

**Cities of Defeat:
Spanish Civil War Refugees and the French Concentration Camps of 1939**



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Maps of the Camps

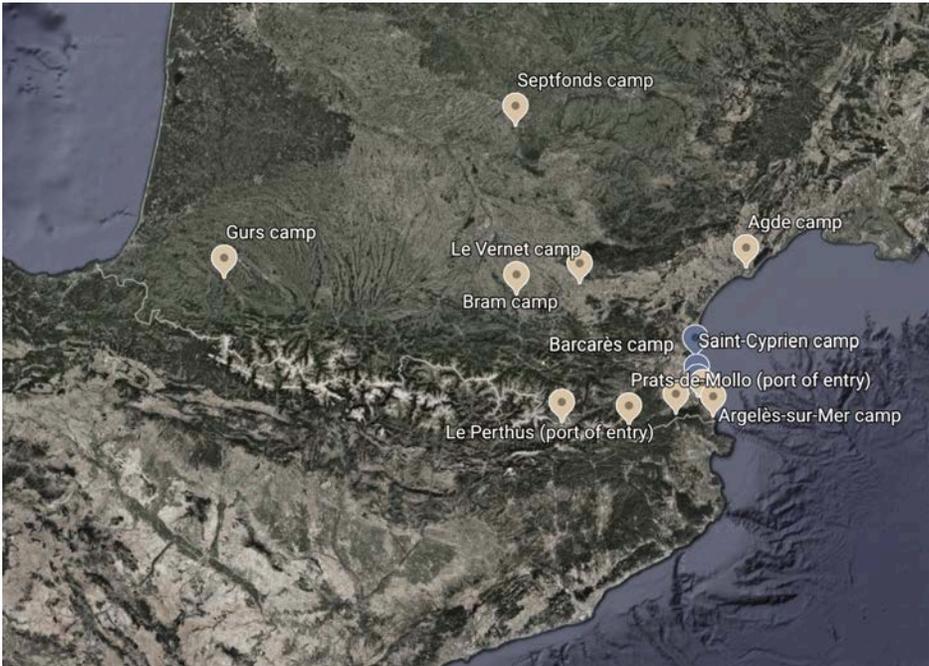


Figure 1: the Spanish-French border, with major concentration camps and ports of entry, 1939.

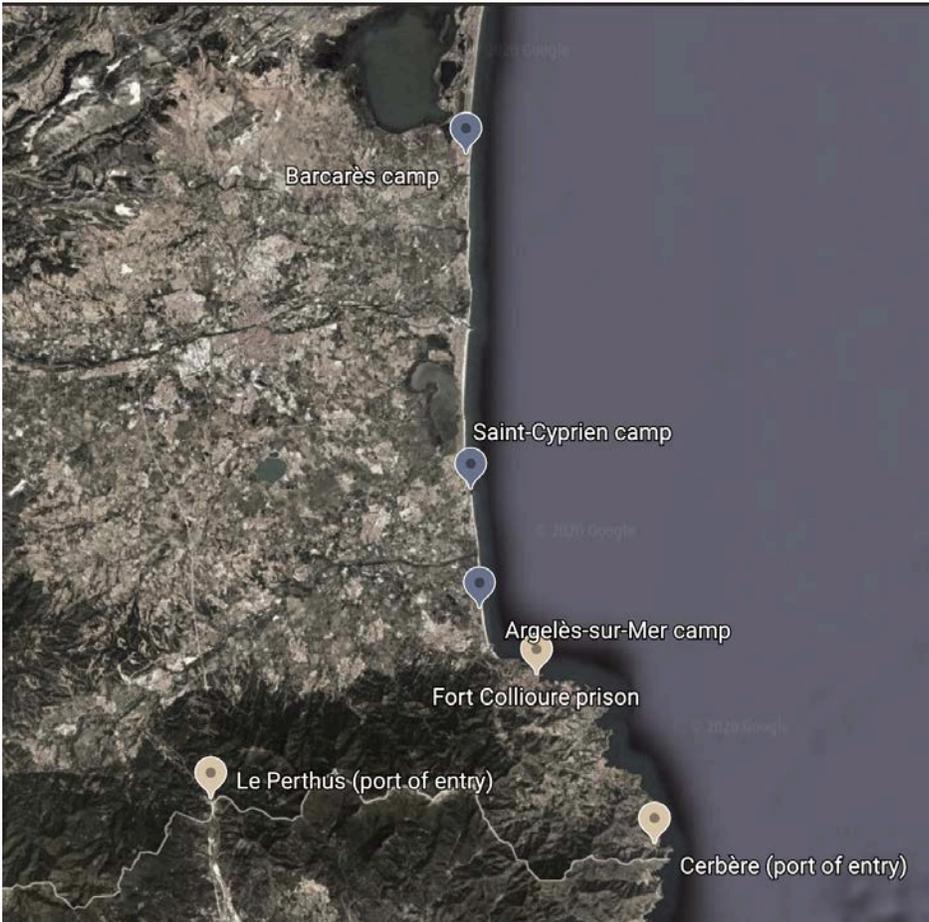


Figure 2: the beach camps of the Roussillon, 1939.

Introduction

Seven notebooks, a typewriter, and a worn copy of Cervantes's *Don Quixote*—these were the belongings that the eighteen-year-old Eulalio Ferrer, with the help of a friend and fellow-internee, carried with him on the hours-long march from the concentration camp of Argelès-sur-Mer, that “port of refuge, and also of captivity” where he had lived since the defeat of the Spanish Republic five months earlier, to his new site of internment at Barcarès.¹ Forty-eight years later, he returned to these notebooks—his diary of the year he had spent in the French concentration camps—editing them and finally publishing them as the book *Entre alambradas* [*Behind Barbed Wire*]. As he tells us in the preface to this book:

The pages of this *Diary*, rescued from my intimate papers, have slept a long sleep of forty-eight years. Awakening them has been a shaking-up of sorrow and, at the same time, of plenitude; like the sensation of having lived another life, its memories remote, its wounds erased. They are pages which come to light now after having discovered—and confirmed—that the crutches of hope can help to heal the mutilations of destiny.²

That “long sleep of forty-eight years” endured by the pages of Ferrer's *Diary* is emblematic of the position that the French concentration camps of 1939 have occupied in historical memory. The experiences of the Spanish refugees who were interned in these camps remain, even today, on the margins of both Spanish and French histories of this period, overshadowed by the two cataclysmic events which preceded and followed them: the destruction of the Spanish Republic

¹ Ferrer, Eulalio, *Entre alambradas* (México, D.F.: Pangea, 1987), pp. 61-63.

² “Las páginas de este *Diario*, rescatadas de mis papeles íntimos, han dormido un largo sueño de 48 años. Despertar de él ha sido un sacudimiento de dolor y de plenitud, a la vez; como la sensación de haber vivido otra vida, remotos los recuerdos, borradas las heridas. Son páginas que ven la luz pública después de descubrir—y confirmar—que las muletas de la esperanza ayudan a salvar las mutilaciones del destino.” Ferrer, *Entre alambradas*, p. 13.

Note: the photograph on the title page is part of a series taken by the Hungarian-American war photographer Robert Capa in the concentration camp of Argelès-sur-Mer in 1939. The description for this one is: “*Refugee writes something down behind a wire fence at a concentration camp for Spanish refugees, Argelès-sur-Mer, France.*” This image and all subsequent photographs by Capa included in this thesis were accessed through the International Center of Photography Website: <https://www.icp.org/search-results/robert%20capa%20argeles-sur-mer/>.

in the first months of 1939, and the French military defeat of June 1940. Consequently, the broader historical significance of these camps—as a response to the largest and most rapid refugee wave in Europe during the interwar period, and as an instance when a purported democracy began to implement mechanisms of control and repression not altogether dissimilar to those put in place by their Fascist opponents—has largely been overlooked.

This was in spite of the fact that many of the hundreds of thousands of internees were, like Eulalio Ferrer, seized by the overpowering need to record their experiences and communicate them to a seemingly indifferent world.³ The process of writing a history of the camps began almost immediately within the camps themselves,⁴ in the form of countless letters, diaries, and memoirs written by internees. But paired with this compulsion to record was a persistent sense that their intended audience—French society, and, more broadly, Europe on the eve of world war—was unwilling to hear, unwilling to see what was right in front of their eyes. Images of blindness and deafness recur throughout these works, as indicated, for instance, by the title of Max Aub’s play about the French concentration camps—*Morir por cerrar los ojos* [*To*

³ See for instance Ferrer’s description of the importance that internees attached to letter-writing: “We were adapting ourselves to the concentration camp life, but in the first few weeks [...] we could think only of writing letters. All kinds of letters. Letters in search of our families; letters asking for help from all the committees of the world; letters following the trail of some wealthy relative in America... Letters, as if with them we could determine our new destiny. To receive a response was a sign, above all, that we existed, that our name had not yet been crossed out from the registry of life.” [“Nos hemos ido adaptando a la vida del campo de concentración, pero en las primeras semanas, tendidos al sol o acurrucados en la noche, sólo hemos pensado en escribir cartas. Toda clase de cartas. Cartas en busca de la familia; cartas pidiendo auxilio a todos los comités del mundo; cartas siguiendo la pista de algún pariente rico en América... Cartas, como si jugaráramos con ellas el nuevo destino. Recibir respuesta ha sido una señal, sobre todo, de que existimos, de que nuestro nombre y apellidos no han sido cancelados en el registro de la vida.”] Ferrer, *Entre alambradas*, p. 19.

⁴ See Paula Simón’s *La escritura de las alambradas: exilio y memoria en los testimonios españoles sobre los campos de concentración franceses* (Vigo, Pontevedra, España: Editorial Académica del Hispanismo, 2012), especially the second chapter (“Testimonio y periodismo en los primeros años del régimen franquista”), for a discussion of the earliest testimonials, published when most of the camps were still existence. Of course, these published texts represent only a small fraction of the total writing produced by internees.

Die by Closing One's Eyes—or by Luis Suárez's aim in his memoir *España comienza en los Pirineos* [*Spain Begins in the Pyrenees*], as stated in the first few sentences: “to shout; to shout at the deaf world.”⁵

As the belated publication of works such as *Entre alambradas* suggests, it would be decades before that “deaf world” was willing to hear—partly because of the suppression, in Spain, of any memory of the organized left which had been destroyed by Franco's victory, eradicated through death, imprisonment, and exile; and partly because of the repression, in France, of any memory which might shatter that heroic image of a nation united against Nazi occupiers, of any reminder of the fact that Vichy was not simply a foreign imposition but rather a continuation of certain patterns in French society and politics already present in the late 1930s. Two concurrent processes in the 1970s would finally bring about an end to this imposed silence: first, the reassessment of conventional narratives of French history during the period 1939-1945, signaled, for instance, by the 1972 publication of Robert O. Paxton's *Vichy France: Old Guard and New Order*, which emphasized the continuities between Vichy France and the late Third Republic; and second, the death of Franco in 1975, which soon brought about a return of parliamentary democracy to Spain and, along with it—and in spite of the so-called “Pact of Forgetting”—a long-awaited re-commemoration of the experiences of socialists, anarchists, Communists, Republicans, Catalan nationalists, and others who had fought against Franco's forces and who, following defeat, had been killed, imprisoned, or driven into exile. These developments enabled a re-opening of historical memory related to the “Exile of 1939,” indicated by the publication of the first historical studies on the topic,⁶ as well as by a profusion

⁵ “gritar; gritar al mundo sordo.” Suárez, Luis, *España comienza en los Pirineos* (Editorial Renacimiento, 2008), p. 59.

⁶ One of the earliest such works was Louis Stein's *Beyond Death and Exile: The Spanish Republicans in France, 1939-1955* (Harvard University Press), published in 1979.

of memoirs and oral histories by former refugees from the Spanish Civil War. In spite of this rich base of primary source material, however, the causes and legacies of the concentration camps of 1939, as well as their place within the broader narrative of French history in this period, have not, in my view, yet been adequately examined.

It will be useful for us to start out with a brief overview of the events immediately leading up to the creation of these concentration camps, in the last few days of January and the first few weeks of February 1939. The immediate cause can be traced to the fall of Barcelona to Franco's forces on January 26, 1939—an event which signaled the imminent end of the Spanish Republic, since Catalonia had been its major stronghold throughout the past three years of civil war. Already, hundreds of thousands of internal refugees from all over Spain had fled to Catalonia as other parts of the country fell into Nationalist hands;⁷ now, the fall of Catalonia sparked a massive wave of refugees—over half a million people—fleeing desperately towards the French border. Joining the 300,000 civilian refugees were another 200,000 soldiers from the Republican army,⁸ who had just been given orders to retreat into France. At the same time, on January 26, the French government—after a series of hurried exchanges between the Minister of the Interior, Albert Sarraut, and a handful of other ministers and prefects—gave the order to close the border.⁹ In order to enforce this decree, large numbers of gendarmes, mobile guards,

⁷ For more context on the situation in Catalonia during the war, see Pagès i Blanch, Pelai, *War and Revolution in Catalonia, 1936-1939* (Translated by Patrick L. Gallagher, Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2015).

⁸ For these figures, see, for instance, Fau, Jean-Claude, “Le camp des réfugiés espagnols de Septfonds (Tarn-et-Garonne) 1939-1940,” in *Camps de sud-ouest de la France* (Toulouse: Editions Privat, 1994), p. 35. The approximate figures (300,000 and 200,000) cited by Fau in this article are corroborated by nearly all other sources, both contemporaneous and historical. For instance, Dreyfus-Armand notes that contemporary official estimates of the number of refugees entering France in late January-early February 1939 ranged from 440,000 to 514,337; see *El exilio de los republicanos españoles en Francia* (Critica, 2004), p. 53.

⁹ Dreyfus-Armand, Geneviève, *El exilio de los republicanos españoles en Francia*, p. 44.

and colonial troops were sent to cordon off the major points of entry along the French-Spanish border.¹⁰ Meanwhile, Franco's forces, with the aid of German and Italian aircraft, continued to bomb the crowds of civilian refugees and retreating soldiers as they fled through Catalonia.¹¹

In order to evade the French border patrols, many refugees made their way clandestinely through the snow-covered paths of the Pyrenees, while others—among them many women, children, and wounded soldiers—were trapped at the border for days, standing in the freezing rain with no food or medical attention, begging the guards for entry into France.¹² Two days after the initial order to close the border, it was re-opened to civilian refugees, but soldiers from the retreating Republican army, along with all other adult male refugees, were still denied entry. These refugees—numbering about 300,000—were not allowed to enter France until February 5, although many had crossed clandestinely before that date.¹³ Before being let through, they were searched, disarmed, and stripped of anything that might be considered “war material.”¹⁴ Then, watched over by the ever-present gendarmes and mobile guards, they were marched along the roads of the Roussillon, with no idea of what their final destination might be—the only response to their inquiries being the guards' constant refrain: “*Allez, allez*” [“go on, go on”]. At the end of this march, they were herded into a series of barbed-wire enclosures, hastily set up on various beaches—the main ones being, at first, Argelès-sur-Mer, Saint-Cyprien, and Barcarès—

¹⁰ Dreyfus-Armand, *El exilio de los republicanos españoles en Francia*, p. 52. See also Fau, “Le camp de réfugiés espagnols de Septfonds,” p. 36-37.

¹¹ For a depiction of the conditions of the retreat in late January, see Max Aub's short stories “El Cojo” and especially “Enero sin nombre,” as well as the opening scenes of his novel *Campo francés*.

¹² For a description of these initial days when the refugees of the Retirada were trapped at the Spanish-French border, see, for instance, Federica Montseny's memoir, *El Éxodo*. See also Sharif Gemie's article, “The Ballad of Bourg-Madame: Memory, Exile, and the Spanish Republican Refugees of the ‘Retirada’ of 1939” (*International Review of Social History*, Vol. 51, No. 1 (April 2006), pp. 1-40), for more details on the retreat from Catalonia.

¹³ Dreyfus-Armand, *El exilio de los republicanos españoles en Francia*, p. 45.

¹⁴ See Suárez, *España comienza en los Pirineos*, p. 86-88, for a description of the humiliating experience of being continually searched and stripped of one's possessions.

throughout the Pyrénées-Orientales: these were what the French government would soon come to call “camps de concentration.”

The term is perhaps misleading, not simply because of the connotations which it gives rise to in the present day—indelibly linked as it is, now, with the image of Nazi extermination camps—but also because, at least in these first few weeks, to call these enclosed strips of sand “camps” is almost to give them too much credit. In fact, the two main sites of Argelès-sur-Mer and Saint-Cyprien contained, at first, no structures of any kind—no barracks, no shelters, and no infrastructure for food distribution, waste disposal, or medical services. Even the barbed-wire enclosures were not fully completed in time for the arrival of the first refugees, necessitating the deployment of large numbers of French and Senegalese troops to guard the internees and prevent escape. Nonetheless, as the camps became increasingly regimented over the ensuing weeks, it became impossible for French officials to deny that these were not simply “special centers” for receiving refugees,¹⁵ but were in fact concentration camps designed to imprison and control a massive interned population.

Overall, approximately 300,000 refugees¹⁶—out of the half-million who had fled to France—were interned in these camps at the start of February 1939. The majority of these internees were former soldiers of the Republican army and other men of “military age,” but tens of thousands of women and children were also interned at least for brief periods of time.¹⁷ The remainder either managed to successfully evade the camps, or—as was the case for most of the

¹⁵ See Dreyfus-Armand’s discussion of this early terminology of “special centers,” in *El exilio de los republicanos españoles en Francia*, p. 59.

¹⁶ Owing to the state of disorganization prevailing in these camps, it is impossible to give precise figures of the number of internees at any given time. Nonetheless, most sources converge on this figure of approximately 300,000 internees at the start of February—see for instance the figure of 275,000 (in the middle of February) cited by Dreyfus-Armand in *El exilio de los republicanos españoles en Francia*, p. 60.

