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The Apostles of the Fatherland: the Army’s Nationalization of Civilians

Patriotic instruction must be directed at the masses, at the whole of society, not just at a few exceptional individuals

(General Villalba)¹

The most ambitious plans for army-led mass indoctrination took place outside the military garrisons. During the years prior to the Dictatorship the majority of military officers had come to the conclusion that the army was the only institution capable of regenerating a decadent Spanish society. For the most radical military officers, fulfilling this self-imposed task meant that the army had to leave the barracks and indoctrinate civilians in patriotic values in their own towns and villages.² Once in power, Primo de Rivera attempted to carry out these plans of total mass indoctrination and sent hundreds of officers out of the barracks to preach patriotism all around Spain as ‘apostles of the fatherland’.

In the primorriverista bid for civilian mass indoctrination, the main role was played by the delegados gubernativos. The Military Directory established the figure of the delegados in October 1923 to assist the generals who were acting as new civil governors after the coup. Directly controlled by the Minister of the Interior, Martínez Anido assigned one delegado to each judicial district (cabeza de partido) in the country to ‘inspect and orient’ municipal life.³ Their initial task was to gain total military control of provincial life and destroy the caciquil local networks. Primo was fully aware of the fact that the destruction of the old political structures had to be complemented with the making of a ‘new type of citizen’ at the municipal level. The delegates were ordered to organize the local Somatén, boy-scouts, gymnastic associations and cultural clubs for men and women. They were also responsible for organizing patriotic lectures, which should promote the virtues of the ‘Spanish race’ and emphasize the duty to defend the
fatherland, respect authority and the head of the state, protect the environment, and pay taxes. For this educational undertaking of ‘strengthening the citizen’s soul and body’, delegates were advised to enlist the participation of local teachers, priests and doctors.

The regime found no problems in gathering volunteers for the job. Most of the delegados were previously in the military reserves, earning 75 per cent of an active officer’s salary, and becoming an ‘apostle of the fatherland’ meant getting full pay. By early December 1923, 523 governmental delegates were already in posts all around Spain. Out of the 523 delegates, 434 were commissioned to serve at judicial districts and 89 at provincial capitals. Popular response to the arrival of the delegates appears to have been sceptical. According to the memoirs of a former delegate, at first most of the locals in towns and villages were profoundly mistrustful of the officers, whom they saw as new caciques in uniform. Despite the cold reception, during the first months the delegates showed a strong zeal in their repression of public administrators. Fuelled by an avalanche of anonymous denunciations made by the public, they arrested and jailed dozens of municipal councillors and caciques. Soon the situation became chaotic.

On 1 January 1924, Martínez Anido sent ‘confidential instructions’ to the civil governors and the delegados as new guidelines to inspect the municipalities. The Interior Minister requested caution when pursuing caciques, since an eventual judicial liberation of the alleged criminals would weaken the delegates’ public image. The petition was ignored and four weeks later Martínez Anido insisted on moderating the number of arrests, deportations and fines imposed by the delegados. Once again, the minister argued that massive confinements were worsening public support for the delegates and maintained that anonymous denunciations should lead to investigations and not to immediate detentions. In the following months, Martínez Anido often insisted on minimizing captures in different letters sent to the delegados, clearly showing that ministerial guidelines regarding detentions were not being followed.

The actions of the delegates were devastating for the old political elite. After the dissolution of municipalities, the delegates became the new local lords. They formed the new provisional town councils, imprisoned political opponents and controlled information published in local newspapers. The implementation of the new municipal statute in 1924 did not change the delegates’ position. For all the instructions ordering the delegates to respect ‘municipal autonomy’, military officers seem to have reinforced their local power after the enactment of the statute. Four months after the implementation of the law, Martínez Anido complained to the governors about the delegates abusing their authority. As described by the Interior