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A short history of the republican exile: the big exodus of 1939

The war begun in 1936 reached its zenith with the April 1939 defeat of the republicans. In its aftermath, as the Francoist troops were taking over Catalonia, and following the fall of the city of Tarragona on 15th January, a massive exodus started, in the form of a heartrending march on the Catalan routes leading to France. The escapees were desperate women, elders, children, soldiers and disabled people, who were all "running away, pushed by physical or psychological fear in the last hours of a lost war". [1] Those civilians had involvement of any sort in neither political nor military actions, therefore were not to be considered as exiled; why were they fleeing then? According to the writer Teresa Pàmies, "the bulk of the population were driven by a collective impulse, persuaded that in France they would each find the husband, the son, the father, the brother; that once the squall was over they could start anew with their families, in spite of the loss of some loved ones, who had died in the trenches, under the bombs or simply gone missing in the vortex of the war". [2]

The exodus entailed a series of destabilizing occurrences, such as the continuous bombardment suffered by the retreating people, the harshness of the particularly cold winter and the abandonment along the way of all personal belongings together with all they represented for the individuals, especially women, who were ditching the memories of a lifetime. Hunger, families set apart by the authorities at the French border, an uncertain future in a foreign country, were all elements that concurred to the experience of the people in exile and traced for most of them a line of demarcation between "before" and "after", ultimately creating a collective memory of the exile.



The prominence given to this dramatic situation by the French and international press, notably during the months immediately subsequent to the Second World War, urged the international helps organizations to redeploy their resources in order to aid the exiled. The helps were managed by the Comité International de Coordination et d'Information pour l'Aide à l'Espagne Républicaine (CICIAER), an organization created by the Republican Government on 13th August 1936 and based in Paris, with the aim to coordinate at an international level the totality of efforts made in favor of the republican Spain. [3] Following the republican failure the international cooperation forces focused on improving the living condition of the exiled people in the concentration camps – both in the French capital and in Northern Africa – as well as proposing for them a possible transfer to America.

Approximately 465.000 people crossed the border to France during that tragic winter; the exodus had started from Madrid to Valencia, then continued through Barcelona, Girona and Figueres, until finally reaching the neighbouring country. Those people not only were burdened by the despair caused by the perennial unanswered question: "What will happen to us now?", but had also to deal with the socio-political environment of France, where the grave economic recession in act since 1930 was accompanied by the presence of a reactionary right wing ruled by fascists and xenophobes. The radical representative Édouard Daladier, at the time Prime Minister, pursued a strategy of clash with the communists, using for this purpose a certain consensus he held among the xenophobic elements thriving in the French society and public opinion from the beginning of 1930's. This instance was determined by the arrival in different waves of political refugees, in particular from Spain and Italy, and by a Spanish economic immigration characterized by a high degree of illiteracy and scarce professional qualification. These factors all played a significant role in the relative repulsion experienced by the French society towards the exiled people arriving in the winter of 1939. Although women and children were still considered innocent victims of

the war, the veterans were accused of using those women and children to protect themselves, and were branded as *êtres repoussants, malpropres, fuyards, déserteurs et des indésirables*. [4]

The exile thus constituted both an economic and a political problem for the French Government, which was immediately eager to sponsor either repatriation to Spain or a further immigration to Mexico, Chile and Dominican Republic, the only three American countries willing to officially welcome the Spanish republicans. This last option depended on the fulfillment of a series of requirements needed for their admission, together with the assurance given by the official help organizations to provide for the expenses related to the travel and the settling of the immigrants into the receiving countries. The costs were defrayed by the SERE (Service of Emigration – or Evacuation – of Spanish Republicans) and the JARE (Board of Aid to the Spanish Republicans), two institutions created by the republican government during the exile and mostly funded by members of the government of the Republic of France over the war period. Both organizations could rely on the disinterested help offered by hundreds of international committees and their cooperation permitted to finalize the evacuation processes. To give an example, among the countries most involved in the republican cause there was Argentina, whose society mobilized according to an anti-fascist spirit in order to support the republican exiled and their issues, in contrast to the local conservative government, reluctant to accept the refugees [5] [For more exhaustive information on the distribution of the republican exiled people across the world at different stages please consult the [Map section](#) of this website].