¹⁷ Dreyfus-Armand, *El exilio de los republicanos españoles en Francia*, p. 53.

women and children—were sent to designated “refuges” scattered throughout the interior of the country. As noted earlier, the main two camps, in this early period, were Argelès-sur-Mer (with 43,000-100,000 internees), Saint-Cyprien (with 30,000-90,000 internees), and Barcarès (with 13,000-70,000 internees), all located in the department of Pyrénées-Orientales.¹⁸ In the next few weeks and months, the French government set up a number of additional camps throughout southwest France: Gurs (in Basses-Pyrénées, with 23,000 internees), Bram (in Aude, with 16,000 internees), Agde (in Hérault, with 17,000 internees), Septfonds (in Tarn-et-Garonne, with 16,000 internees),¹⁹ and Le Vernet (in Ariège, with 15,000 internees).²⁰ These camps were established in an effort to alleviate the problems of overcrowding and insufficient resources at the first three camps of Argelès, Saint-Cyprien, and Barcarès. Some of them were intended specifically for certain categories of refugees, such as Gurs, which was designated for Basques and former members of the International Brigades, or Le Vernet, which had been a WWI-era camp for German prisoners-of-war, repurposed to receive the Spanish anarchists of the Durruti Column.²¹

This thesis will focus primarily on the initial main camps of Argelès-sur-Mer, Saint-Cyprien, and Barcarès, simply because these were the sites where the majority of the 300,000

¹⁸ See the second map on p. 4 of this thesis. These figures are a combination of those offered by Dreyfus-Armand, *El exilio de los republicanos españoles en Francia*, p. 60, and those recorded on a sheet of paper in the following archival folder: “Proyecto de historial oral: deportados y refugiados” (PHO, Memoria Viva, 30-38), from the Asociación para el estudio de la deportación y el exilio español (Centro Documental de la Memoria Histórica, Salamanca). These latter figures seem to be copied down from another secondary source. The range of figures noted does not indicate uncertainty in the estimates but rather change over time. The higher figures for Saint-Cyprien and Argelès correspond to the period of early to mid-February 1939, before the processes of repatriation and re-immigration began in earnest, and before many of the internees were transferred to other camps. The case of Barcarès is somewhat different, as the lower figure of 13,000 corresponds to this earlier period; many of the internees from Saint-Cyprien and Argelès were later transferred to Barcarès as more barracks were built at the latter camp.

¹⁹ For more detail about Septfonds in particular, see Fau, “Le camp des réfugiés espagnols de Septfonds (Tarn-et-Garonne) 1939-1940,” in *Camps de sud-ouest de la France*.

²⁰ See the first map on p. 4 of this thesis. Figures cited in “Proyecto de historial oral: deportados y refugiados” (PHO, Memoria Viva, 30-38), from the Asociación para el estudio de la deportación y el exilio español (Centro Documental de la Memoria Histórica, Salamanca).

²¹ For more detail, see “Le camp du Vernet d’Ariège, 1939-1944,” in *Camps de sud-ouest de la France*.

internees were confined during the period of February-September 1939. However, I will not take the approach adopted by some other historians, that is, to examine each of these camps separately²²—although such an approach might be useful when it comes to providing greater detail about, for instance, the concerns and motivations of local French authorities, it may nonetheless present a misleadingly compartmentalized portrait of the experiences of Spanish internees. Except for those who left the camps relatively early on—whether through repatriation, re-emigration, or escape—nearly all of the internees spent time in multiple camps, as they were frequently transferred from one site to another.²³ This gave rise to a sense of shared identity and commonality of experience between the different camps, in spite of the aspects which varied from one site to another.²⁴ Moreover, none of these camps functioned as an isolated unit, but rather were embedded within a wider network of surveillance and repression established by the Daladier government²⁵ in the period of 1938-1939—a subject we will return to in Chapter 3.

This thesis is centrally concerned with the actual experiences of the Spanish internees of the camps, but also with what the creation of these camps can tell us about the state of French society and politics in 1939. The influx of half a million refugees from the Spanish Civil War—

²² For instance, the authors of the chapters on Septfonds and Le Vernet in *Camps de sud-ouest de la France*.

²³ Eulalio Ferrer, for instance, spent five months in Argelès-sur-Mer, three months in Barcarès, and three months in Saint-Cyprien.

²⁴ This is reflected, for instance, in works like Suárez's *España comienza en los Pirineos*, which rarely mentions the camp where it is set (Saint-Cyprien) by name. Similarly, Molins i Fàbrega and Bartolí's *Campos de concentración: 1939-194...* never mentions any of the camps by name, but only ever refers to them as a totality. On the other hand, however, Manuel Andújar's *St. Cyprien, plage... campo de concentración* and Agustí Bartra's *Cristo de 200.000 brazos* are much more focused on the specificity of place, though this may be attributed to the fact that Andújar and Bartra both left the camps relatively early through re-emigration, and so were never transferred to other camps.

²⁵ Édouard Daladier was a French politician and one of the leading members of the Radical Party throughout the interwar period. He served as Prime Minister of France in 1933 and 1934, and then again from 1938 to 1940. At this time, the Radical Party was a major party of the center-left in France; it traced its lineage to the radical republicanism of the French Revolution, standing for secularism and equal rights but differing from the socialists in its defense of private property. Daladier's political stances and his role in the creation of the camps will be examined more extensively in the next chapter.

by far the largest and most rapid influx of refugees in French history²⁶—took place during a period of acute class conflict and political division within France itself. The question of what was to be done with the refugees took on an outsized significance in the midst of these ideological battles over the very nature of French national identity, over who “belonged” to the nation and who was to be excluded from it. This was the fundamental issue at stake in countless areas of French society throughout the 1930s and 1940s, ranging from the immigration policies of the Daladier government to the Vichy regime’s methods of imprisoning and deporting non-citizens—a lineage in which the concentration camps set up for Spanish refugees in 1939 form a crucial, and often overlooked, link.

In order to better understand the origins and function of the concentration camps from the standpoint of the French state, this thesis draws on various government documents in the Archives Nationales—in particular, letters sent between the Minister of the Interior, Albert Sarraut, and the prefects of the departments, regarding the organization of the camps as well as surveillance measures to be taken against the refugees. These reports allow us to gain some insight into the concerns and motivations of high-ranking French officials when it came to the creation and supervision of the camps, especially in the context of French refugee and immigration policy in the late 1930s.

The sources for this thesis consist primarily, however, of accounts written or narrated by former Spanish internees. Eight of these sources—Luis Suárez’s memoir *España comienza en los Pirineos*, Eulalio Ferrer’s diary *Entre alambradas*, Agustí Bartra’s novella *Cristo de 200.000 brazos* [*Christ of the 200,000 Arms*], Manuel Andújar’s memoir *St. Cyprien, plage... campo de concentración* [*St. Cyprien, beach... concentration camp*], Narcís Molins i Fàbrega and Josep

²⁶ Soo, Scott, *The Routes to Exile: France and the Spanish Civil War Refugees, 1939-2009* (Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 3, 15.

Bartolí's illustrated series of prose poems, *Campos de concentración, 1939-194...*, Celso Amieva's poetry collection *La almohada de arena* [*Pillow of Sand*], and Max Aub's experimental novel *Campo francés* and his short stories from his *El laberinto mágico* [*The Magic Labyrinth*] cycle—are published literary accounts, and have been analyzed before by literary critics and historians.²⁷ Some of them, like the works by Suárez, Andújar, Molins i Fàbrega and Bartolí, were published while the camps were still in existence; others, like the works by Aub, Amieva, Bartra, and Ferrer, were only published decades afterwards, although all of them were based on material written much earlier.

My aim is to use these literary texts as historical documents which can potentially tell us much more about the subjective experience of the camps than that which is offered by more conventional archival sources. Rather than seeing archival or state-sponsored sources as possessing some kind of privileged status of historical “truth,” we must turn to these kinds of literary or personal accounts in order to correct the inherent erasures and distortions of the perspective offered to us by government documents. This is not to claim, of course, that any of these literary texts can offer us an unmediated image of historical truth—it is only to point out that we should be skeptical of the illusion of “objectivity” which government documents present us with, given the way that the various interest and power relations at play within these sources would likely have motivated their authors to obscure aspects of the full truth. My hope is that, by

²⁷ Most notably by Francie Cate-Arries in *Spanish Culture Behind Barbed Wire: Memory and Representation of the French Concentration Camps, 1939-1945* (Bucknell University Press, 2004). Cate-Arries's book is one of the few works in any language to focus primarily on the experience of Spanish refugees in the French concentration camps of 1939. However, Cate-Arries's approach differs considerably from my own, in that her book is a work of literary criticism, focused primarily on a formal analysis of these works, rather than a historical study of the causes, consequences, and broader implications of the concentration camps. This thesis differs from her work considerably both in its use of additional sources (including French government documents as well as oral histories) and in terms of its arguments and modes of historical analysis.

combining both of these perspectives—each of them highly limited and mediated when taken on their own—we can come to a better understanding not only of the internees’ experiences but also the origins, functions, and legacies of the camps themselves.

The remainder of the sources for this thesis consist of oral histories contained in the General Archives of the Spanish Civil War in Salamanca, specifically nineteen interviews from the collection “Proyecto de historia oral: Refugiados españoles en México” which were conducted in 1978. These interviews contain a wealth of information about the French concentration camps, and yet, to my knowledge, they have never before been examined for any study on this topic. This new primary source base has enabled me to further contextualize and corroborate the information contained in the published accounts, and has also presented new dimensions of the experience of the camps which at certain points in the thesis—particularly in the chapter on surveillance, control, and evasion—have served as the starting point for original historical arguments.

The chapters that follow are structured to reflect a dual focus on the experiences of the Spanish internees and the surrounding context of French politics and society. Chapter 1, “A Civil War,” focuses on the impact of the Spanish Civil War on French politics and on the evolution of French immigration policy over the course of the late 1930s. This chapter argues that the origins of the policy of mass internment can be traced back to two fundamental causes: first, the erosion of France’s status as a nation of asylum for refugees, owing in large part to policies implemented by the Daladier government in 1938; and second, fears of class conflict on the part of French politicians of the right and center (including the Minister of the Interior, Albert Sarraut), who saw the refugees as harbingers of a revolutionary process which threatened to engulf France.

Chapter 2, “An Inferno of Sand,” examines the living conditions of the camps, and the way in which they were depicted by former internees as sites of absence, enforced idleness, and death. It also examines the question of the intentionality of the camps: that is, to what extent these conditions of neglect were a largely unintended consequence of the French state’s incapacity to deal with a refugee wave of this scale, and to what extent they were part of an intentional policy to repress and control the internees in the interests of the French state. This chapter argues that, in order to answer this question, we will have to look carefully at how the organization and function of the camps changed over time. Finally, this chapter will suggest a way of thinking about the camps as sites of “civil death,” whose purpose was to isolate the refugees from the rest of the French nation by excluding them from the realms of work and citizenship.

Chapter 3, “Surveillance, Control, and Evasion,” examines how the concentration camps functioned as the lynchpin of an entire system of surveillance and repression which the French state sought to establish in order to control the refugee population. However, as this chapter will argue, the limitations and contradictions inherent in French policies at this early stage made it possible for many refugees to evade or even collectively resist these modes of control.

Finally, Chapter 4, “To Live Free in Prison,” examines the organization of cultural, political, and commemorative activities within the camps. It argues that we should think of the camps as not solely sites of absence or of repression, but also as spaces which served as unexpectedly fertile ground for the formation of new bonds of solidarity and community.

The aim of this thesis is to re-situate the concentration camps of 1939 within the history of France in the interwar period, showing how the creation of these camps was closely bound up with the conflicts which had been unfolding within French society over the course of the

previous decade. More than that, it aims to examine the way in which the camps revealed certain irreconcilable contradictions at the heart of French national identity, particularly its own self-conception as the birthplace of a tradition of “republican universalism”—a tradition which proved increasingly difficult to uphold amid the social conflicts and political uncertainties of the late 1930s. It is my hope that, in examining internees’ accounts of these camps, we can come to a better understanding not only of their experiences, but also of the society from which they had been deliberately excluded—an aspect of French history which is only visible, perhaps, from the vantage point of Saint-Cyprien, Barcarès, and Argelès-sur-Mer, from the perspective of these makeshift, barbed-wire jails on the beaches of the Roussillon, pressed up against the edge of the Mediterranean.

Chapter 1: A Civil War

Perhaps no account better captures the sense of a traumatic break occasioned by the “Exodus of 1939” than Max Aub’s short story “El Limpiabotas del Padre Eterno,” particularly in its climactic scene of the border crossing at Cerbère. In this story, the main character (nicknamed “Málaga”), at the insistence of his friend, Manuel, flees from Barcelona as Franco’s troops approach. During the retreat, Manuel dies in an aerial bombardment, and “Málaga” puts his friend’s dead body into a wheelbarrow, faithfully pushing it all the way to the French border. When he reaches Cerbère, one of the four main points of entry to the Pyrénées-Orientales,²⁸ he has no choice but to dump his friend’s body onto the ground, since “there was no possibility of digging a grave.” Then, he stands there among the throngs of other refugees, gazing at the tunnel that leads into France:

“To the tunnel! To the tunnel!” The tunnel, black mouth of hell, there at the foot of the mountain. The station of Cerbère, and, on the sidetracks, two long trains laden with military equipment ready to cross the border. The mobile guards, the gendarmes: “To the tunnel! *Allez! Allez!*” Even now, they had no other orders. For now, it was just: “to the tunnel!”, whatever it took, pushing them, dragging them. *Málaga* didn’t understand: this was France, the same France that Manuel wanted to reach, France was heaven on earth, the land of milk and honey, that’s what he’d heard [...] And now he was entering the black mouth of the tunnel, stumbling over the railroad ties, over the rocks, over the tracks [...] France is a dark tunnel filled with the cries of children, the shouted curses of men, the lost calls of women.²⁹

At the end of the scene, watching the crowds of refugees, one French official asks another: “how many? A hundred, two hundred, three hundred thousand? [...] It must be over half a million [...]

²⁸ The others being Le Perthus, Bourg-Madame, and Prats-de-Mollo (see maps on p. 4 of this thesis).

²⁹ “-¡Al túnel! ¡Al túnel! / El túnel, negra boca del infierno, allí a lo más abajo de la falda del monte. La estación de Cerbère, y, en las vías muertas, dos larguísimos trenes con pertrechos de guerra que estaban ‘a punto’ de pasar la frontera. Los guardia móviles, los gendarmes: -¡Al túnel! *Allez! Allez!* / Todavía no tienen otras órdenes. Por de pronto: ¡al túnel!, como sea, a empujones, a rastras. El *Málaga* no entiende: está en Francia, allí mismo donde quería llegar Manuel, Francia es Jauja, él lo ha oído [...] Y está entrando en la negra boca del túnel, tropezando en las traviesas, en las piedras, por las vías. [...] Francia es un oscuro túnel donde lloran los niños, maldicen los hombres, gritan perdidas las mujeres.” Aub, Max. “El Limpiabotas del Padre Eterno,” in *Enero sin nombre*, p. 269.

A whole country falling from the sky, on top of another country.” In response, the other official simply exclaims: “A plague, sir! A plague!”³⁰

This passage is remarkable for the way in which it shifts between two opposing perspectives of the “Exodus”: first, that of the refugees, whose hopes of France as a “land of milk and honey” are shattered by the pushes and shouts of the gendarmes, and who now see the moment of crossing the French-Spanish border as an entry into a kind of purgatory or hell; and second, that of the French state, whose emissaries see the refugees as little more than a “plague,” which must immediately be quarantined and inoculated against. Aub is, in fact, quite justified in linking these two perspectives together in this way: after all, the experiences of the refugees during the “Exodus” cannot be understood without first understanding their treatment at the hands of the French state—and this, in turn, stemmed directly from this characterization of the refugees as a threat, an invading force, a “plague.”

But to say this is only to raise another, deeper question: *why* was it that these refugees were seen and treated as a “plague”? After all, this seemed to go against the French Republic’s own cherished tradition of humanitarianism, which proclaimed the right of all political refugees to asylum. For many of the refugees, France was not only a “land of milk and honey”; it was also the birthplace of the “rights of man,” a beacon of hope for the persecuted, and, perhaps most significantly, a “sister Republic” to the defeated Spanish Popular Front. Why was it, then, that these refugees—many of whom saw themselves as upholders of the republican tradition of “liberty, equality, and fraternity”—were perceived by French officials as a force so threatening that they were willing to compromise their own stated ideals in order to contain and control it? To answer these questions, and to understand the origins of a mass internment policy which was

³⁰ “¿cuántos? ¿Cien, doscientos, trescientos mil? [...] Pasan del medio millón. [...] Un país que cae del cielo, sobre otro. -¡Una plaga, señor! ¡Una plaga!” Ibid., p. 269.

entirely unprecedented in French history,³¹ we will first have to examine much more closely the impact of the Spanish Civil War on French society, as well as the shifts which took place in French refugee and immigration policy over the course of the 1930s.

Of course, on one level, the panicked response of the French officials in Aub's story—their fear of this “whole country falling from the sky, on top of another country”—might seem justified enough, considering the sheer scale and rapidity of the refugee wave. The “Exodus of 1939” marked the single greatest influx of refugees in French history—half a million people in scarcely two weeks.³² In their report to the French Parliament, which was reprinted in the Socialist newspaper *Le Populaire* on February 19, 1939, a delegation of Socialist politicians referred to “the lightning-like rapidity and the unforeseen scale of the exodus, without precedent in history, of old men, of women and children, and of the retreating army.”³³ The report goes on to note that the “unforeseen scale” of this refugee wave has been exacerbated by its acute geographic concentration: “between January 27 and February 12,” they explain, “400,000 people have crossed the border at the Pyrenees, flowing into a department populated by only 240,000 people.”³⁴

³¹ As Scott Soo emphasizes: “The very particular circumstances surrounding the French government's reception policy – involving the forced separation of families and friends and the ensuing internment of hundreds of thousands of people—represents a unique episode in French refugee history: never before had the country experienced a rapid influx of refugees of this magnitude; and never before had the French state responded to the call for asylum with mass internment.” Soo, *The Routes to Exile*, p. 15.

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 3, 15.

³³ “la rapidité foudroyante et de l'ampleur imprévue de l'exode, sans précédent dans l'Histoire, des vieillards, des femmes et des enfants, et de la retraite de l'armée.” “Pour les Réfugiés Espagnols: Le Rapport de la Délégation du Groupe Socialiste au Parlement.” *Le Populaire*, 19 February 1939. Accessed through Gallica.

³⁴ “400.000 personnes ont franchi du 27 janvier au 12 février les frontières des Pyrénées et ont afflué dans un département peuplé de 240,000 habitants seulement.” *Ibid.* There is reason to think that the figure of 400,000 referenced in this report is a somewhat conservative estimate, and it certainly does not include the hundreds of thousands of refugees who had already arrived earlier on in the civil war. If we use the higher figure of 500,000 referenced by most contemporary historians, then this means that, in the first few weeks of February 1939, the number of Spanish refugees in the Pyrénées-Orientales outnumbered the local residents of that department by a factor of two to one.

