cities of Morocco;
- 2) the creation of a Moroccan Central Bank;
- 3) the fight against smuggling and weapons illegal trade;
- 4) the reform of the taxation system;

The first two questions soon became the real core of the Conference.

Especially regarding the police, the German delegation was inflexible on its position (full internationalization), against the French one (police under the command of Spanish and French officers).

The discussion often led the Conference to the edge of the failure; however, at the end, von Bulow decided to soften the German position by accepting an Austrian proposal of compromise (which was practically an acceptance of the French point of view).

The Conference officially ended the 7th April 1906 with the sign of the final Act.

It was composed by six distinct parts, with a total of 123 articles.

Regarding the police, it was decided to leave it at the command of Spanish and French officers (the Act provided a complete description of the organization, and an equal division of the Moroccan ports between the two nationalities), under the supreme control of a neutral Inspector General (it was decided also that the Inspector had to be Swiss).

The Bank was structured on the model of the European Central Banks, and submitted to the control of the Central Banks of England, France and Germany; it was also expected that the new Bank had to become the main financial source of the Moroccan government.

Consequently, the final Act of the Algeciras Conference provided a stop (although a weak, temporary one) to the French penetration in Morocco, but also, at the eyes of most part of the public opinion in Europe, a diplomatic defeat of Germany, which have had to measure the strength of its diplomatic isolation.

The Italian government succeeded in its aim to not siding with both Germany or France (the alternative, to choose between them, would have highlighted the contrast between the agreements and alliances Italy had signed).

However, the system established at Algeciras proved to be weak, in the years to come.

The French penetration in Morocco resumed soon, and in 1909 France and Germany signed an agreement that give to the first wide range of freedom in Morocco to pursue its interests.

In 1911, however, Germany tried for the second (and last) time to undermine the advance of the French in Morocco, taking the opportunity given by the French military intervention into a tribal rebellion against the Sultan to send the gunship *Panther* to the city of Agadir.

The subsequent crisis (Second Moroccan Crisis, or Agadir Crisis) saw the final victory of France, which managed successfully to compensate Germany with some colonial territory in Camerun in exchange for the acceptance of the French protectorate in Morocco.

This event marked the end of the consequences the Algeciras Conference had in Morocco.

In the field of the relations of the European Powers, Algeciras helped to destroy the hope (secretly cultivated by the German government) to divide England and France, and also contributed to the new, more suspicious attitude of Austria and Germany toward their Italian ally, due to the behaviour of its delegate (Visconti-Venosta) at the Conference.

The direct consequence was a more strict tie between the two Central Empires, and an often complete support of Germany to Austria, especially in the Balkan fields (and the crisis for the annexation of Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1909 was a clear demonstration of this new situation).

The signature of an agreement between Great Britain and Russia (searching for a counterbalance against the connection Austria-Germany in the Balkans), on the other side, confirmed the impossibility to destroy the new French alliances playing on the divergent interests of its members (England and Russia were in competition especially in Persia, and this will cause troubles also after the agreement).

In conclusion, the Algeciras Conference was not a major event of the European international relations (not in comparison with the crisis it have resolved), but it contributed to the slow shift of some, important, pieces on the checkerboard (especially Italy), finally creating the peculiar diplomatic situation of the 1914, which will be the dawn of the World War.

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