In the collective imaginary of the exile, the aforementioned re-emigration to America is often associated with the “vessels of hope”, the ships employed to transfer a large number of Spanish refugees over to friendly countries in the troubled period between 1939 and 1940. Names such as *Flandre* (312 exiled in total), *Sinaia* (1.599), *Ipanema* (900) o *Mexique* (2.067) referring to Mexico, *Winnipeg* (2.200) to Chile, *Massilia* to Argentina and *Stanbrook* to Orán, symbolized not only a trip towards hope but also a vivid memory representing the beginning of a new life in a faraway country. [6]

Similarly the repatriations to Spain took place mainly between April and December 1939. As the historian J.B. Vilar points out, about 268.000 people went back home, divided into veterans and civilians with no political implications. By 31st December of that same year the number of refugees still living on the French soil amounted to 182.000 units. According to the same account, during the Second World War there was an increase in the size of the return flows to Spain, to the point that toward the end of 1944 the total of exiled people remaining in France went down to 162.000 units. [7]

Potentially the Second World War determined a shift of interest among the French press from the matter regarding the republican refugees of Spain, who promptly ceased to constitute news [8]. Their fortunes started to be coupled with those of many others who were persecuted due to political or racial reasons, such as the Jews hounded by the Nazi-Fascist regimes.

Geographic, political and socio-professional diversification of the exile

The majority of people going into exile through the French border arrived from the Catalan provinces, although it is also certain that the exodus involved from its early stages individuals coming from all over the Iberian Peninsula, and Catalonia had promptly started to be populated by refugees coming from the areas already occupied by the Francoist armies. According to the data collected by historian J. Rubio, at the time of the great escape of 1939, the geographical regions represented among the exiled corresponded to the following percentages: Catalonia (36.5%), Aragon (18%), Eastern Spain (14.1%), Andalusia (10.5%), New Castile (7.6%), Northern Spain (Bask Country, Santander and Oviedo) 8.1%. [9] As regards the socio-professional level, based on the accounts reported by historian Alicia Alted it is recommendable to distinguish between exile in Europe, particularly France as the country that received the largest group of immigrants, and America, led by Mexico. Most of the refugees remaining in France were agricultural workers or belonged to industrial sectors, such as transport, metallurgy, electricity and building. The exiled who moved to Southern France held “a more modest socio-professional qualification and a strong militancy in the anarchist and communist parties”, them being the members of the very first fighting units that, together with the auxiliary services, settled abroad in January and February 1939. [10] Relocating to America represented however, using the words of historian Juan B. Vilar, an “extremely selective emigration. Without ignoring the presence of working class emigrants, still the majority of Spanish who fled to Latin America belonged to the leader levels of society”. [11] The exile in the American countries was then characterized by a large number of exiled people connected to a range of professions in the fields of politics and intellectual and liberal arts.

From a political point of view, this exile was drawn by the different ideologies of communists, socialists, anarchists and republicans. In many occasions the existence of those factions resulted in clashes and disputes among all groups of refugees, whether they belonged to the governmental entourage or to the collectivity. The political

differences that had already risen during the years prior to the Spanish war were only strengthened by the experience of the exile.

Frontier crossings and concentration camps

The border to France was usually crossed at Latour de Carol, Bourg Madame, Prats de Mollo, Le Perthus and Cerbère. All these outposts situated in the region of the Eastern Pyrenees found themselves on the verge of collapsing due to the arrival of masses of refugees who were trying to reach the other side of the border. In the initial stage there were mainly women, children and old people, but shortly after they were joined by the veterans on the run from the advance of the nationalist troops. On 22nd January, following the final fall of the front at the river Ebro, the Republican Government ordered the evacuation of Barcelona, starting a massive retreat of both civilians and soldiers toward the frontier to France.