But the impact of the Exodus of 1939 on French society in this period went much deeper than simply the sheer scale of the humanitarian crisis it involved—rather, it cut straight to the core of the political fissures, class conflicts, and contested notions of national identity which characterized French society and politics in the late 1930s and early 1940s. In effect, the Spanish refugees, in fleeing from their own lost civil war, had stumbled into an ongoing “civil war” of another kind—one which had begun with the growing polarization of French politics in the early 1930s, would continue to escalate through the Popular Front victory and strike wave of 1936, then would carry over into the outbreak of the Second World War, and would ultimately find its culminating point in Vichy. Just as had been the case with the Spanish Civil War, moreover, this French “civil war” was, in the words of Julian Jackson, “first and foremost a class war.”³⁵

Jackson locates the starting point of this “civil war” in the crisis of February 6, 1934—a night of right-wing riots which sparked Daladier’s resignation,³⁶ led to the formation of a center-right “National Union” government, and which, as Jeremy Popkin points out, helped to “create an atmosphere in which the possibility of a Fascist France seemed at least plausible.”³⁷ Two years later, the Popular Front—an uneasy anti-fascist coalition between Socialists, Communists, and Radicals—was swept into power, accompanied by “a wave of strikes unprecedented in

³⁵ Jackson, Julian, *France: The Dark Years, 1940-44*, p. 65. I am heavily indebted to Jackson both for this characterization of French politics in the period 1934-1944 as a “civil war” as well as his overall account of French politics in the late 1930s, which is laid out in Chapter 3 (“Class War/Civil War”) of his book. It is worth noting that Jackson is very much working within the historiographical tradition established by Paxton in *Vichy France: Old Guard and New Order*, which emphasizes the continuities between the late Third Republic and the Vichy Regime—but Jackson’s account is more useful for my purposes in this thesis because Jackson goes into far more detail on the context of the late 1930s than does Paxton.

³⁶ See footnote 25 on p. 12 of this thesis for more background on Daladier and the Radical Party. After his resignation in 1934, he would again come to power at the head of a Radical government in 1938-1940, when he would become a driving force in the creation of the concentration camps (a process which we will explore later in this chapter).

³⁷ Popkin, Jeremy, *A History of Modern France*. Jackson, *France: The Dark Years*, p. 65. Encyclopedia Britannica, “The Stavisky affair.”

French history.”³⁸ Not only was the scale of this strike wave unprecedented—with over 1.8 million strikers and 12,142 separate strikes in June 1936 alone—but so, too, was the militancy of the tactics involved, with factory occupations opening up an “irremediable breach” in “patterns of authority” in the workplace.³⁹ As Jackson concludes: “revolution or no revolution, the Popular Front represented a massive shift in power towards organized labor.”⁴⁰

Just at this moment when the power and militancy of organized labor in France was reaching its height, one of the most radical social revolutions in history was taking place just across the Pyrenees.⁴¹ In response to the right-wing military insurrection of July 17, 1936, workers in parts of Catalonia, Aragon, Andalusia, and Valencia not only managed to defeat Franco’s supporters, but also seized the crisis as an opportunity to place much of the economy under working-class control. Urban workers seized control of factories, collectivizing them and setting up democratic workers’ committees; rural workers expropriated land and set up libertarian socialist communes; and revolutionary militias were formed both to stave off the threat of fascist victory and to defend the social revolution.⁴²

For many contemporary observers, the revolution and civil war in Spain was an arena in which the fissures and conflicts of an impending Europe-wide “civil war” were played out in advance: on one side, the forces of fascism, represented by Franco and his German and Italian allies; then, the side of liberal “bourgeois” democracy, represented by the beleaguered Spanish

³⁸ Jackson, *France: The Dark Years*, p. 76.

³⁹ Jackson, *France: The Dark Years*, p. 76. Popkin, *A History of Modern France*.

⁴⁰ Jackson, *France: The Dark Years*, p. 76.

⁴¹ See for example Burnett Bolloten’s description of the 1936 Spanish revolution as “a far-reaching social revolution [...] more profound in some respects than the Bolshevik Revolution in its early stages.”

Bolloten, Burnett, *The Spanish Civil War: Revolution and Counterrevolution*.

⁴² For more context on the Spanish Revolution, see Bolloten’s *The Spanish Civil War: Revolution and Counterrevolution*, Pagès i Blanch’s *War and Revolution in Catalonia*, and, for a first-hand account, George Orwell’s *Homage to Catalonia*.

Republic; and finally, the possibility of working-class social revolution, as represented by the expropriated land and collectivized industry of Catalonia. It would not be too much of an exaggeration to say that, for broad segments of the European middle and upper classes, this latter possibility—that of social revolution—was seen as perhaps an even greater threat than that of fascist victory.⁴³

The echoes of the Spanish Civil War, then, reverberated across Europe—but nowhere were they greater than in France.⁴⁴ As Geneviève Dreyfus-Armand and Pierre Laborie note, the Spanish Civil War was seen at the time as a reflection of social and political conflicts within France, a “Spanish mirror” which transformed French observers into “spectators of their own conflicts, their own anxieties and hopes.”⁴⁵ Some saw in it the fragility of their own Popular Front coalition, and another grim reminder of the steady triumph of fascism across Europe; others saw a dire warning of the chaos that might be unleashed by class warfare in their own country. As Julian Jackson remarks: “The outbreak of the Spanish civil war in July fuelled [French conservatives’] nightmares of revolution and anarchy: Spain, where the ‘reds’ were allegedly burning churches and massacring patriots, seemed an ominous sign of what the future held for France.”⁴⁶ The outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, in fact, sparked a severe political crisis within the French Popular Front coalition: although Prime Minister Léon Blum’s initial impulse had been to lend military aid to the Spanish Popular Front government, this policy was

⁴³ This is certainly the viewpoint put forward, for instance, by George Orwell in *Homage to Catalonia*, based on his experiences in the POUM militia and in the “May Days” of 1937, as well as his analysis of British newspaper articles written about the events of the civil war.

⁴⁴ See Dreyfus-Armand’s claim in *El exilio republicano en Francia*, p. 32: “France was the country in which the Spanish conflict created the most widespread and profound reverberations in public opinion and in which it most forcefully marked internal debates. In France at the end of the 1930s, the Spanish Civil War became ‘completely integrated in the internal struggles of national politics.’”

⁴⁵ Laborie, Pierre, quoted in Dreyfus-Armand, *El exilio español republicano en Francia*, p. 32.

⁴⁶ Jackson, *France: The Dark Years*, p. 77.

met with opposition by Radicals as well as by a pacifist current within Blum's own Socialist party. In an attempt to placate these two groups, Blum's government declared a "non-intervention" policy in August 1936, cutting off all aid to Republican Spain. This scarcely solved the political crisis within the Popular Front coalition, however, as French Communists resolutely opposed the non-intervention policy and led demonstrations calling for "arms for Spain."⁴⁷

The "Spanish mirror" of the Civil War, then, not only presented France with a reflection of its own class conflicts and political divisions; it also played an active role in exacerbating those divisions. But this was certainly not the only realm which was shaped by the conflicts taking place within French society and politics in the 1930s. The "civil war" in France made its influence equally felt in another area which is just as relevant, for our purposes, as a factor in the creation of the concentration camps: namely, that of French immigration and refugee policy.

During the 1920s, as Julian Jackson notes, "a combination of demographic deficit and economic growth had given France one of the largest rates of immigration in the world."⁴⁸ These had made France into "Europe's foremost nation of asylum" throughout most of the interwar period.⁴⁹ By the years 1935-1938, France was home to approximately 523,000 political refugees, a figure which included 100,000-120,000 Russians; 63,000 Armenians; 37,000-40,000 Germans;

⁴⁷ Popkin, *A History of Modern France*, p. 248. This "non-intervention" policy would in fact have a decisive impact on the course of the civil war in Spain—particularly when it came to the suppression of the social revolution and, ultimately, Franco's military victory—and, as such, it remained a considerable source of bitterness towards France among the refugees of 1939. This explains why many Spanish refugees felt so betrayed, not simply by the Radical government of Daladier, which had interned them in concentration camps, but also by the supposedly left-wing government of Blum, which they saw as partly responsible for their defeat.

⁴⁸ Jackson, *France: The Dark Years*, p. 104.

⁴⁹ Maga, Timothy, "Closing the Door: The French Government and Refugee Policy, 1933-1939" (*French Historical Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 3 (Spring, 1982), pp. 424-442), p. 424.

10,000 Italians; and, most significantly for our present topic, 300,000 Spaniards, who had virtually all arrived in France only in those last three years.⁵⁰

Out of these various groups of political refugees, those who had arrived, for the most part, in the 1920s and early 1930s—particularly the Russians and Armenians—were the beneficiaries of a relatively liberalized immigration policy, which enabled them to obtain work permits, and eventually citizenship, with relative ease. But this liberal stance towards immigration began to erode in the mid-1930s. One factor was the Great Depression, which, owing to concerns about unemployment, sparked a rollback of immigrants' right to work in France.⁵¹ This economic crisis, along with the arrival of a new wave of political refugees from Nazi Germany, provided the fodder for the emergence of xenophobic, right-wing discourse on immigration as a driving force within French politics.

In particular, the question of immigration and refugee policy soon assumed an outsized role in ongoing debates about what constituted, or should constitute, a French national identity. On one side were those—primarily on the left—who sought to link this identity with a long-

⁵⁰ It is worth noting that, since these figures go up to only October 1937, this means that Spanish refugees *already* constituted sixty percent of the total number of political refugees in France even well before the fall of Catalonia and the “Exodus” of 1939—a percentage that would become even more disproportionate with the addition of another 500,000 Spanish refugees in February 1939, bringing the total to about 800,000 out of about one million refugees in France (in just a few months, however, this percentage would decrease, due to a combination of a large number of Spanish repatriations along with the arrival of other groups of refugees throughout the course of 1939, most notably Czechs and Poles). See the table on p. 427 of Maga’s “The French Government and Refugee Policy,” p. 427.

⁵¹ It is important to note, however, that this anxiety over unemployment did not necessarily have much basis in reality—even at its peak in 1935, the number of unemployed in France was only one million, which is to say less than 3% out of a total population of about 40 million. France, then, had a significantly lower rate of unemployment compared to other countries hit by the Depression—in fact, owing to falling prices, the real wages of most workers actually increased during this period. This meant that in France “the potential strength of labour was not as weakened as in other countries”—undoubtedly a key factor in enabling the massive strike wave of 1936. (See Jackson, *France: The Dark Years*, p. 71.) What all of this suggests, of course, is that the issue of unemployment—which in actual fact was not too severe—was being weaponized by certain political groups in France to support a restrictionist immigration policy which they wanted to push through for an entirely different set of reasons.

lasting republican, universalist, and humanitarian political tradition which could be traced back to the French Revolution: in other words, the France of the “Rights of Man.” To their right were those who sought instead to distance themselves from this political tradition—without necessarily rejecting it outright—and to emphasize a more conservative identity based on “traditional values” and “order.”⁵²

This debate over the nature of French national identity gave rise to contradictory pressures in the immigration and refugee policy of the time. On the one hand, in the Popular Front period of 1936-1938, both Blum and the Radical prime minister Camille Chautemps sought to maintain the humanitarian tradition of France as a “nation of refuge,” and consequently tried to continue the older policy approach of granting refugees and other immigrants the right to live and work indefinitely in France. But then, in April 1938, the Popular Front gave way to the center-right Radical government of Édouard Daladier, marking the start of an increasingly repressive immigration policy. As Timothy Maga notes, Daladier had been the foremost French politician to advocate in favor of restrictionist policies throughout the 1930s.⁵³ One of Daladier’s first actions upon re-entering office was to issue a decree-law limiting the residence rights of non-citizens (particularly those who had arrived in France more recently), in addition to granting greater authority to border officials to turn back refugees.⁵⁴ The consequence of this, Maga

⁵² It would not be too much of an exaggeration to suggest that this latter strain of French politics would later find expression in the Vichyite slogan of “Travail, Famille, Patrie” [“Work, Family, Homeland”] and in that regime’s obsession with “social stability” and “assuring order.” However, the extent of continuity between French politics of the late 1930s and the Vichy regime is too complex a topic for us to examine in depth here. See Paxton, *Vichy France: Old Guard and New Order*, especially Chapter 2 on “The National Revolution,” for more context about the guiding ideological principles behind the Vichy regime.

⁵³ Maga, “The French Government and Refugee Policy,” p. 428.

⁵⁴ Maga, “The French Government and Refugee Policy,” p. 435.

argues, was that “almost overnight and with one decree, Daladier had shifted the status of France from refugee receiver nation to one of transit.”⁵⁵

In actual fact, this attempt to turn France into a country of “transit” only—that is, a place where refugees might pass through temporarily, but would not be allowed to settle permanently—was never fully achieved, owing to the fact that most refugees in France were unable to settle permanently in other countries;⁵⁶ but the policy did serve as a pretext to enact increasingly repressive measures against non-citizens residing in France, especially against recently-arrived refugees. And yet not even Daladier was willing to entirely abandon the older image of France as a humanitarian “nation of asylum”—as Maga notes, “because of the [May 2, 1938] decree’s defense of the rights to residence for the older migrations, Daladier announced to the press that he had taken this action with the clear conscience that the country’s humanitarian tradition remained intact.”⁵⁷ As this remark suggests, Daladier’s attempts to restrict immigration, while nonetheless holding onto a certain image of France as a “humanitarian” nation, oftentimes lead to acute contradictions within French refugee policy of this period.

The roots of the concentration camps of February 1939 can be traced directly back to these contradictions. France was seen as having reached its “saturation point,”⁵⁸ and refugees were now seen as “*indésirables*” [“undesirables”]⁵⁹ to be expelled from the country as soon as possible. There were, however, only three ways in which this aim could be achieved:

⁵⁵ Maga, “The French Government and Refugee Policy,” p. 435.

⁵⁶ See for instance Timothy Maga’s article on “The United States, France, and the European Refugee Problem, 1933-40” (*The Historian*, Vol. 46, No. 4, August 1984, pp. 503-519), for more context on the French government’s (mostly abortive) attempts to pressure other countries into accepting more refugees.

⁵⁷ Maga, “The French Government and Refugee Policy,” p. 435.

⁵⁸ Maga, “The French Government and Refugee Policy,” p. 436.

⁵⁹ This term would, of course, later be applied to the Spanish refugees; it appears in nearly every source written about Spanish refugees or the concentration camps of 1939.

repatriation, resettlement, or internment.⁶⁰ Resettlement was perhaps the ideal option, as it allowed the French government to “rid itself” of the “burden” of refugees without overly tarnishing its “humanitarian” reputation. But it quickly became the least viable option of the three, because so many other countries in both Europe and the Americas were adopting restrictionist immigration policies at the same time.⁶¹ But repatriation was a problematic solution, because in the case of many of the refugees—those from Nazi Germany, or later from Franco’s Spain—being forcibly sent back to their countries of origin would have certainly meant imprisonment or death. Hence why the French government ultimately settled on the option of mass internment. As soon as the decision had been made to exclude refugees from French society—to deny them the right to permanently reside or work in the country—then suddenly a paradoxical situation arose, in which the construction of concentration camps for refugees appeared, at least to the eyes of French officials, to be the only possible “humanitarian” solution.⁶²

No concentration camps were actually built in France until late January 1939, after the fall of Catalonia, but the groundwork for their creation was laid in 1938. On November 12, 1938, Daladier issued another two decrees, one of which was aimed at the organization of brigades of “border gendarmes” in order to prevent refugees from entering France without authorization. The

⁶⁰ “Repatriation, resettlement, and internment were what the prime minister [Daladier] had in mind, not assimilation and economic assistance.” Maga, “The French Government and Refugee Policy,” p. 436.

⁶¹ Again, see Timothy Maga’s article on “The United States, France, and the European Refugee Problem, 1933-40” for more context on this international situation.

⁶² This is not to say that the French government did not continue to pursue the alternate options of resettlement or repatriation in the case of the Spanish refugees. Perhaps surprisingly, they pursued the latter option of repatriation far more aggressively than the possibility of resettlement in Latin America (especially Mexico), even though a large number of Spanish refugees militantly opposed repatriation to Nationalist Spain, and desperately hoped for the opportunity to re-emigrate to Mexico (or other countries). The subject of repatriation to Spain will be examined more at the end of Chapter 3 of this thesis.

second decree aimed to establish a distinction between “the healthy and hard-working segment of the foreign population,” on the one hand, and, on the other, the “undesirables,” those who must be expelled from France without exception. Those who fell into this category of “undesirable,” and who were “incapable of finding a country which would accept them,” would either be subject to constant surveillance or would be sent to “special centers”—what would soon become the concentration camps.⁶³

Clearly, then, the trajectory of French immigration and refugee policy throughout the 1930s, and especially in this first year of the Daladier government, accounts for much of the reason why the French government, faced with the prospect of half a million additional refugees, responded by more or less abandoning its long-standing status as a “nation of refuge,” and implementing, for the first time in its history, a policy of mass internment.⁶⁴ Daladier’s decision to reject the older approach to immigration policy—one which allowed immigrants to obtain work permits, residence rights, and which, essentially, encouraged them to assimilate into French society—necessarily entailed the creation of spaces like the concentration camps. These camps existed on French territory, but on its very margins—Argelès-sur-Mer, Saint-Cyprien, and Barcarès were all constructed on the edge of the Mediterranean, and within 10 to 30 miles of the

⁶³ “Uno de esos dos nuevos decretos se refería a la organización de brigadas de ‘gendarmes de frontera’ y tenía como objetivo asegurar la existencia de sólidas barreras en la frontera, y el otro estaba destinado a marcar una discriminación entre la ‘parte sana y laboriosa de la población extranjera’ y los ‘indeseables,’ a los cuales había que eliminar inflexiblemente.[...] En cuanto a los indeseables ‘incapaces de encontrar un país que les aceptara,’ serían enviados a ‘centros especiales’ o serían objeto de vigilancia constante.” Dreyfus-Armand, *El exilio de los republicanos españoles en Francia*, p. 59. This decree of 12 November 1938 is also mentioned by Julian Jackson on p. 105 of *France: The Dark Years*. It is probably not entirely coincidental that this decree was issued shortly after *Kristallnacht* (which took place on November 9, 1938); at the time, Daladier was likely thinking at least as much about another possible wave of German-Jewish refugees as of Spanish refugees (although the possibility of an imminent defeat of the Spanish Republic, and an accompanying wave of refugees, was nonetheless also foreseen by French officials by this period of late 1938—see for instance the document quoted at the start of Chapter 3 of this thesis).

