

Spanish troops in Iraq to wear Christian badge

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On first hearing that the new contingent of Spanish troops being sent to Iraq are wearing the Cruz de Santiago de Compostela (Cross of St. James of Compostela) on their arm badge, one could be forgiven for thinking the authorities in Spain had lost their minds. On reflection, however, and in the context of the prevailing world political atmosphere, more sinister conclusions can be drawn from this action.

The triangular top and arrow-like arms of the cross have become a symbol of the liquidation of the Muslims who were finally driven out of Spain after 800 years of fighting by the reconquest in 1492. This was also the start of the period of colonialist expansion by Spain's Catholic monarchy.

During the battle of Clavijo, the legend goes, the Apostle St. James appeared in the sky on a white horse brandishing a sword with which he killed every Muslim in his path. St. James became the symbol of the fight for the reconquest of Spain and has since been known as "Santiago Matamoros" (St. James the Moor killer). Described in the Scripture as one of the "sons of thunder," the Apostle is credited with converting the Iberian peninsula to Christianity.

The soldiers are the first batch of 1,300 combat troops that the Spanish government is sending to Iraq to join the international occupation force patrolling the Al Qadisija and An Najaf areas, whose population is overwhelmingly Shiite. They are joining a force of 900 Spanish soldiers already in Iraq and which, due to anti-war feeling in Spain, were supposedly sent strictly for humanitarian purposes. The 2,000-strong brigade of which they will form part, made up of Spanish and Latin American soldiers, will wear the cross on the arm of their uniforms.

Najaf is considered one of the holiest cities in Iraq and a pilgrimage centre for the world's Shiite faithful.

Two weeks ago, 10,000 Shiites demonstrated against the American occupation. Additionally, Najaf is the tomb of the Imam Ali, cousin and son-in-law of the prophet Mahomet. The city contains a world-renowned school for the understanding of the Koran and houses the biggest cemetery of Muslims in the Near East.

The new army badge was specially designed for the Iraq mission by the Ministry of Defence. It consists of two Hercules columns capped with the existing and imperial crowns. A ribbon is threaded round the columns bearing the unit's name, "Plus Ultra", which also has connections with the imperial reign. The badge is completed with the initials IF (Iraqi Freedom)—the Pentagon's name for the Iraqi invasion—engraved in gold at the top. The Ministry has named the new mission IF (India Foxtrot). The red Cross of St. James of Compostela looms large in the middle of the badge, between the two columns.

A spokesman from the military explained that the cross had long featured somewhere on the uniforms of the Spanish Army, and that the Hercules columns are a symbol to mark the fact that the brigade will contain soldiers from the other side of the Atlantic.

General Manuel Angel Cumbreño said that he hoped the Spanish soldiers sent to Iraq "are not seen as an army of occupation, because we are going to help and support the Iraqis in everything we can."

The minister of defence, Federico Trillo-Figueroa, also stated in Congress that "the religious fervour of the Shiites has found a freedom of expression that it did not have before [the war] and that the attitude of our Armed Forces, respectful, sensitive to their beliefs and preoccupations, and without doubt, tolerant, will facilitate the contact with the population."

The incorporation of the cross, however, gives the lie to such claims.

The centre-right newspaper *El Mundo* new design, arguing that careful consideration must be given to the risks of sending a Spanish force to the country, yet the latest deployment had been taken on the sole say-so of the ruling Popular Party (PP) government.

The newspaper's editorial declared: "To put the Cross of St. James of Compostela on the uniforms of Spanish soldiers demonstrates an absolute ignorance of the psychology of the society in which they will have to carry out their mission." And it added, "It would be difficult to come up with any symbol more offensive to the Shiite population than this cross."

The Cross of St. James of Compostela was not included in the first design of the badge originally presented to the ministry by the defence secretary, Fernando Diez Moreno.

It is not clear who in the ministry took the decision to include the cross in the badge. However, it is well known that right-wing extremists and fascist forces within the establishment feel emboldened by President George W. Bush's global "war on terror" and the now constant appeals to patriotism.

Trillo-Figueroa is said to be a supernumerary member of the Prelature of the Holy Cross and Opus Dei—commonly known as "Opus Dei" (Latin for "Work of God"). Founded in 1928, Opus Dei is an ultra-right-wing movement that recruited many of its members from Spain's wealthy and powerful families. It flourished under General Franco's rule and provided ministers to his government. Its clannishness and secrecy has won it the name of "Holy Mafia."

Its founder Jose Maria Escrava de Balaguer died in 1975, was beatified by the Pope in 1992 and was controversially made a saint in 2002, in record-breaking time.

Jesus Ynfante, author of the critical *Founding Saint of Opus Dei*, says that Escrava was an unashamed fascist. "He had Madrid under his control, starting with the dictator. Under Franco the clerical fascism of Opus Dei won out over the true fascism of the Falange [political party]," he wrote. Escrava has also been quoted as saying that Hitler would save Christianity from Communism.

The group's annual income has been estimated at around £120 million—enough to fund hundreds of schools and universities and help make it one of the

fastest growing movements within the Catholic church. It is present in 80 countries. The group is estimated to have up to 77,000 members.

El Mundo recently named a raft of senior officials in the defence, justice and interior ministries who belong to the order, which encourages its followers to seek positions of power. "Defence, law and order and the judiciary are in the hands of Opus," said Juan Carlos Rodriguez, the socialist president of Extremadura region's government.

With the insertion of the cross onto its soldiers' uniforms, the government is making clear that the invasion and occupation of Iraq are but the first step towards a renewed campaign of colonial conquest by the advanced capitalist countries.



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