The crossings at the border were not always open. On 28th January, two days after the occupation of Barcelona by the Nationalist army, Julio Álvarez del Vayo, at that time in office as the republican Minister of Foreign Affairs, obtained from the French government the opening of the frontier to receive thousands of refugees. On 5th February, after few days when only the civilians had been allowed to enter the country, the French authorities permitted to pass also to the soldiers, under the condition they were disarmed and interned into concentration camps. [12] In roughly three weeks time – the last day of this huge crossing operation being 10th February – around 465.000 people entered the coastal and agricultural district of the Eastern Pyrenees.



Once across the border the refugees first had to undergo a selection procedure called triage, and afterwards they were relocated in temporary camps known as centres d'accueil. The first camp to open in France was Argelès on 1st February 1939. As a consequence to the large number of refugees arriving between 5th and 9th February, on the 8th of the same month another camp was opened in Saint-Cyprien: both were destined to the immigrants crossing the border through Le Perthus y Cérbera. In the areas surrounding Vallespir and the Cerdanya the camps of Arles-sur-Tech y Prats de Molló were also opened. [13]

The camps were constantly kept under surveillance by both the French police and the Moorish and Senegalese colonial troops. Shortly after their arrival the refugees started to suffer malnutrition, promiscuity and overcrowding, as well as lack of hygiene and water contamination caused by the presence of human detritus on the beaches. All these factors generated avitaminosis, scabies, dysentery and the death of many due to cholera and starvation.



The overcrowding in the camps of *Argelès* and *Saint-Cyprien* urged the French government to establish another shelter point on the shore of Barcarés, also situated in the region of the Eastern Pyrenees, in order to ease off the pressure from the other structures. Little by little new camps were erected in other districts, such as Adge (Hérault) – especially reserved to people with Catalan origins – and Bram (Aude), for the elderly individuals. Subsequently the camps of Gurns (Béarn), destined to Bask aviators and members of the International Brigades, Judes (Septfonds), for specialized workers, and Couiza, to offer repair to women and children, were also created.

Accordingly, few correction facilities were as well prepared to receive those considered particularly dangerous. Several hundreds of Spanish officers and soldiers of the republican army, together with representatives of the International Brigades, were relegated in the ancient templar fortress of Collioure. Similarly, the former prison camp of Vernet-d'Ariège was used to accommodate the majority of anarchists belonging to the Columna Durruti. The women were instead sent to Rieucros, as a form of punishment and repression. The structures in Vernet and Rieucros both also served during the Second World War as prisons to intern men and women of different nationality who bore a specific military and political significance. They were mostly antifascists from central Europe, French communists and anarchist women. [14]

A secondary route to the exile was represented by northern Africa; it all started on 5th March 1939, when the republican fleet escaped from Cartagena. The main destination to this exodus was Orán and its area: the western end of Algeria close to the Moroccan border. The exile in the African continent followed a pattern similar to the one noticed in metropolitan France. It was "basically a popular emigration. It involved only a bunch of low grade political and union activists, very few literati and a small group of cultural or scientific personalities". [15] The figures reported by Juan B. Vilár refer to 8.000 refugees in Algeria, 4.000 in Tunis and about 1.000 in Morocco.

Women and children were sheltered in detention centers, whilst the mass of veterans and male adults were sent to labour camps, among the others Morand and Suzzoni in Algeria and Rélizane in Orán. Prison camps were also established in Merijda and Djelfa. The freighter Stanbrook can well be considered a symbol of this emigration to North Africa; it set off the port of Alicante on 28th March 1939 with a full cargo of 2.638 passengers and reached its final destination of Orán thanks only to the sense of humanity shown by its captain, welshman Archibald Dickson. [16]



Work, fight or return to your homecountry. Exiled people in France during the Second World War

On the eve of the Second World War the French government emitted a decree that compelled all male foreigners (between 20 and 48 years of age and entitled to the right of asylum) to serve among the files of the French Army. The Spanish republicans fell into the aforementioned category, and they were offered four options to choose among:

- To be individually contracted as employees either in the agricultural or in the industrial sector, with the scope to somehow compensate the scarcity of workers so common at the time;
- To enrol into a Company of Foreign Workers (CTE), in charge of reinforcing the fronts of the French defence, like the Maginot line and the Italian border, as well as installing the Pipe-Line;
- To serve for a period of 5 years as volunteers in the Foreign Legion;
- To become part of the Marching Regiments of Foreign Volunteers (RMVE) and offer their services "pour la durée de la guerre". [17]

The CTE, RMVE and the Foreign Legion all represented a viable solution for socialist, anarchist and communist refugees who were afraid to go back to Spain and face the fascist retaliation. Most choices were then dictated by the menace constituted by the Spain of Franco. As regards those individuals who could not be repatriated and refused to join one of the above organizations, they were confined to the disciplinary camps of Collioure or Le Vernet, and treated more as prisoners than as political refugees. To add pressure to the already difficult situation, only the families of the ones who were employed or members of either the CTE, the RMVE or the Legion were allowed to stay in France, as well as the republicans whose return to the homecountry would have endangered their lives. As a matter of fact many among the male refugees were obliged to accept one of the offers they were presented with by the French government.

It is worth pointing out that the percentage of enlistments proved to be directly proportional to the grade of politization held by the refugees, as the more radical political fringes did not reach an agreement with the French government. For example the number of those who joined the Foreign Legion was relatively small (less than 1000 units), due to the fact that it was associated with the Tercio de Extranjeros (or Francoist Legion), as opposed to the RMVE, where around 6000 units enlisted. The latter represented for the Spanish republicans "the only possible way to enter the French Army. The integration into the regular ranks of platoons formed exclusively by Spanish soldiers was not acceptable to the French government, always very attentive to avoid troubles of any sort with Franco".[18]

After Paris was occupied by the German Army on 14th June 1940, a new odyssey begun for the exiled people still living in the concentration camps by the time the collaborationist government led by the marshal Philippe Pétain was established. Likewise, many others were captured by the Nazis and sent to the death camps since they were cooperating with the French Resistance through their positions at the CTE and RMVE. Out of the 7000 Spanish refugees detained at Mauthausen, over 5000 units perished in the camp. Ironically the refugees were also imprisoned by the English forces under the accusation of "suspected cooperation with the enemy" because they had been forced to work as slaves at the construction of the Western Wall (Organización Todt). On top of that, in spite of them fighting side by side with the French Resistance, many republican partisans (maquisards) did not receive any international help to end the Francoist dictatorship. They had instead to engage alone on their particular "Reconquista of Spain" and conquer the Arán Valley in 1944 by relying only on their scarce resources. Many other elements characterized the lives of the refugees at the end of the war. Those who did not return home were gradually forgotten by the Spain of Franco and at times they achieved to lead a brand new existence in different places, adjusting to different cultures and languages. To them the exile represented a salvation and the possibility to explore opportunities otherwise precluded in a Spain soaked in the taboos of one of its darkest moment. The constant wish to go back to their homecountry was somehow mitigated by time. Rootlessness became part of their lives and the memories – well beyond the belongings carried in a suitcase during their journey – blended with the experience of the exile, generated the production of a group identity sharing a strong common background.

Author: Lidia Bocanegra | November 2009

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5. For more information about the performance of the Argentina society see Bocanegra, Lidia; "La República Argentina: el debate sobre la Guerra Civil y la inmigración" en *¡Ay de los vencidos! El exilio y los países de acogida*, Ed. Eneida, Madrid, pp. 189-233 [[Back to text](#)].
6. Refer the bibliography-webgraphy section of the Project to see the references about the exile in America [[Back to text](#)].
7. Vilar, Juan B.; "El exilio español de 1939 en el Norte de África", en *¡Ay de los vencidos! El exilio y los países de acogida*, Ed. Eneida, Madrid, pp. 71-72 [[Back to text](#)].
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