⁶⁴ Soo, *The Routes to Exile*, p. 15.

Spanish border⁶⁵—and their physical location signaled their main purpose: to quarantine the refugees from the rest of French society, as if (to use a metaphor common at the time) they were carriers of a terrible, incurable plague.

But this metaphor—of the refugees as a “plague,” and of the consequent need to quarantine them off from the rest of the French body politic—raises another question, because it suggests that there were motivations and anxieties underlying the creation of these concentration camps that went beyond simply the perceived need to prevent any additional refugees from entering a country that was already at its “saturation point.” After all, this factor alone could not account for the vehemence with which the Spanish refugees were denounced, demonized, and reviled—and not simply by the extreme right-wing, but also by a relatively wide segment of the French press and political establishment, including many of the most powerful figures in the French government. Countless articles and speeches—excluding only those of an explicitly left-wing bent, like *L’Humanité*, *Le Populaire*, and *Ce Soir*, which vigorously sought to intervene on behalf of the refugees—portrayed the Spanish refugees as “dirty foreigners” [*sales étrangers*], as “Reds,” as thieves, criminals, “dregs of society.” Right-wing groups called for the immediate, forcible repatriation of all refugees—based on the reasoning that those who had fled to France out of fear for Nationalist reprisals in fact deserved to be “brought to justice” for the “crimes” they had committed in the Spanish revolution.

Albert Sarraut, who, as Minister of the Interior at the time, was perhaps the driving force behind the internment of the refugees, gave striking expression to the overall tone which prevailed in French politics at the time. During a speech in the Chamber of Deputies, Sarraut, referring to the Spanish refugees had asked: “What is to be done with these criminals, these

⁶⁵ See the maps on p. 4 of this thesis.

unsavory characters? Keeping in mind the fact that these criminals constitute a danger against which we must protect ourselves, we have considered our colonial possessions in the depths of the Pacific, where we might find some deserted island on which we could settle them, allowing them to work and live there.”⁶⁶ In a statement quoted by a March 1939 issue of *Le Temps*, Sarraut poses the same question, before going on to spell out his anxieties even more explicitly:

But what is to be done with these criminals? It is impossible to permit them on our territory which has already been so thoroughly invaded. [...] We have 400,000 Spanish refugees, according to official figures, in France. A lot of them, unfortunately. Thanks to the harmony we've maintained with Franco, some of these unfortunate people will return to Spain and will be reunited, if not with their homes, then at least with their homeland. But not all of them will return. There are some who do not want to return and for this reason: they're anarchists, Trotskyists, common criminals, thieves, destroyers of property [...] These rogues who've just recently arrived in France have already begun to put their talents to use on our vineyards, our chicken coops, our country estates, because they prefer to continue their sacking and pillaging in France. How many of them are there? Four hundred thousand, five hundred thousand, maybe more. A nice, lovely army of crime and revolution.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Quoted in Suárez, *España comienza en los Pirineos*, p. 209. Since Suárez is not always meticulous when it comes to citing his sources, it has been difficult for me to track down an original copy of this speech. However, although keeping in mind the possible inconsistencies introduced by translation, I don't think that there's any good reason to seriously doubt the reliability of these quotations from Sarraut, considering that their tone is certainly keeping with other sources I have read which were written by Sarraut, such as letters to the prefects written in his capacity as Minister of the Interior, which are located in the Archives Nationales. Additionally, this proposal to re-settle Spanish refugees on a “deserted island” in the Pacific is also referenced by other sources besides Suárez's account. The (translated) version quoted by Suárez is as follows: “Qué se hará de este hampa, de esta gente de mal vivir? En cuanto a la gente de mal vivir constituyen un peligro contra el cual nos tenemos que proteger, y para el objeto he pensado en nuestra posesiones coloniales en el fondo del Pacífico, donde se podría encontrar una isla desierta y se les instalaría ayudándoles a trabajar y a vivir.”

⁶⁷ Quoted in Suárez, *España comienza en los Pirineos*, p. 149. Here is the (translated) version that Suárez quotes: “Pero, qué se hará con los criminales? Imposible permitirlos sobre nuestra tierra ya demasiado invadida. [...] Tenemos 400 000 refugiados españoles, cifras oficiales, en Francia. Muchos, desgraciados. Gracias a la armonía mantenida con Franco, estos desgraciados volverán a España y encontrarán si no sus hogares, por lo menos su patria. Pero los refugiados no volverán todos. Hay quien no quiere volver y por esta causa: anarquistas, trotskistas, condenados de derecho común, ladrones y destructores [...] Esos pillos que apenas recién llegados a Francia ejercían su talento sobre nuestra viñas, nuestros gallineros, nuestros cortijos, preferirían continuar saqueando en Francia. ¿Cuántos son? Cuarenta mil, cincuenta mil, puede ser que más. Un bello ejército del crimen y la revolución.”

Sarraut's use of this phrase—"an army of crime and revolution"—might, with good justification, strike us as an absurd way of describing a group of half a million refugees—among whom were about 200,000 women and children, with most of the remainder consisting of soldiers from the army of a Republic which the French government had, only a few years before, at least nominally supported. And certainly, statements like this might be interpreted, on one level, as simply *ex post facto* attempts to provide a rationale for why the concentration camps should be necessary at all. But at the same time, Sarraut's statements, exaggerated and alarmist as they may be, also speak to a deeper set of anxieties which informed the policies of the French government during this period.

To understand this, we will have to turn back to that theme we examined earlier on in this chapter: the idea of France in 1939 being in the midst of a "civil war" of its own, a civil war which was also "first and foremost a class war." This, of course, was the reason why the image of the now-defeated Spanish revolution loomed so large in the French political imaginary of the late 1930s—to such an extent that the defeated remnants of the "Red Terror" of Barcelona were treated, in 1939, as a more pressing threat than the newly-installed Nationalist regime just across the border. After all, France's own "revolutionary moment"—the strike waves and factory occupations of 1936—was not so far behind.⁶⁸ And in such a context, the arrival of half a million refugees from the defeated Spanish Republic did indeed appear to pose a grave threat for those who feared revolution in France.

Part of the reason for this perception can be traced back to the unique composition of the refugee wave of 1939. In contrast to earlier waves of Spanish refugees—which did consist

⁶⁸ Most historians now are in agreement that the working-class militancy of the 1930s in France never had the potential to erupt into a full-scale revolutionary crisis; but this, perhaps, is only a conclusion that becomes clear in retrospect, and, for an observer in 1939, living in the midst of rather tumultuous and unpredictable times, things would not have seemed nearly so certain.

mainly of “non-political” civilian refugees or even, in the early stages, of right-wing émigrés—the “Exile of 1939” consisted of a substantial portion of the most organized and politically-militant section of the Spanish working class. About half of them, as noted earlier, had been enlisted in the Republican army at the time they crossed the French border. Out of this number—who would make up the bulk of the concentration camp internees—as many as 60 percent belonged to organized left-wing groups: anarchists, Communists, or socialists of various tendencies.⁶⁹ Many of them, indeed, had participated first-hand in the revolutionary social transformations of 1936. If they were to live in France, to take up jobs in factories and other workplaces across the country—in short, if they were to become integrated with the French working class—it might very well have a radicalizing effect on French workers, who had already had a brief taste of their own potential power in the strikes of 1936. It was for that reason that the “Red Spaniards” needed to be quarantined from the rest of the French society, pushed out of sight against the edge of the Mediterranean; it was also the reason why ordinary French people

⁶⁹ It is very difficult to find a direct measure of political affiliations of the concentration camp internees—much less the entire refugee population—as a whole, for the simple reason that the French state’s “reception” of the refugees was far too improvisational and disorganized, in this early period, to allow for any kind of systematic census that might provide such information. This figure of 60% is based on the only quantitative information on political affiliations in the camps which, to my knowledge, is available—namely, the affiliations of those who were selected for re-emigration to Mexico. These figures are as follows: 38% were Marxists (i.e. socialists, Communists, or dissident Marxists), 33% were Republicans, 24% were anarchists, and only 5% were unaffiliated. This, however, is probably an inaccurate measure of affiliations in the Spanish refugee population overall, because it was often alleged that anarchists were underrepresented in the lists of those chosen to emigrate to Mexico (owing to the socialist sympathies of the SERE and JARE), and professionals (who tended to be Republican) were highly overrepresented. When it comes to the overall refugee population, the number of anarchists probably exceeded the number of Republicans; in any case, the CNT (the anarchist labor confederation) was by far the largest single organization among the refugees (see Soo, *The Routes to Exile*, p. 96). Additionally, the percentage of unaffiliated refugees was probably much larger than 5%; but the process of re-emigration favored those who were members of political organizations because these were seen as being at higher risk of being imprisoned or executed if they were repatriated to Spain. Therefore the figure of 60% might be an overestimate—but, in any case, I think that it can safely be said that a majority of the internees belonged to left-wing organizations, for the simple reason that many of those who did not belong to such organizations quickly elected to return to Spain rather than stay in the camps.

were taught, by large segments of the press and political establishment, to regard the Spanish refugees as “criminals,” “bandits,” “priest-killers”—there was clearly a need to obscure any potential ties of solidarity between French workers and Spanish refugees, to avoid the possibility that the vision of a new world which so many of the refugees had fought for might come to be identified with the French workers’ own hopes, aspirations, and possibilities.

This, in any case, was how many of the Spanish refugees interpreted their own situation, as the following passage from Molins i Fábrega’s *Campos de concentración, 1939-194...* suggests:

You wished to set up a world in which work would not be a curse. Captivity was your punishment. [...] Your muscles, indeed, could be useful, but it was dangerous to leave you at liberty. Even at forced labor you offered an example to the oppressed. In the land that gave you asylum in the quiet of the cemeteries there was, sure enough, work for you, but slave work. It was necessary that the other slaves that still roamed about at liberty should know nothing of your lives, your sorrows, that they should not feel the contact of your spirit. For the salvation of society you had to be treated like mangy dogs.⁷⁰

Whether Molins i Fábrega was right—whether the fear of revolution was at the root of the French government’s internment of the Spanish refugees—might, in the end, be a difficult question to answer definitively, since such a possibility was only ever referred to obliquely by French officials,⁷¹ and more often than not in the coded, alarmist language of “criminality” or “pillaging.” But it did certainly account for the way in which the camps were experienced by the refugees—as sites of nothingness, in which they were at risk of being stripped of all their past identities, including their political identities, and in which they were treated, above all, as

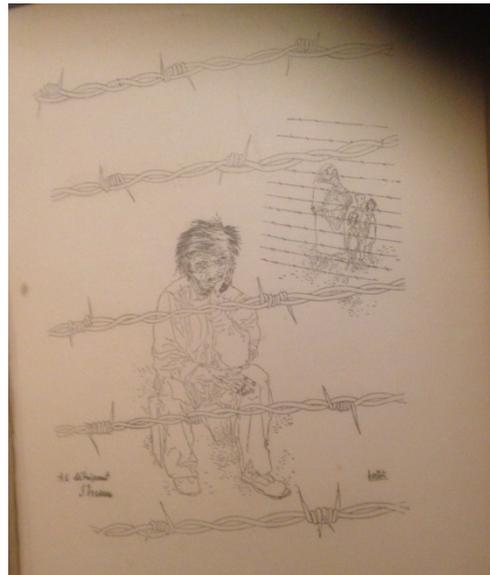
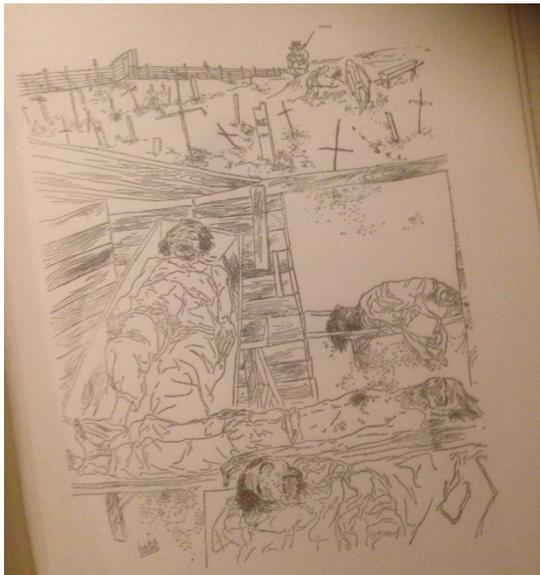
⁷⁰ Molins i Fábrega, *Campos de concentración*, p. 128.

⁷¹ That is, under the late Third Republic. Under the Vichy regime—a period which is outside the main focus of this thesis—this fear of revolution would become quite explicit, and in fact almost obsessive. See for instance the letters from prefects and other government officials in the Archives Nationales (Pierrefitte-sur-Seine), 19890158/2.

“dangerous elements” or (as a song written by the internees of Argelès put it)⁷² as “pariahs of the world.” Whether it was the fear of an “army of crime and revolution” which motivated the creation of the concentration camps, or whether these were simply the logical consequence of an exclusionary, xenophobic immigration policy which denied refugees the right to live and work in France, the outcome was the same—an outcome which was eloquently summed up, again, by Molins i Fàbrega:

They arrived at the frontier of France, that France which had been the cradle of liberty and fraternity amongst men. On their way there they left fields and mountains strewn with their lives and the wretched remains of their belongings. The frontier opened, but not in order to offer them frank and honest asylum. There was neither path nor road that did not lead to the concentration camps, improvised graveyards where hunger, misery, slavery and death awaited them.⁷³

The nature of these “improvised graveyards,” and the way in which they were depicted by those who spent months and years of their lives within their barbed-wire peripheries, will provide the topic for next chapter.



*Illustrations by
Josep Bartolí in
Campos de
concentració,
1939-4...*

⁷² As quoted in Ferrer, *Entre alambradas*, p. 190.

⁷³ Molins i Fàbrega, *Campos de concentració*, p. 10.

Chapter 2: An Inferno of Sand

In *Entre alambradas*, Eulalio Ferrer tells the story of a fellow-internee, a former engineer in the Republican army, who dedicated himself to “throwing stones in the sea, hurriedly writing down numbers in a notebook.” When anyone asked him what he was doing, he would explain that he was trying to calculate “the quantity of time and of stones that would be needed to dry up the sea.”⁷⁴ What Ferrer is describing is a classic case of “*arenitis*”—of insanity brought on by the conditions of the camps, by the constant, inescapable presence of the wind and sand [*arena*].⁷⁵ The victim of *arenitis* would become an almost mythical figure in accounts of the concentration camps: Ricardo Mestre, for instance, recalls that “there were people who went insane in the camps [...] people who tried to go across the sea by foot to reach America.”⁷⁶ Molins i Fàbrega, in *Campos de concentració, 1939-194...*, recounts the same quasi-mythical story:

The sea was the only path that led from the world of the dead to liberty. The sea! The sea! First his stiff, bare feet. Then his spindly legs. Slowly with the joy of one who feels himself on the luminous road to freedom, he advances, step by step in quest of the sun

⁷⁴ “En el campo 7 bis he visto la escena cotidiana de un hombre alto, de rotundo calvicie, que se ufana de ser el mejor ingeniero de España, dedicado a tirar piedras al mar, haciendo números apresuradamente en una libreta [...] Anota, según dice, la cantidad de tiempo y de piedras que se necesitarían para secar el mar.” Ferrer, *Entre alambradas*, p. 50.

⁷⁵ See Robcis, Camille, “François Tosquelles and the Psychiatric Revolution in Postwar France” (*Constellations*, Vol. 23, No. 2, 2016), especially the section on “War Psychiatry,” for an example of how the Catalan psychiatrist Tosquelles, who was interned in Septfonds in 1939, established a psychiatric service to “temper some of the psychological effects of the ‘camp psychosis’” (p. 217). See also Scott Soo’s claim, also cited by Robcis, that “internment caused psychological harm” (Soo, *The Routes to Exile*, p. 63).

⁷⁶ “había gente que enloquecía en los campos.” “Sí, gente que, que salían a, a, a pie por el mar para venir a América.” Interview with Richardo Mestre Ventura (PHO/10/99). “Proyecto de historia oral: Refugiados españoles en México.” Collection in Centro Documental de la Memoria Histórica (Salamanca), 1978/1990. See also Ferrer, *Entre alambradas*, p. 50: “En nuestro campo vive un oficial de la armada que a veces se aproxima, con su maleta, a la orilla del mar en espera del barco que le llevará a América. Vuelve desconsolado a la barraca y confiesa: ‘Me tienen varado, pero estoy seguro que mañana no me falla el barco.’” [“In our camp there was a navy captain who sometimes carried his suitcase up to the shore, waiting for the ship that was to take him to America. He would always return, disconsolate, to the barracks, and confess: ‘This time it’s left me stranded, but I’m sure that tomorrow, the ship won’t let me down.’”]

that draws him on. He has dared! He has disappeared amongst the waves. He is already free! His brothers, less vehement in desire, think him gone mad. But he, in his cold restless tomb, knows that it is not so. The prisoners, who do not know how to follow him, weep for their brother.⁷⁷

This image of the insane internee who dies trying to seek freedom from the barbed-wire of the concentration camps through the path of the open sea is repeated again and again in accounts of the camps—perhaps owing not so much to the actual frequency of such incidents, but rather because it captured something of the desperation and madness of the internees' existence. Molins i Fàbrega's account is particularly striking for its characterization of the concentration camp which the drowned internee leaves behind: "the world of the dead." This is a theme which runs through *Campos de concentració*n, as in Molins i Fàbrega's continued use of the words "cemetery," "tombs," "charnel-houses" to describe the camps, or in his depiction of these deserted strips of sand as a wasteland devoid of life: "In order to give you a corner on the earth they stripped the meadow of its flowers and verdure. On the sky that covers you they hung crape of weeping clouds and erased the sun from it. They knead your bread with bitter tears. They torture your bodies. Each second they rob the breath of one of your lives."⁷⁸

But this portrayal of the concentration camps as a wasteland, a land of death, was by no means limited to Molins i Fàbrega: it appears, as well, in Ferrer's remark that "death walked hurriedly through the concentration camps,"⁷⁹ or in Suárez's description of the camp of Saint-Cyprien as "that improvised cemetery which swallowed us insatiably."⁸⁰ Celso Amieva, in his poetry collection about his life in the camps, likened the holes that the internees dug in the sand

⁷⁷ Molins i Fàbrega, *Campos de concentració*, 1939-194....

⁷⁸ Molins i Fàbrega, *Campo de concentració*, p. 44.

⁷⁹ "La muerte camina aprisa en los campos de concentració." Ferrer, *Entre alambradas*, p. 155.

⁸⁰ "ya no precisarían para cubrirse más que la arena justa para la tumba, de la existente en aquel cementerio improvisado que tragaba insaciable." Suárez, *España comienza en los Pirineos*, p. 161.

to try to shield themselves from the relentless wind to open graves dug for the living.⁸¹ The camps were described not only as cemeteries but also as scenes taken from the underworld: Suárez, for instance, refers to Saint-Cyprien as “a Dantesque picture, horrifying, with a barbed-wire frame, capable of repelling consciences, of making spirits flee, ripping them apart”;⁸² and Ferrer uses the same trope when he describes Argelès-sur-Mer as “a spectacle of madness, to be described by a new Dante.”⁸³

But out of all the ways of describing the camps—as madhouses, as cemeteries, as an inferno—the most common one was also the most simple: as sites of pure absence, of nothingness. As Adrian Olmedilla, recalling his internment in Argelès-sur-Mer shortly after crossing the French border on February 7, 1939, has remarked: “there was no camp, there was nothing, there wasn’t even a barbed-wire fence, there was absolutely nothing, nothing more than a strip of land there along the beach.” There was only an “immense line” of people who “kept coming and coming” across the border, all of them pushed into this narrow strip of beach by the lines of gendarmes with their incessant refrain of “*allez, allez.*”⁸⁴ In these early days of February 1939, the camps were characterized above all by a state of “improvisation”—so much so that, as Olmedilla points out, in the first few days they could scarcely be called “camps” at all, as they were nothing but strips of land along the beach surrounded by gendarmes and soldiers; not even

⁸¹ “Cuando todas las chavolas / eran fosa y pavesas / y cuando la tramontana / se llevó las humaredas, / el alba se fué asomando / toda roja de vergüenza.” [“When all the hovels / are turned to graves and cinders / and when the north wind / drags with it clouds of smoke / dawn will show itself / turned red with shame.”] Amieva, Celso, *Almohada de arena*. Similarly, Suárez frequently uses the word “tumbas” [“tombs”] to describe these pits in the sand.

⁸² “Un cuadro dantesco, horrorizante, con un marco de alambre espinoso, capaz de repeler las conciencias, de hacer huir los espíritus, de clavarse, desgarrándolos, sobre los que se acercasen demasiado.” Suárez, *España comienza en los Pirineos*, p. 146.

⁸³ “El espectáculo es de locura, para ser descrito por un nuevo Dante.” Ferrer, *Entre alambradas*.

⁸⁴ “ni había campo, ni había nada, no había ni alambrada, no había nada absolutamente, nada más que allí en la playa, a lo largo de la playa...” Interview with Adrian Olmedilla (PHO/10/ESP 25). “Proyecto de historia oral: Refugiados españoles en México.” Collection in Centro Documental de la Memoria Histórica (Salamanca), 1978/1990.

the barbed-wire fence had yet been built. This, of course, would change quickly—for instance, Ferrer, arriving in Argelès-sur-Mer just a few days after Olmedilla, described being led into a barbed-wire enclosure.⁸⁵ But in Argelès as in Saint-Cyprien, it would be weeks and sometimes months before any other structures were built—so that, during this period of February-March 1939, internees in these camps had to figure out how to get by without shelter of any kind, without latrines, without medical facilities. Only in Barcarès, by far the smallest of the three main camps of this early period, did barracks of any kind exist at all, and these were not nearly sufficient to house all of the 13,000 internees the camps received during this first month.

Suárez, commenting on the construction of the camps, these “jails on the sands of the beach,” describes them as follows:

The jails followed one after the other, using the same barbed-wire fence, in the horizontal direction, and with perpendicular ones which divided each sinister rectangle. Behind us there was no barbed wire; in its place was the insurmountable sea. The location by the sea saved on costs for barbed wire and guards. The French officials had a good sense of economy. Who would dare go against the sea?⁸⁶

Or, as Agustí Bartra put it: “To the north, barbed wire; to the south, barbed wire; to the west, barbed wire. Oh, but to the east, that’s where you’d find the sea!”⁸⁷ The proximity to the sea may very well have allowed the French government to save on costs for barbed-wire, but it rendered the problem posed by the lack of any real shelter even more acute—because it meant that the internees were constantly buffeted by strong winds, which, in conjunction with the rainy, freezing February weather and the continually-shifting sands, made conditions in the camps

⁸⁵ Ferrer, *Entre alambradas*, pp. 20-22.

⁸⁶ “Las jaulas se sucedían unas a otras, utilizándose una misma valle de alambre, en sentido horizontal, y con perpendiculares que dividían cada rectángulo siniestro. A la espalda no había alambres; pero estaba el mar erizado e infranqueable. La playa ahorra alambre y vigilancia. Los mandos franceses tienen un buen sentido de la economía. ¿Quién podría atreverse con el mar?” Suárez, *España comienza en los Pirineos*, p. 119.

⁸⁷ “Al Norte, alambradas; al Sur, alambradas; al Oeste, alambradas. ¡Ah, pero al Este se encuentra el mar!” Bartra Agustí, *Cristo de 200.000 brazos*, p. 7.

virtually unlivable. As Agustí Bartra summed it up: “Sand, wind, rain. Sand in your fingernails, sand in your hair, sand in your eyes.”⁸⁸

Nonetheless, the internees had to find some way of surviving in these conditions, and most did so by, essentially, burrowing into the sand. Bartra’s *Cristo de 200.000 brazos*, which centers on the experiences of four friends in Argelès-sur-Mer, gives a good sense of the sorts of improvised communities that arose in the unlikely setting of these small, fragile “*chabolas*” [“shacks,” “shanties,” “huts”]⁸⁹ dug into the sand. Much of the first chapter is devoted to the struggle to find materials—reeds, driftwood, blankets—that might somehow keep out at least some of the freezing rain and wind. In the context of the total deprivation which characterized these early camps, such paltry materials acquired an immense significance, as Bartra points out:

“In the circumstances of the camp, these reeds had a definitive value, as they offered the marvelous possibility of protection and of shelter against the weather... without reeds, without a hut, all of one’s surroundings became enemy territory, marked by active hostility...”⁹⁰

Eventually, the main characters manage to find enough reeds and driftwood to build a small “roof” over the hole they’ve dug into the sand, just large enough to fit the four of them; they manage to do so through a mixture of barter—for instance, trading cigarettes for some bundles of reeds—and subterfuge, as when they steal some wood from a warehouse containing materials intended for the construction of buildings for the French guards.⁹¹ The solution adopted by the four characters of Bartra’s novel represented the nearly universal approach in both Argelès-sur-

⁸⁸ “Arena, viento, lluvia. Arena en las uñas, arena en los cabellos, arena en los ojos.” Bartra, *Cristo de 200.000 brazos*, p. 10.

⁸⁹ The Catalan version of this word, “xabola,” in fact provides the title for Bartra Agustí’s initial 1943 version of what was to become *Cristo de 200.000 brazos*.

⁹⁰ “En la circunstancia del campo, las cañas tienen un valor definitivo de posibilidad maravillosa de protección y de lanza contra el tiempo.... Sin caña, sin chabola, todo lo circundante se vuelve enemigo, de una activa hostilidad...” Bartra, *Cristo de 200.000 brazos*, p. 21.

⁹¹ Bartra, *Cristo de 200.000 brazos*, p. 26.

Mer and in Saint-Cyprien during this period of February-March 1939: Manuel Andújar, for instance, describes the “hole in the sand” shared by five ex-soldiers in Saint-Cyprien, heated only by their five military capes and their own body warmth,⁹² while the anarchist Antonio Ordovas recalls using reeds to construct his own “*chabola*” in Argelès-sur-mer, which he shared with eight other members of the Juventudes Libertarias.⁹³



Robert Capa: “Shelter at a concentration camp for Spanish refugees, Argelès-sur-Mer camp, France.”



Robert Capa: “Three republican exiles near a structure, French internment camp, Argelès.”

Along with this lack of adequate shelter was the complete absence, in the first few days, of any form of food distribution. Internees who arrived in the first week of February 1939 were compelled to go entirely without food for the first five days or so; they only had access to some limited drinking water from pumps which, owing to their faulty construction, quickly infected nearly all of the internees with dysentery.⁹⁴ The latter problem was compounded by the absence

⁹² “El hoyo en la arena fue providencial. Se acurrucaron los cinco. Cuatro capotes y aquel regalado capisayo grisáceo, con una franja rojo, estrecha, de segador, paliaron la noche. Los cuerpos completaron la calefacción.” Andújar, Manuel. *St. Cyprien, plage... campo de concentración*, p. 22.

⁹³ Interview with Antonio Ordovas (PHO/10/51). “Proyecto de historia oral: Refugiados españoles en México.” Collection in Centro Documental de la Memoria Histórica (Salamanca), 1978/1990.

⁹⁴ See for example the interview with Antonio Ordovas (PHO/10/51), “Proyecto de historia oral: Refugiados españoles en México.” Collection in Centro Documental de la Memoria Histórica (Salamanca), 1978/1990), where these problems are discussed at length. However, countless other sources dealing with Argelès-sur-Mer and Saint-Cyprien mention these problems as well.

Note: the photographs by Robert Capa were accessed through the International Center for Photography Website: <https://www.icp.org/search-results/robert%20capa%20argeles-sur-mer/>.

of latrines, a situation which quickly led to the build-up of massive piles of human excrement along the beach, contributing further to the spread of disease as well as providing yet another source of humiliation. The problem of waste disposal was never adequately solved—in Saint-Cyprien, for instance, rather than building proper latrines, the French authorities simply enlisted the labor of Spanish refugees to continually clean up the beach (what Suárez calls “the open, immense, and nonetheless inadequate latrine, completely covered with excrement”), using this as a disciplinary tool to punish refugees who, for instance, tried to take more than their minuscule allotted ration of bread.⁹⁵

Similarly, the issue of food distribution scarcely improved over the course of the first weeks and months. Even after internees were finally provided with food—nearly a week after some of them had first arrived in the camps—the French authorities were still too disorganized or negligent to actually provide an individual ration to each internee. Instead, in many instances, they simply threw pieces of bread at random into the crowd—an approach which, considering that most of these tens of thousands of refugees had not eaten anything for days, seemed almost deliberately designed to incite conflict and induce humiliation. Ferrer, for instance, recalls that “pieces of bread were thrown from the distribution trucks and were disputed through the laws of force and ability, which recognize no moral scruples.”⁹⁶ After a few more days, the method of food distribution had become marginally more organized—now internees were sorted into groups of 25 people, who were to divide amongst themselves a single loaf of bread per day. As Suárez, recounting his early days in Saint-Cyprien, recalls: “One loaf of bread for 25 men! [...]

⁹⁵ “El castigo consistía en trabajar en los pelotones de limpieza de la playa, la abierta, inmensa, y no obstante pequeña letrina, totalmente cubierta de excrementos.” Suárez, *España comienza en los Pirineos*, p. 204.

⁹⁶ “Los pedazos de pan se lanzan desde los camiones de reparto y se disputan por la ley de la fuerza y de la habilidad, que no reconoce escrúpulos morales.” Ferrer, *Entre alambradas*, p. 22.

From each round loaf came 25 tiny slices, so small that the most modest of the generous of the earth would be ashamed to hand one of them to the most humble of beggars.”⁹⁷ In the weeks to follow, these slices of bread would be supplemented by monotonous rations of lentils, watery chickpea, and ersatz coffee.⁹⁸ After the first few months, however, the diets of the internees began to improve somewhat from this dismal starting point—owing not so much to the efforts of the French authorities, however, but rather to the arrival of the French shopkeepers from nearby towns who readily seized onto this opportunity for trade, as well as to the emergence of “barrios chinos” set up by the internees to sell, buy, and barter amongst themselves.⁹⁹

The problem of lice, fleas, and scabies, however, continued virtually indefinitely; so, too, did the problem of contagious illnesses, which was compounded not only by the conditions of overcrowding, inadequate food, and exposure to inclement weather in the camps, but also by the almost complete lack of medical attention. This problem was particularly acute in the early days of the camps, since a large number of the refugees—about 10,000 of them—had been wounded in the last few days of the campaign in Catalonia. Suárez describes the conditions of the makeshift “infirmaries” of the first few days as follows:

They return without medicine, without medical examinations, with higher fevers. They’re turned away because the infirmaries, improvised with some boards and not a single bed, aren’t sufficient to ‘accommodate’ everyone, and there’s nothing in them anyways [...] No one is attended to; no one is evacuated when they’re found to be sick,

⁹⁷ “Pero, ¡un pan para 25 hombres, que desde hacía día únicamente usaban los dientes para rechinar de rabia! De cada pan redondo salieron 25 trocitos tan pequeños que al más modesto de los dadivosos de la tierra le hubiera avergonzado entregar uno de ellos al más humilde de los mendigos.” Suárez, *España comienza en los Pirineos*, p. 138. The figure of 25 internees sharing a single loaf of bread is not unique to Suárez but also mentioned by many other sources as well.

⁹⁸ Details about the kinds of food served in the camps can be found in virtually all of the sources, but the oral histories provide a particularly good source. (“Proyecto de historia oral: Refugiados españoles en México.” Collection in Centro Documental de la Memoria Histórica (Salamanca), 1978/1990.)

⁹⁹ See Ferrer, *Entre alambradas*, pp. 27, 29, 40, 43, 68, 150, 165, 169, and 175 for a fairly negative assessment of the “barrios chinos” [“Chinatowns”] of Argelès-sur-Mer, Barcarès, and Saint-Cyprien, or Suárez, *España comienza en los Pirineos*, pp. 221-223, for a more sympathetic assessment of the “barrio chino” of Saint-Cyprien.

at least not when they need to be, but rather simply whenever it's possible, come what may.¹⁰⁰

Suárez sums up the overall sense of material deprivation which pervaded the camps when he writes, recalling the guards who corralled the refugees into Saint-Cyprien upon his first entry into the camp: “that terror turned into a human cord which drowned, asphyxiated, all those human beings who had already begun to haggle for everything: even space and air. Only a little bit, scarcely enough, to breathe.”¹⁰¹

Suárez descriptions here capture the sense, shared among nearly all accounts of the camps, that internees were denied even the most basic of human needs and rights. Indeed, all of these conditions—the lack of medical care, the lack of adequate food, the terrible hygienic conditions, the absence of any real shelter—contributed to a sense among the internees that they were being treated not as human beings but as animals, or worse than animals. A letter of Communist parliamentarians at the time, for instance, condemned the French authorities for “treating the Republicans like beasts.”¹⁰² Paula Simón, in her study of testimonials of the concentration camps, provides some insight into how this treatment was experienced and expressed on the subjective level: “One characteristic which is registered by the majority of testimonies,” she writes, “is the narrator’s awareness of finding oneself subjected to a harsh

¹⁰⁰ “Vuelven sin medicinas, sin exámenes médicos, con más fiebre. Son devueltos porque las enfermerías, improvisadas con algunas tablas y sin ninguna cama, no son suficientes para ‘albergar ’a todos, ni en ellas había nada. Los médicos franceses—uno, dos, para todo el campo—no podían convertirse en mil. ¿Cómo se les ocurriría a tantos españoles enfermar a la vez? Nadie puede ser atendido; nadie es evacuado cuando se halla enfermo, cuando lo necesita, sino cuando puede serlo, esté como esté.” Suárez, *España comienza en los Pirineos*, p. 143. See also the report by the delegation of Socialists to Parliament, printed in the February 19, 1939 issue of *Le Populaire*, which devotes considerable attention to the state of medical care (or lack thereof) during the first two weeks in the camps.

¹⁰¹ The full sentence is as follows: ‘Es como una llame que se extiende, dispuesta a arrasar nuestro improvisado campamento; la destruction uniformada; el terror hecho elegante y humana cuerda que ahoga, que asfixia a los seres a quienes ya comenzaba a regateársele todo: el espacio y el aire. Sólo un poco, escaso, para respirar.’ Suárez, *España comienza en los Pirineos*, p. 105.

¹⁰² Quoted in Suárez, *España comienza en los Pirineos*, p. 107.

process of brutalization, objectivization, or ‘de-subjectivization,’ understood as a gradual loss of civil rights, first, and then the natural rights of human beings. ‘They didn’t treat us as human beings,’ writes the narrator of *Éxodo*.¹⁰³ Suárez gives striking expression to this sense of being stripped of everything, of all rights, even down to the bare recognition of one’s humanity, when he writes: “And each blow of the whistle, each order, each shove, was almost an affirmation that we did not have the right to live. But they were not able to take that away from us. That was prohibited by the simplest rules of the Rights of Man.”¹⁰⁴ Here, Suárez conveys the widely-shared sense that the French commitment to the rights of life and liberty had, “from the sorrowful perspective of the concentration camps,”¹⁰⁵ been reduced to meaningless rhetoric—something which the French government, for the sake of national pride, could not afford to abandon entirely, but nonetheless threw aside in practice.

This observation points to the way in which internment in the French camps entailed a certain kind of “civil death” or “social death,” a sense of being removed from the human condition—after all, it was only a short step to go from labelling an entire group of people as “undesirable” [*indésirable*] to regarding their lives as expendable. This, perhaps, was the real reason why the concentration camps were portrayed, in so many different accounts, as

¹⁰³ “Una característica que registran la mayoría de los testimonios es la conciencia que tienen los narradores de encontrarse sometidas a un duro proceso de embrutecimiento, cosificación o ‘des-subjetivación,’ entendido como paulatina pérdida de los derechos civiles, primero, y luego de los derechos naturales del ser humano. ‘No nos trataban como a seres humanos’ (Oliva Berenguer, 2006: 123), sentencia la narradora de *Éxodo*...” Simón, Paula, *La escritura de las alambradas*, p. 213.

¹⁰⁴ “Y cada pitada, cada orden, cada empujón, era casi una afirmación que no se tenía derecho a la vida. Pero no se nos podía quitar. Eso lo prohibían la más sencillas reglas del Derecho Humano. Había, pues, que conservarla. La solución encontrada en los famosos Consejos de Ministros de M. Daladier, era la mejor. Lentamente el reuma, la fiebre, las infecciones, acortarían con celeridad el placer de morir en aquellas circunstancias.” Suárez, *España comienza en los Pirineos*, p. 107.

¹⁰⁵ “Alguien recuerda que la revolución francés fue cuna de los derechos humanos. La historia dirá si éstos nos protegieron a nosotros. Sería difícil que lo entendiéramos hoy, desde la visión dolorosa de los campos de concentración.” [“Someone recalled that the French Revolution had been the cradle of human rights. History told us that those rights would protect us. It was difficult for understand that now, from the sorrowful perspective of the concentration camps.”] Ferrer, *Entre alambradas*, p. 85.

“cemetaries for living men”—not so much because they were actually intended to strip their inhabitants of life, but rather because the very fact of their internment implied that their status as human beings with a right to life was no longer truly recognized by the French state.

The use of the terms “civil death” or “social death” in this context, of course, requires some further examination. The latter term, in particular, has been used to describe some of the most extreme historical instances in which the humanity of entire groups of people was radically derecognized, ranging from systems of slavery¹⁰⁶ to the Holocaust. My use of the same term in this context is not meant to elide the substantial differences between those historical instances and the concentration camps which are the subject of this thesis; but it is intended to alert us to the ways in which similar mechanisms of derecognition might be at work even in this less extreme case of “social death.” In the case of the French concentration camps, the way in which “civil death”—the denial of the rights belonging to citizens—could so quickly turn into a much more fundamental kind of dehumanization is yet another reminder of what we might call the limits of republican universalism. This universalist vision saw itself as articulating rights which belonged to all human beings simply by virtue of their humanity (“the rights of man”); but the fundamental paradox was that French republicanism, in linking those rights to the political form of the nation-state, made the recognition of those supposedly universal rights entirely dependent on one’s inclusion within a national community (hence the full phrase: “the rights of man *and* citizen”). But what about those who were forcibly excluded from any such community? This was the dilemma in which millions of “stateless” people would find themselves over the course of the twentieth century. To use Hannah Arendt’s phrase, citizenship was what conferred “the right to

¹⁰⁶ The term, as currently used in historical studies, originated in Orlando Patterson’s *Slavery and Social Death* (Harvard UP, 1982).

have rights”¹⁰⁷—and, consequently, those who were stripped of citizenship were not only denied the political rights of civil participation, but also those much more basic rights which were supposed to be inherent to all human beings.

This, then, points to one of the basic functions of the concentration camps from the standpoint of the French state: that is, to isolate the Spanish refugees from the rest of the French national community. In order to understand precisely how this exclusion functioned, however, we will first have to examine more closely how this state of “civil death” or “social death” was experienced by internees on the subjective level. On one level, it was depicted as a forced withdrawal from the normal rhythms of life, a disruption of the regular flow of time. Manuel Andújar perhaps expressed it most succinctly when, at the end of his *St. Cyprien, plage... campos de concentración*, he narrates the moment when, after finally leaving the camp after so many weeks of confinement, he turns back and reflects: “it seemed as though life had suffered a syncope”¹⁰⁸—that is, as if the past few weeks had been nothing but a coma, from which the internees, upon being released, were only just now reviving. This, in fact, echoes an observation which has also been made in many other accounts, having to do with the strangely distorted experience of time which was engendered by the temporary “death” that the camps represented. Celso Amieva, in his poetry collection *La almohada de arena*, expresses it as a dissolution of both time and space: “I no longer know where I am / whether I’m in France or in Spain / whether over there everything has happened / and here nothing has happened. / I’ve lost the notion / of time and of distance.”¹⁰⁹ Amieva, who spent far more time in the concentration camps—three

¹⁰⁷ Arendt used this phrase in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951). See also DeGooyer, Stephanie, et al., *The Right to Have Rights* (Verso, 2018), for a contemporary discussion of this concept.

¹⁰⁸ “parece que la vida sufrió un síncope.” Andújar, *St. Cyprien, plage... campo de concentración*, p. 108.

¹⁰⁹ “Yo ya no sé en dónde estoy, / si en Francia estoy o en España, / si allí ya ha pasado todo / y aquí no ha pasado nada. / He perdido la noción / del tiempo y de la distancia.” Amieva, *La almohada de arena*, “El tricorno.”

years—than any of the other writers or interviewees whose accounts are examined here, could perhaps give better expression than anyone to this sense of time having dissolved in the camps, and in another poem he likens the image of the camp with its endlessly-swirling sand to that of an hourglass being perpetually rotated: “Grain by grain, the sandglass / on the beach by the Mediterranean / surrounded by barbed wire / and lashed by the inhuman wind / a means of marking the hours, / years, more years, it keeps marking.”¹¹⁰ Bartra conveys the same distorted sense of time in the camps when he writes, in the second chapter of *Cristo de 200.000 brazos*: “Time does not exist in the camp [...] everything seemed to be replaced there by an absurd waiting. Between our memories and the future, there was only the Nothingness of the sand, and the sea, like an impossible invitation to liberty.”¹¹¹ Later on in *Cristo de 200.000 brazos*, he makes a direct connection between this distorted experience of time and the internees’ sense of having been degraded, isolated from the rest of society, no longer recognized as human beings:

The hours without successors buried themselves in the sand, searching for memories [...] in the camp, the habitual images of life belonged to a past in which each man buried himself in search of his own lost time, in a maddening commingling of the imagination and the specters of dreams. It was an enormous city of defeat that imposed its terrible, unreal quality over everything [...] a wasteland, a lazaretto for an immense body of two hundred thousand arms; and its isolation from the world, that inflexible siege which crammed together those hundred thousand naked human beings, exposed, above all, the fear that had taken hold of that epoch of disregard for humanity. Without our wives, without our children, without work, time rotted in our hands.¹¹²

¹¹⁰ “Grano a grano, el reloj de arena / en la playa del Mediterráneo / rodeada de alambre espinoso / y azotado por viento inhumano, / a fuerza de marcar las horas, / años, más años fué marcando.” Amieva, *La almohada de arena*, “Noviembre 1942.”

¹¹¹ “El Tiempo no existía en el campo. [...] toda parecía haber sido sustituido allí por una absurda espera. Entre los recuerdos y el futuro, la Nada de la arena, y el mar, como una presencia y una invitación imposible a la libertad.” Bartra, *Cristo de 200.000 brazos*, p. 43.

¹¹² “las horas sin herencia escarbaban en la arena buscando campanas y recuerdos; maniatada la acción, se establecía el reino de las palabras y de los silencios, y se aceptaba el caos con una pasividad desalentada que contribuía a crear en el campo una vasta conciencia difusa de tribu inerme y sin destino. En el campo, las imágenes habituales de la vida pertenecían a un pasado en el cual cada hombre se hundía en busca de su particular tiempo perdido, en una cúpula irascible de la imaginación y los fantasmas de los sueños. Era una enorme ciudad de derrota que imponía su tremenda cualidad irreal por lo sumario, concreto y frágil de los elementos que la habían formado, un baldío lazaretto para un inmenso torso yacente con doscientos

The relation to time that Bartra expresses here—in which the present (that is, the experience of the camps) becomes so “unreal” that it seems to recede behind memories of the past, imaginings of the future, and “specters of dreams”—is, in fact, the core structuring principle not only of *Cristo de 200.000 brazos*, but also many other texts written about the camps, particularly *España comienza en los Pirineos*, *Entre alambradas*, and *La almohada de arena*, each of which, in different ways, seem to be irresistibly pulled towards memories of the past (or, in the case of *Entre alambradas*, towards imaginings of an increasingly uncertain future). In all of these instances, the sense of time “rotting in the hands” of the internees was linked to this overall experience of the camps as sites of utter exclusion from the ordinary rhythms of social life—as “lazarettos” for the “plague” that was the refugees.

But the perception of time in the camps, although given a complex literary expression by these authors, was in fact rooted in a very concrete experience shared by virtually all internees, an experience which might be said, in a certain way, to define the camps: that of boredom. As one internee, Jean Olibo, put it: “boredom is our enemy.”¹¹³ To be an internee was to “spend hours and hours and hours without doing anything,”¹¹⁴ and life in the camps was characterized above all by what Manuel Andújar called a “terrible, destructive union [...] of exile, of inactivity, of defeat.”¹¹⁵ This sense of compulsory inactivity served as a continual reminder of

mil brazos; y su aislamiento del mundo, el rígido cerco que los apiñaba en cien mil desnudeces, delataba, por encima de todo, el miedo de que estaba poseída una época de desprecio por el hombre. Sin mujeres, sin niños, sin trabajo, el tiempo se pudría en sus manos.” Bartra, *Cristo de 200.000 brazos*, p. 81-82.

¹¹³ “El aburrimiento es nuestro enemigo.” Quoted in Dreyfus-Armand, *El exilio de los republicanos españoles en Francia*, p. 66.

¹¹⁴ “pasar horas y horas y horas sin hacer nada.” Interview with Manuel Martínez Roca (PHO/10/32). “Proyecto de historia oral: Refugiados españoles en México.” Collection in Centro Documental de la Memoria Histórica (Salamanca), 1978/1990.

¹¹⁵ “la terrible unión destructora [...] del exilio, de la inactividad, de la derrota.” Andújar, *St. Cyprien, plage... campo de concentración*, p. 105.

the internees' impotence—as a group of Spanish workers put it, in an interview with *Ce Soir*: “the most intolerable thing about being here is not being able to do anything, while in the central zone our brothers continue to fight. We’re ashamed of our own inactivity.”¹¹⁶ The sense of “absurd waiting”¹¹⁷ which characterized the camps could, as Suárez notes, be even more unbearable than the material deprivations which the internees suffered:

It seemed as though we were condemned to remain forever in these conditions. Sometimes we thought that it'd be better to be in prison, serving a sentence. Because, even in the worst jail cells, you could live knowing that eventually a glorious day will come when you'll be set free. But to be penned in like that, without knowing when you'll be allowed to return to life, made us dazed and desperate in that narrow, dead-end alleyway of our exhausted patience.¹¹⁸

It was, then, the forced idleness of the camps, the perpetual inactivity, which constituted one of the most monotonous and humiliating aspects of what Suárez called “the battle of exile.”¹¹⁹ More than that, it was also a symptom of one of the key factors which distinguished the French concentration camps of 1939 from the innumerable other concentration camps that arose in Europe in the 1930s and 1940s—and not simply from the most obvious counter-example, that of the Nazi concentration camps, but also from the later camps of Vichy France. Many have noted, for instance, the factory-like regimentation of the Nazi camps, which doubled, in the war years,

¹¹⁶ “Un grupo de obreros dijo: ¿‘Cuándo podremos ir a Valencia? Lo más insoportable de aquí es no hacer nada, mientras que en la zona central se baten nuestros hermanos. Estamos avergonzados de nuestra inactividad. ¿Cuándo se nos dejará partir?’” *Ce Soir*, 17 February 1939. Quoted in Suárez, *España comienza en los Pirineos*, p. 117.

¹¹⁷ Bartra, *Cristo de 200.000 brazos*, p. 43.

¹¹⁸ “Parecía como si estuviéramos condenados a quedar siempre en tales condiciones. / Algunas veces pensábamos que era preferible estar en la cárcel, cumpliendo una condena. Porque, aún en la peor de las celdas, se vive pensando que hay un hermoso día en que se vuelve a ser libre. Pero estar encerrados, sin saber cuándo se vuelve a la vida, desespera y aturde en el callejón sin salida de nuestra paciencia colmada.” Suárez, *España comienza en los Pirineos*, p. 248.

¹¹⁹ “Seguía latiendo España en nuestros corazones, con la sagrada preocupación de los dos años y medio de lucha. Podríamos tener momentos en que la desesperación nos hiciera débiles, pero entendíamos que era ocasión de mantener la moral alta, el espíritu fuerte, para ganar la batalla del exilio.” Suárez, *España comienza en los Pirineos*, p. 117. This passage occurs immediately after quotation from the *Ce Soir* article, also quoted above.

as sources of slave labor—though this forced labor was almost always secondary to the main purpose of the camps, which consisted in the repression and, oftentimes, extermination of the inmates, making these camps, above all, “factories of death.”¹²⁰ In stark contrast both to these extermination and forced-labor camps, as well as to the coercive French labor battalions that many of the refugees would later join upon the outbreak of war,¹²¹ the French concentration camps of 1939 were constructed as explicitly *non-productive* spaces—in which enforced idleness, rather than forced labor, constituted the defining feature of the internees’ existence.

In a certain sense, of course, this was unavoidable—the camps of 1939 were too improvised, too hastily-constructed, to even provide the most basic necessities of shelter, food distribution, or waste disposal, much less achieve the kind of factory-like regimentation and discipline which would later characterize the camps of Vichy or Nazi Germany. Moreover, prior to September 1939, France was still in the midst of an economic depression, and French politicians could still point to unemployment, rather than a shortage of labor, as the most urgent problem.¹²² One of the main rationales for the policy of mass internment, after all, had been the perceived need to shield the French labor market from the influx of a few hundred thousand refugees seeking work.

¹²⁰ Indeed, as a point of comparison, it is worth noting here that a few tens of thousands of Spanish refugees, nearly all of them former internees of the French camps of 1939, ended up as inmates of the Nazi extermination camp of Mauthausen, after being captured while fighting for the French army—and for these refugees, at least for the small number of them who survived the war, it was the bleak memory of endlessly climbing up and down the stone quarries at Mauthausen, until many of them fell down, on the brink of death from exhaustion, that dominated their recollections of these dark early years of exile, far overshadowing the memory of the disorderly but comparatively benign seaside camps of 1939.

¹²¹ See Pons Prades, Eduardo, *Republicanos españoles en la Segunda Guerra Mundial* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), which offers hundreds of pages of primary source material relating to the involvement of Spanish refugees in French labor battalions and army units.

¹²² Although, as noted in the previous chapter, the actual extent of unemployment was often exaggerated by anti-immigrant politicians.

However, even if the conditions in the camps were, in large part, a logical consequence of the various political and economic factors that led to their construction in the first place, this should nevertheless not blind us to the various ways in which these conditions might have served—whether intentionally or not—the interests of the French state. This brings us to the complex question of the intentionality of the camps: the question, that is, of the extent to which conditions in the camps were simply an accidental by-product of the unprecedented scale and suddenness of the refugee wave, or rather part of a deliberate policy to control and repress the refugees. French government sources, of course, had an interest in representing the situation in the former light—portraying the camps as the best provisional solution available to the government at the time, given the sheer scale of the “exodus” as well as the various constraints placed on French officials’ actions. Sources written by the refugees, as well as, above all, left-wing opposition groups within French politics, tended towards the opposite extreme, portraying the conditions in the camps as part of a deliberate policy to discipline the refugees and coerce them into taking actions that fit with the interests of the French government, whether that meant returning to Spain or enlisting in French work companies or army units. Early on, for instance, an article in *Ce Soir* suggested that the poor living conditions in the camps were not at all an “accidental” by-product but rather part of an intentional policy to coerce refugees into returning to Spain:

It is impossible to believe that this has not been systematically organized in order to compel the refugees to return across the border at Irún. Mistakes are possible, of course, but it is impossible to think of an error or a lack of organization that could last for such a long time. The distribution of bread is the simplest thing in the world and there is no lack of arms to transport it, if it had been desired. It has not been done because it has not been desired.¹²³

¹²³ *Ce Soir*, 13 February 1939. Quoted in Suárez, *España comienza en los Pirineos*, p. 138: “Es imposible creer que esto no haya sido sistemáticamente organizado, para acoger a los refugiados y obligarlos acto seguido a franquear la frontera por Irún. Se puede pensar en una equivocación pero es imposible pensar

Around the same time, an article in *L'Humanité* even went so far as to suggest that departmental officials were intentionally assisting Franco's forces through their application of the mass internment policy:

The truth is that the prefect of the Pyrénées-Orientales has applied the orders of the French government in such a way as to facilitate the victory of Franco. The prefect and his subordinates want to liquidate the Republican army, impeding the soldiers, officials, and political commissars, who are in the camps, from leaving for the central zone. They are creating such conditions for the refugees, both civilian and military, so that they will say to themselves: "Better to leave with Franco than to stay in this inferno."¹²⁴

Although *L'Humanité* was certainly correct in pointing out the consequences of the internment policy—it did prevent soldiers from returning to Madrid to fight for what remained of Republican Spain, and it did compel nearly 100,000 people to return to Nationalist Spain within the first few weeks—it almost certainly overplayed the extent to which this was actually a calculated policy on the part of the departmental government, leaving aside the fact that it is entirely likely that many of these officials did, indeed, harbor pro-Franco sympathies.¹²⁵

Perhaps the most realistic stance was that adopted by the Socialist delegates, who noted that, although the poor conditions in the camps may have been entirely understandable in the first few days of the refugee wave, the longer those conditions continued without any substantial improvement, the less "accidental" the situation seemed to become. That is to say, the conditions in the camps may have indeed begun as a relatively unintended consequence of the scale and

que pueda existir un error o una falta de organización que dure tanto tiempo. La distribución de pan es la cosa más fácil del mundo y no son brazos los que faltarían para transportarlo, si se quiere. Esto no se ha hecho porque no se ha querido."

¹²⁴ *L'Humanité*, 17 February 1939. Quoted in Suárez, *España comienza en los Pirineos*, p. 138: "La verdad es que el prefecto de los Pirineos Orientales aplica las órdenes del gobierno francés tratando de facilitar la victoria de Franco. El prefecto y los suyos quieren liquidar al ejército republicano, impidiendo que los soldados, oficiales y comisarios políticos, que están en los campos, pidan partir a la zona central. Se crean tales condiciones a los refugiados, civiles y militares, a fi de que ellos digan: 'Antes partir con Franco que quedar en este infierno.'"

¹²⁵ See for instance Suárez, *España comienza en los Pirineos*, p. 149.

rapidity of the exodus, combined with the relative indifference and negligence of the French authorities; but, over the months to follow, many steps that might have been taken to alleviate these conditions were not, in fact, taken—perhaps because it quickly became clear that, for many powerful interests within the French state, there was profit to be had in the suffering of the internees. The compulsory idleness of the camps, for instance—whether initially intended or not—turned out to be quite beneficial for the Daladier government’s restrictionist approach to immigration, which, as noted earlier, required the complete exclusion of refugees from French society. To be allowed to work in France meant, in some way, to be integrated into French society—and this was precisely what French authorities wanted to prevent Spanish refugees from doing, at least in these first few months, since this would have made it much less likely that they would opt to return to Spain.

Finally, in addition to serving as an *ex post facto* justification for their exclusion from French society, the non-productive nature of the camps also symbolized yet another way in which the internees were stripped of their prior political identities. As noted in the previous chapter, the Spanish refugees of 1939 were overwhelmingly working-class in terms of social background, and were moreover highly organized and radicalized; the idleness of the camps, then, marked a stripping-away of the concrete power they had once possessed as workers. By turning the refugees into a precarious “reserve army of labor,” to be isolated from all forms of productive labor when unemployment was relatively high, only to be called on, in a variety of coercive ways, when their labor was desperately needed—as during the mobilization for war in September 1939—the French government essentially drove a wedge between them and the rest of the working class in France, thereby eroding any potential basis of solidarity between the two groups.

The concentration camps played a key role in this dynamic, not only because they provided a literal site in which this “reserve army of labor” could be quarantined and controlled, but also because, even for those refugees who had managed to obtain their release from the camps (whether through official channels or through escape), the *threat* of being sent back to the camps quickly presented itself as an ever-present and highly effective tool of repression. In this way, what had begun as an ad hoc and disorganized means of receiving an unprecedented wave of refugees soon turned into the lynchpin of an elaborate system of surveillance, control, and repression—one which was not, however, without its share of contradictions and imperfections. The way in which this shift took place will form the subject of our next chapter.



Robert Capa: “Men talking to an old woman through fence at a concentration camp for Spanish refugees, Argelès-sur-Mer, France,” 1939.

Chapter 3: Surveillance, Control, and Evasion

The previous two chapters examined the question of the intentionality of the camps—that is, the extent to which the various forms of repression to be found in the camps were either an accidental consequence of the French state’s disorganized response to an unprecedentedly large and rapid influx of refugees, or whether this repression was instead a conscious aim on the part of French authorities, motivated by officials’ desire to limit immigration and to restrict the spread of revolutionary activities. Many officials involved in the enactment of this policy of mass internment, of course, sought to portray the concentration camps as simply an inevitable outcome of the sheer scale of the refugee wave. Even the Socialist report to Parliament of February 19, 1939, which protested conditions in the camps, began by implying that “the unforeseen scale of the exodus, without precedent in history,” had rendered the initial existence of the camps, if not inevitable, then at least excusable.¹²⁶ However, it is misleading to suggest that this massive wave of refugees was entirely “unforeseen.” Already in April 1938, over a year before Franco’s final victory, the Spanish consul at Perpignan was warning the prefect of the Pyrénées-Orientales of the likelihood of a “mass exodus to the French border” that would result from the fall of Catalonia.¹²⁷ Nor did French officials ignore such warnings. On September 12, 1938—four months before the fall of Catalonia—the Minister of the Interior distributed a circular to all of the prefects of France dealing with the issue of “the conditions under which

¹²⁶“ Pour les Réfugiés Espagnols: Le Rapport de la Délégation du Groupe Socialiste au Parlement,” in *Le Populaire*, February 19, 1939. Accessed through Gallica.

¹²⁷ Memorandum from Joaquín Camps Arboix, Spanish Republican Consul at Perpignan, to Raoul Didkowski, Prefect of the Department of the Pyrénées-Orientales, April 23, 1938. A translation of this memorandum by Silvie Larrimore is quoted in full in an appendix to Louis Stein’s *Beyond Death and Exile: The Spanish Republicans in France, 1939-1955* (Harvard UP, 1989).

Spanish refugees ought to be authorized to stay in France, and how the general regulations applying to foreigners ought to be applied to their case.”¹²⁸

In this report, however, there is none of the humanitarian concern for the conditions of the refugees that had prompted the Spanish consul to warn the French government of an impending “mass exodus.” Rather, the immediate concern of the Interior Minister’s report is the implementation of surveillance measures. He begins by arguing that the only refugees which ought to be granted access to France in the first place are those who meet a set of narrow conditions: 1) “those who possess sufficient resources to stay here without holding any job” or 2) “those who can be received by people who will take responsibility for paying for all of their needs.” Exceptions were made for “women, children, old men, and the sick or injured, who may be sheltered at public cost.” Besides the need to give proof of financial self-sufficiency and the assurance that they would not try to find work, Spanish refugees hoping to live in France would also have to “be the subject of excellent information in all respects, to have never engaged in any suspect activity, nor in any demonstration likely to create incidents.”¹²⁹

The Minister’s report is clear, however, that even those Spanish refugees who qualify to stay in France will be subject to strict regulations. The report describes the kind of identity document which will be given to such refugees, which would include: 1) a renewable laissez-

¹²⁸ “De diverse côtés, j’ai été saisi de demandes de renseignements sur les conditions dans lesquelles devait être autorisé le séjour des réfugiés espagnols en France, et sur les modalités d’application, à leur égard, de la réglementation générale relative aux étrangers.” Letter from the Minister of the Interior to the Prefects, Paris, 12 September 1938. Archives Nationales, F/7/15172.

¹²⁹ “en principe—et sauf cas d’espèce—seuls, doivent être autorisée à résider dans notre pays les réfugiés qui possèdent des ressources suffisantes pour y demeurer sans y occuper aucun emploi ou qui peuvent être recueillis par des personnes prenant l’engagement de subvenir à leurs besoins, exception faite, toutefois, pour les femmes, les enfants, les vieillards et les malades qui peuvent encore être hébergés aux frais des collectivités publiques. Les intéressés doivent, bien entendu, faire l’objet d’excellente renseignements à tous les égards, ne ce livrer à aucune activité suspecte, ni à aucun manifestation susceptible de créer des incidents.” Letter from the Minister of the Interior to the Prefects, Paris, 12 September 1938. Archives Nationales, F/7/15172.

passer applicable for the duration of one month, which would not be valid outside the department in which it was issued; and 2) a “non-worker” identity card.¹³⁰ The Minister adds that “it would be good to clarify to the refugees that the possession of [these identity documents] do not imply that they have any right to settle or establish themselves in France, and that their stay here must be essentially temporary.”¹³¹ He also reminds the prefects that “the Spanish refugees should not hold any job of any kind unless they are authorized to do so by the Foreign Labor Service and consequently possess a ‘favorable visa ’affixed to a work contract.”¹³² He notes that such an exemption can apply only to particular kinds of labor—specifically manual agricultural labor—and that any form of employment in “industrial, commercial, or artisanal professions” is “formally prohibited” for the refugees.¹³³

The Interior Minister’s report of September 1938 does not mention anything about the creation of concentration camps; but the origins of the camps can be traced back, at least in part, to the kinds of regulations established here. The two requirements outlined here for the right of legal, temporary residence in France—to possess sufficient wealth or connections so as to be

¹³⁰ “Ceux d’entre eux qui remplissent ces conditions doivent être mis en possession d’une pièce d’identité régulière valant autorisation de séjour. Cette pièce pourra être: a) soit un laissez-passer du modèle ci-joint en annexe. Ces laissez-passer seront établis pour une durée d’un mois et renouvelables. Ils ne seront valables, en principe, que pour le seul département dans lequel ils auront été délivrés. [...] b) soit un récépissé de demande de carte d’identité de ‘non travailleur.’” Letter from the Minister of the Interior to the Prefects, Paris, 12 September 1938. Archives Nationales, F/7/15172.

¹³¹ “Il sera bien précisée aux intéressés que la possession du récépissé de demande de carte d’identité n’implique pour eux aucun droit de fixation ou d’établissement en France et que leur séjour est essentiellement temporaire.” Letter from the Minister of the Interior to the Prefects, Paris, 12 September 1938. Archives Nationales, F/7/15172.

¹³² “Je vous rappelle que les réfugiés espagnols ne doivent occuper aucun emploi de quelque nature qu’il soit sans justifier d’autorisation habituelle des Services de la Main d’Oeuvre Etrangères et par conséquent, sans posséder le “visa favorable” apposé sur un contrat de travail.” Letter from the Minister of the Interior to the Prefects, Paris, 12 September 1938. Archives Nationales, F/7/15172.

¹³³ “En ce qui concerne l’exercice éventuel de professions industrielles, commerciales ou artisanales, il conviendra d’aviser les réfugiés espagnols que ce genre d’activité leur est formellement interdit.” Letter from the Minister of the Interior to the Prefects, Paris, 12 September 1938. Archives Nationales, F/7/15172.

able to live without seeking work, and to be entirely politically “unobjectionable” in the eyes of the French government—would necessarily apply only to a small percentage of the Spanish refugees, who (as mentioned in earlier chapters) were largely working-class and highly politically mobilized.¹³⁴ This raised an urgent question: if only a tiny percentage of the half-million refugees who crossed the French border in January-February 1939 were deemed “eligible” to enter France, what was to be done with the rest? Immediate, forcible repatriation was the favored course of action on the French right, but this proved impossible to carry out in practice, owing not only to the defense of the right of asylum on the part of French liberals and leftists, but also, perhaps even more crucially, to the resistance of Spanish refugees themselves.¹³⁵ If they could not be forced to leave France, then, and since allowing them to live *in* France was clearly out of the question, then the only solution was to indefinitely “quarantine” the refugees in a space that both *was* and *was not* France. This, then, was the role played by the concentration camps—they served above all as a means of isolating the refugees from the rest of French society.

Clearly one of the motivating factors for this—as the Minister of the Interior’s September 1938 circular suggests—was the need to allay concerns that refugees would take on jobs “rightfully belonging to” French citizens in a time of widespread unemployment. And yet the real reasons for these restrictions perhaps went much deeper than this. To take on a job, to settle down in a fixed residence—all of this would encourage the refugees to start thinking of

¹³⁴ See footnote on p. 27 of this thesis. It is also worth noting here that the anarchists, socialists, and Communists among the refugees were all seen as equally politically “suspect” by the French state, which did not do much to differentiate between the various left-wing groups; Republican refugees, for instance, often complained about being “lumped in” with the Communists or anarchists. In actual fact, then, the percentages matter little for the point that I’m making here, because *all* refugees were automatically viewed by the French state as politically “suspect” simply by virtue of *being* Spanish refugees.

¹³⁵ As will be discussed later in this chapter.

themselves not as temporary asylum-seekers, but rather as a part of French society, entitled to the same rights as other French citizens. Such an outcome would be disastrous for the French state's plans to eventually repatriate the refugees.

But this only gives rise to a further question: *why* did French officials so desperately want to repatriate as many Spanish refugees as possible? The simple answer is that French authorities saw the refugees as a threat to “order.” We saw in Chapter 1 that the Spanish Civil War constituted a moment of crisis for the French state and society, not simply because it exposed the impotence of its own Popular Front government but also because it tapped into deep-seated anxieties about the possibility of civil war and revolution in France. This accounts for the French press's morbid fascination with the “Red Terror” that supposedly accompanied the social revolution in Catalonia, and the frequently-expressed fears on the French right and center that the violence of the Spanish Civil War might somehow “spill over” the border into France.¹³⁶ In this context, the influx of half a million refugees in February 1939—among them hundreds of thousands of ex-militiamen from the Republican armies, and tens of thousands of former participants in a failed social revolution—seemed to be the confirmation of their worst fears. This anxiety over the looming possibility of social unrest *within* French society was therefore the motivating factor behind the elaborate network of surveillance and control that French officials sought to create in order to manage the Spanish refugee population.

That, however, is the operative word: *sought*. Because, at least in 1939, there was an immense gap between the kinds of control that French officials *wanted* to exert over the refugee population, and the kinds of control that they were actually *able* to implement. As a result, this

¹³⁶ See for instance Weber, Eugen, *The Hollow Years: France in the 1930s* (New York: Norton, 1994), p. 166, as well as the passages from Genevieve Dreyfus-Armand's *El exilio de los republicanos españoles en Francia*, on p. 16 of this thesis.

system of surveillance, at least in this early period, was disorderly and ad hoc, like the camps themselves, and there was little consistency or logic in how it was applied in individual cases. This inconsistency made it relatively easy—relative, that is, to other systems of surveillance in more repressive European states of the time—for refugees to evade these controls by, for instance, escaping from the camps, forging false identification documents, or taking on work and moving to different parts of the country despite regulations against it.

We should begin, however, by examining the various modes of control and repression within the camps themselves, as these served as the lynchpin for the entire system. As discussed in the previous chapter, the camps, at least in the early weeks of February 1939, were defined above all by what they lacked—they had nothing in the way of adequate shelter, latrines, medical services, or even food distribution, except for that which the refugees managed to organize for themselves. To use a recurring image used by so many former internees, the camps at this point were nothing but strips of sand surrounded by barbed wire. In actual fact, the camps were constructed so hastily that sometimes even this barbed-wire enclosure was not even completed prior to the arrival of the refugees—meaning that, in the first few weeks at least, there was very little in the way of any kind of physical barrier to prevent the refugees from simply escaping. For instance, Antonio Ordovas, a 17-year-old member of the anarchist group *Juventudes Libertarias*, describes the situation in Argelès-sur-Mer in the early weeks of February 1939 as follows:

Interviewer: And was the camp delimited?

Ordovas: No, no, no, it was chaos.

Interviewer: And it was open?

Ordovas: It was open.

Interviewer: And so people could escape?

Ordovas: Everyone was able to escape, as long as they had... well, what you needed to escape was appropriate clothing, civilian clothing, so that you could be mistaken for a French civilian, a modest knowledge of French, and some francs. With those three things, obviously, it was completely possible to escape.

Interviewer: And you had civilian clothing?

Ordovas: Yes, sir.

Interviewer: Because you didn't enter as a soldier. Did you have francs?

Ordovas: I didn't have francs.¹³⁷

As Ordovas's remark suggests, what kept the refugees in the camps, at least in this initial period, was not so much any form of strict control or repression *within* the camps themselves, but rather the fact that life in France was deliberately made impossible for most Spanish refugees. Most had no valid money (since the pesetas of the defeated Republic were now worthless) and only a few were able to speak French. To these practical difficulties were added legal obstacles: it was extremely difficult for refugees to receive a residence permit for any location in France, and, until September 1939, virtually all of them were formally barred from taking on any kind of work in France. Although it was relatively easy at first to physically escape from the concentration camps, then, it was almost impossible to remain outside of the camps for very long without some kind of special authorization by the French government.

But that is not to say that there were *no* measures of control or repression within the camps themselves. On the contrary, concerns about how to keep the refugees separate from the general French population led to the deployment of a large number of guards tasked with supervising the border as well as the camps themselves. While the border tended to be patrolled by gendarmes (that is, by white French citizens), the actual supervision of the camps was usually delegated to Senegalese soldiers. Nearly all of the former internees of the camps complained of physical mistreatment at the hands of these guards, but many of them emphasized that what was

¹³⁷ "¿Y estaba delimitado el campo?" "No, no, no, es el caos." "Es el caos. ¿Y está abierto?" "Está abierto." "¿Entonces la gente hubiera podido escaparse?" "Y se escapó todo el mundo que tuvo... pues, lo que se necesitaba para escaparse, que era una ropa apropiada. [...] de civil, al efecto de poderse confundir con la población civil francesa, un modesto conocimiento del francés y unos cuantos francos. Con estas tres cosas era, evidentemente, totalmente factible poder escapar." "¿Y tú tenías traje de civil?" "Sí, señor." "Porque tú no habías entrado como soldado. ¿Tenías francos?" "No tenía francos." Interview with Antonio Ordovas (PHO/10/51). "Proyecto de historia oral: Refugiados españoles en México." Collection in Centro Documental de la Memoria Histórica (Salamanca), 1978/1990.

really to blame was not the guards themselves, but rather the French authorities who had deployed them to the camps. Many internees interpreted the deployment of the Senegalese soldiers in particular as a cynical move on the part of the French government, intended to humiliate them—and it was this perceived intention that they most resented.

It is not clear, incidentally, that there was in fact anything calculated or cynical about the French government's deployment of these troops—there was simply a disproportionate number of Senegalese soldiers stationed at the time in the Pyrénées-Orientales and other nearby departments, making it easy for them to be called up at a short notice. That being said, however, what is important for the argument at hand is not so much the actual intentions of the French state, but rather what the internees *thought* those intentions were—a quite distinct question. The central problem faced by the French state, at least as the internees saw it, was the question of how to destroy any possible links of solidarity between the (working-class) French soldiers and the (working-class) Spanish internees. This evidently was not a problem in the case of the gendarmes or the mobile guards, who enjoyed a higher status than regular French troops—but the former, given their more limited numbers, could not provide the entirety of the personnel which the French state deemed necessary to guard the internees.

Starting out from this assumption, many internees concluded that French officials preferred to deploy Senegalese troops to guard the internees because these soldiers—owing to their more exploited and degraded condition as colonized, working-class racial minorities—were easier to manipulate, and therefore more likely to obey the harsh orders of gendarmes and French officials when it came to the treatment of the internees. Manuel Martinez Roca, for instance, suggested that the contemptuous attitude which the Senegalese guards displayed towards the internees might have been owing to the possibility that French officials had deliberately misled

them about the nature of the internees' crimes: "they must've been told that we were bandits and murderers and that we should be treated as such."¹³⁸ Martínez Roca, echoing a claim made by many other former internees, suggested that the fraught relations between the internees and the Senegalese guards were also exacerbated by the difficulty of communication caused by the lack of a shared language—many of the Senegalese guards, like most of the Spanish refugees, spoke French only imperfectly.¹³⁹ Ferrer goes further and suggests that the harsh treatment which the internees received at the hands of the guards was a direct result of the latter's own harsh treatment under French colonialism. "Of all the humiliations we experienced," he writes, "none was more painful than that which was inflicted on us by those barbarians, avenging on us their own humiliations. The humiliations of life under colonialism; that of being treated as inferior beings."¹⁴⁰ Suárez makes the same argument when he writes:

[They were] scorned, subordinate, mistreated, enslaved, and [in the camps] they found a moment of satisfaction which they had never been able to find against those white men who ruled over their land and who had put a rifle in their hands, so that the treatment which they had themselves received became the basis for the treatment they meted out to the Spaniards; in this way they were transformed into executioners. The refugees were for those black men, so far as treatment and consideration were concerned, what they themselves were to the French. We were the Senegalese of the Senegalese.¹⁴¹

¹³⁸ "les habíamos dicho que eran, que éramos, eh, bandidos y asesinos y como tales nos trataban ¿verdad?" Interview with Manuel Martínez Roca (PHO/10/32). "Proyecto de historia oral: Refugiados españoles en México." Collection in Centro Documental de la Memoria Histórica (Salamanca), 1978/1990.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ "De todas las humillaciones experimentadas, ningunas más sensibles que las que nos han inferido estos bárbaros, vengando en nosotros sus propias humillaciones. La humillaciones de la vida colonial; la de ser tratados como seres inferiores." Ferrer, *Entre alambradas*, p. 56.

¹⁴¹ "Al oír negro se vio cual era: despreciado, inferior, maltratado, esclavo, y halló un minuto de satisfacción que no había podido encontrar nunca contra aquellos blancos que mandaban en su tierra y que habían puesto un fusil en sus manos para que el trato que ellos recibían tomasen normas que pudieran ser aplicadas a los españoles, convirtiéndose así a la categoría de ejecutores. / Los refugiados eran para estos negros, en cuanto al trato y a la consideración, lo que ellos para los franceses. Nosotros éramos los senegaleses de los senegaleses." Suárez, *España comienza en los Pirineos*, 186-187.

This phrase Suárez uses to describe the internees' condition—"the Senegalese of the Senegalese"—might help us to better understand precisely what the internees found to be so "humiliating" in their treatment by these guards. As the next few accounts by Manuel Martinez Roca and Antonio Ordovas will suggest, the internees tended to look down on the Senegalese soldiers as culturally inferior, referring to them as "backwards," "illiterate," "rough," "brutal." These racialized attitudes have led many historians to suggest that at the root of the "humiliation" that the internees felt was a sense that colonial power relations had been reversed.¹⁴²

This characterization may not be entirely accurate, given that so many of the internees held consciously anti-colonial views and therefore tended to see the "backwardness" of the Senegalese soldiers as being due to their exploited, colonized status rather than (as colonial ideology would have it) their racial status. Nonetheless, this overall sense of distance, superiority, and even contempt towards the Senegalese on the part of the internees can tell us quite a bit about how far the French state had succeeded in eroding any possible groundwork for solidarity between these two groups. For in fact, despite all of the barriers erected between them, the Spanish internees and the Senegalese soldiers shared a great deal in common, as members of a "foreign" working class who were equally excluded from the privilege of French citizenship and subject to the control and repression of the French state. Perhaps at the root of internees' resentment of their status as "Senegalese of the Senegalese," then, was their frustration at the limitations of a French republican tradition which purported to extend the principles of "liberty, equality, and fraternity" to all human beings—while nonetheless condemning them to the

¹⁴² See for instance Soo Scott's remarks on this subject in *Routes to Exile*.

degradation of the camps, just as surely as it condemned the Senegalese to the degradation of colonial servitude.

That being said, however, the presence of the Senegalese guards—in spite of all the humiliation they engendered among the internees—served, in fact, as a quite imperfect means of control. This was especially true in the early days of internment, when the actual physical barriers separating the interior from the exterior of the camps were still surprisingly permeable. Manual Martinez Roca, in the same passage from the interview quoted above, hints at this situation when he explains:

Martinez Roca: The French organized very little, very little. And there we were treated pretty badly by the French. I'm not saying that there weren't decent people, there were even decent gendarmes... but the majority [...] considered us as enemies. [...] And I'm not talking about the Senegalese, who were some poor black men who didn't speak French and were illiterate, I suppose, very backward, you understand? They must've told them that we were bandits and murderers and that they should treat us as such, you see? With a gendarme you could at least have something of a dialogue, but with the Senegalese you couldn't have any kind of dialogue, you understand?

Interviewer: Were you mistreated?

Martinez Roca: Well, quite often, yes, we were hit...

Interviewer: Why?

Martinez Roca: Well, for any reason... if you passed the line, whatever, you'd get hit with the butt of a rifle, or... punishment, etc., you see?

Interviewer: The line, so there were demarcations?

Martinez Roca: Boundary lines, yes, that you couldn't go beyond...¹⁴³

¹⁴³ “Los franceses organizaron muy poco, muy poco. Y ahí estábamos, eh, en un trato bastante, bastante malo a nivel de los franceses. No digo que no había gente decente, incluso había gendarmes decentes, eh... pero la mayor parte no lo eran, no, eran... nos consideraban como enemigos.” “Como enemigos.” “Como enemigos.” “¿Los mismos gendarmes?” “Sí, sí, los gendarmes. Y no digamos los senegaleses que eran unos pobres eh... eh... negros que no hablan ni francés y analfabetos, supongo yo, atrasadísimos ¿verdad?, les habíamos dicho que eran, que éramos, eh, bandidos y asesinos y como tales nos trataban ¿verdad?_Con, con un gendarme podía haber un poco de diálogo, en algunos de ellos, y explicarles algo, pero con los senegaleses no podía haber diálogo ninguno ¿verdad?” “¿Recibían maltratos?” “Bue... en muchas ocasiones, sí, golpes...” “¿Por qué?” “Pues, por cualquier motivo, uno que se pasaba la raya, que tal y cual, un golpe de culata o... castigos, etcétera ¿no?” “¿La raya, había delimitaciones?” “Limitaciones, uno no se podía pasar, no se podía...” Interview with Manuel Martinez Roca (PHO/10/32). “Proyecto de historia oral: Refugiados españoles en México.” Collection in Centro Documental de la Memoria Histórica (Salamanca), 1978/1990.

In the absence of well-constructed physical barriers, then, the guards served the function of policing the imagined boundaries that separated one section of the camp from another, or the camp from the outside world—and even if these lines were not directly visible, they could not be crossed without the threat of some kind of physical punishment. In the interview above, Martínez Roca is describing the Barcarès camp, but the situation was the same in Argelès-sur-mer, at least in the early weeks of February 1939, as Antonio Ordovas’s testimony shows:

Interviewer: Who supervised the camp?

Ordovas: The Senegalese and, to a lesser degree, the gendarmes; later on, the only ones we saw were the Senegalese.

Interviewer: How did they treat you?

Ordovas: Well, the Senegalese guards obviously were, well, rough individuals, very coarse, dressed in military uniform, and if you went past certain boundaries, they would treat you with brutality, and if you didn’t cross those boundaries, they would treat you with indifference.

Interviewer: And what were those boundaries?

Ordovas: Well, they’d tell you that there was a line that you couldn’t cross and that if you tried to cross it, they’d attack you, but if you didn’t cross it, then they wouldn’t take a damned bit of notice of you.

Interviewer: A line outside the camp?

Ordovas: Outside the camp, because their task was to keep you within certain limits, even though the camp wasn’t actually fenced in, even though it didn’t really constitute a camp as such.¹⁴⁴

As Ordovas’s and Martínez Roca’s testimony suggests, the mobilization of the Senegalese was an imperfect measure on the part of the French state to mitigate in some degree the utter disorganization of the camps in this early stage, and to reduce the perceived security threat that this disorganization implied. I use the word “imperfect” because in fact, despite complaints about

¹⁴⁴ “¿quién cuidadaba el campo?” “Los senegaleses y la gendarmería en menor escala; luego los que veías eran los senegaleses.” “¿Cómo os trataban?” “Bueno, el senegalés evidentemente era un individuo pues, tosco, muy rústico, vestido de militar y si pasabas de ciertos límites, con brutalidad, y si no pasabas de ciertos límites, con indiferencia.” “¿Y cuáles eran los límites?” “Pues él te decía que ésta era una línea de la que no podías pasar y si la querías pasar atacaba y si no pasabas no te hacía ni puñetero caso.” “¿Una línea hacia fuera del campo?” “Hacia afuera del campo, puesto que su misión era mantenerte dentro de unos límites aunque no estuviera cercado el campo, ni constituido el campo como tal.” Interview with Antonio Ordovas (PHO/10/51). “Proyecto de historia oral: Refugiados españoles en México.” Collection in Centro Documental de la Memoria Histórica (Salamanca), 1978/1990.

the brutality of the guards, it was—at least judging from the accounts of refugees who evaded the camps—still relatively easy to slip out from their control, either through various forms of deceit, or simply because it was impossible for a relatively small number of guards to keep watch over so many refugees at all times.

The case of José María Muría, a Catalan nationalist, freemason, and former soldier in the Republican army, is illustrative of the degree to which French systems of surveillance and control over the refugees in this period were indeed quite permeable so long as one possessed the right skills and connections. This is how he narrates his “escape” from the concentration camp, which he undertakes virtually as soon as he arrives:

Basically, I left my little suitcase there, and I went to the place that was cordoned off by the Senegalese; I saw the official—he wasn’t Senegalese, he was French, white—and [...] I said: “Look here, I have here a safe-conduct to go to Port-Vendres, signed here by your mayor, but I don’t have the two francs or so that I need for the journey.” “You want me to exchange pesetas?” he asked, looking at me and smiling. [...] And then he gave me, not just the two francs and twenty-five cents I needed, but a coin for five francs. A fortune. [...] So I went. Later I returned to where my comrades were, still being watched by the Senegalese guards. And I said: ‘Look, here I have a *laisser-passer* and a safe-conduct to Port-Vendres, and I have five French francs; already all of France is mine. [...] Good luck, I’m leaving.’ [...] I disguised my luggage, so that I would look as little like a soldier as possible. [...] I picked up my little suitcase, disguised my soldier’s coat as much as I could, left behind my knapsack and everything else that made me look like a soldier, my military belts and all of that, and acting very serious I passed the line where the official had seen me enter and where I’d asked him about the town hall. I said goodbye to him very amiably: “Au revoir, monsieur, au revoir.” And he said goodbye to me. That is to say, that official, who was there to keep watch over everyone and make sure that nobody escaped, let me enter and leave very peacefully. I went to the station, took the train: two francs or so, and still I had two francs or so left over and I went to Port-Vendres.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁵ “Efectivamente, dejé allí mi velicito, me voy a la salida del espacio acordonado por los senegaleses; me voy al oficial—éste no era senegalés, era francés, blanco—y le pregunto: ‘¿Dónde queda el Ayuntamiento?’ [...] le digo: ‘Pues yo... mire ¿ve?, aquí tengo el *savloconducto* para ir hasta Port-Vendres, aquí firmado por el alcalde de ustedes, pero no tengo los dos francos y pico que me cuesta el viaje. ‘¿Me quiere cambiar pesetas?’ Me mira, se sonríe y dice: ‘¿Cuántas pesetas?’ ‘Necesito nomás dos francos y pico para ir hasta llá.’ Me vuelve a sonreír. ‘Bueno ¿y cuántas pesetas me da?’ ‘Ah, las que quiera.’ Y entonces se las doy y me da, no dos francos veinticinco, sino que me da una moneda de cinco francos. Una fortuna. [...] me fui. Luego me vuelvo a meter donde estaban mis compañeros baja la

Muría's account here is interesting for two reasons. The first is simply that it corroborates Ordovas's explanation of what was needed to escape from the camps: civilian clothing, a moderate knowledge of French, and money, in the form of francs. Muría lacks all of these except for a knowledge of French, but is able to disguise his soldier's uniform and to receive five francs from an oddly obliging French official, enabling him to slip away easily to another part of the Pyrénées-Orientales.

The main reason why this account is interesting, however, is that Muría is able to evade the camps almost effortlessly not *in spite*, but actually *because*, of the fact that he fell into a category which the French government deemed to be *most* potentially dangerous: that is, former officials of the Republican government and army. This concern is clearly visible in a report from the Minister of the Interior to the Prefect of the Police and the Prefects, dated 14 February 1939, calling for "Surveillance Measures" to be taken against "certain categories of refugees." In this report, the Minister writes:

There are, among these foreigners, certain individuals who have occupied official functions in Spain, whether in the Government or in the Army; and others who occupied leadership posts in regional, syndicalist, or political organizations. I would be much obliged if you would, as a matter of urgency, provide me with a list of such individuals residing in your department which indicates their identity and their former posts. Please let me know if these individuals have displayed any signs of [political] activity on our

guardia de senegaleses. Y les dio: 'Miren, muchachos: aqui tengo un laissez-passer un salvoconducto hasta Port-Vendres, y tengo cinco francos franceses; ya todo Francia es mía. A lo que quedamos. Buena suerte y yo me voy.' [...] Disimulé mi equipaje, que se viera lo menos posible que era de soldado. [...] Agarré mi velicito, disimulé mi manta de soldado como pude, dejé mi saco de costado y todo lo que era militar, mi corraje y todas estas cosas y muy serio paso la línea donde estaba el oficial que me había visto entrar y al que le pregunté dónde estaba la mairie. Lo saludo muy amable: 'Au revoir, monsieur, au revoir,' ya. Y me saluda. Es decir, aquel que estaba allí, para vigilar que nadie se fugara, a mi me deja que tranquilamente entre y salga. Me voy a la estación, agarro el tren: dos francos y pico, y todavía me quedan dos y pico más y me voy a Port-Vendres." Interview with José María Muría (PHO/10/40). "Proyecto de historia oral: Refugiados españoles en México." Collection in Centro Documental de la Memoria Histórica (Salamanca), 1978/1990.

territory and, making as discrete an inquiry as possible, whether they are in contact with [or have any connections with] French or foreign political or syndicalist organizations.¹⁴⁶

Muría, as a former officer of the Republican army and a former official of the Catalan Generalitat, would therefore fall into this category of Spanish refugees which the French state deemed most necessary to surveil and control. And yet the disorganized state of this surveillance apparatus made it possible for Muría to actually use his position as a former Catalan official as a way of obtaining the kinds of documents he needed to avoid the camps. To continue with his account:

And then I saw that the passport that they'd made for us in the Spanish Consulate in Perpignan, which had made it possible for me to leave straight away from the concentration camp, actually wasn't valid. So then I waited there, where they were questioning everyone who'd been detained on account of their documents. There were some people there, very few of them, who had more or less good documents, and they released them. The rest of them, who had this passport, were sent to the bus, a repulsive truck that took them away to the concentration camp. [...] "And what documents do you have?" [the official asked.] At that point I had the cheek to say: "Look here, I'm an official of the Catalan Government." And I showed him my identity card, the one I still kept with me as an official of the Catalan government. [...] He looked at it and said: "Well, this is a new case. Look here, come back tomorrow, so you can see the superintendent of the police and figure it out with him." "Great, thanks," I said, and left. Everyone else was taken to the concentration camp.¹⁴⁷

Eventually, Muría was able not only to avoid being sent back to the concentration camp, but even to obtain a fixed residence and a modest income at an asylum center for Spanish intellectuals and professors, managing to do so rather haphazardly by taking advantage of his

¹⁴⁶ "Il en est, parmi ces étrangers, qui occupaient, en Espagne, des fonctions officielles, soit auprès du Gouvernement, soit auprès des Armées; d'autres se trouvaient à la tête d'organisations régionales, syndicalistes ou politiques. Je vous serais très obligé de me faire parvenir, d'urgence, une liste de ces personnalités en résidence dans votre département en m'indiquant leur identité et leurs fonctions antérieures. Vous voudrez bien me faire savoir si les intéressés font preuve d'activité sur notre territoire et, dans la mesure où des enquêtes discrètes vous le permettront, s'ils sont en rapport avec des organisations politiques ou syndicalistes françaises ou étrangères." Letter from the Minister of the Interior to the Governor-General of Algeria, the Prefect of Police, and the Prefects, 14 February 1939. Archives Nationales (Pierrefitte-sur-Seine), F/7/15172.

¹⁴⁷ Interview with José María Muría (PHO/10/40). "Proyecto de historia oral: Refugiados españoles en México." Collection in Centro Documental de la Memoria Histórica (Salamanca), 1978/1990.

connections as a freemason and a member of an Occitan literary society (to which, luckily for him, many right-wing French officials in the region happened to belong). It is clear enough, of course, that Muría's case was quite unusual. But it is nonetheless telling for what it reveals about the gap between the *intentions* of the French state, on the one hand, and the actual *enforcement* of these measures, on the other. Simply reading the Minister of the Interior's reports, for instance, might convey the impression that by this point (February 1939), there was already an organized network in place to surveil and manage those refugees considered most politically "dangerous." But Muría's case, perhaps, shows how easily these measures could be evaded simply by taking advantage of the prevailing uncertainty and confusion that came along with such an entirely unprecedented situation.

Yet Muría's account could be read in another way, as well: as evidence that even at this early point, and in spite of the above-mentioned state of uncertainty, the French state had already constructed a relatively complicated bureaucratic network capable of monitoring the lives of Spanish refugees both inside and outside the concentration camps. On this interpretation, it would make perfect sense why Muría found it so easy to escape from the camps—they formed only one part of that overall system of surveillance and control. Muría, even in his relatively privileged position, is scarcely capable of living freely in France—like all Spanish refugees, he was forbidden from leaving the city in which he was granted authorization to reside (although he states that he often flouted this rule, he only managed to do so at great risk, and in fact was once nearly sent back to the concentration camp as a result of trying to go to a neighboring city). He was also forbidden from working (hence the necessity of the income he received from the asylum center), at least until September 1939, when he was actually *required* to work or else risk re-internment in a concentration camp. At that point, it was his work contract for an aluminum

factory, rather than his promise *not* to work, which provided him with the documents he needed to legally reside in France and to avoid being sent back to a concentration camp.¹⁴⁸

The key to this system of control, then, was the creation of an elaborate set of bureaucratic requirements in which one's eligibility to reside (or, later, to work) in France was tied to a series of documents which were exceedingly difficult to acquire in practice. As Muría sums it up: "In France the most important thing was to have documents. '*Papiers, papiers,*' the gendarmes would always say. And the more papers that you had, the happier the gendarmes were, and the more possibilities you had to save yourself from the concentration camp."¹⁴⁹ This constant demand for "papers," and the implicit threat of internment which accompanied it, served as an acute source of humiliation for the refugees—one which becomes the subject of parody in an anecdote that Suárez relates:

They played at Spaniards and soldiers. One of the Senegalese became the Spaniard. The other was the sentinel. The latter adopted a '*féroce*' attitude, gritting his teeth and knitting his brows. The first walked towards him, stepping timidly, his head cast down, a pitiful look on his face. He carried a paper in his hand. Upon reaching the "sentinel," the "Spaniard" tried to appeal to his sense of compassion. The guard cried out: "Paper!" The one who played at being a refugee held it out fearfully. The other one pretended to read, turning it up, down, and around, and then, giving it back, cried out: "No! No!" The "poor internee," frightened, protested and pointed at the paper: "Paper... paper..." His companion responded: "No! No! To the camp... to the camp! Go on [*Alé!*]" He walked on, groaning, because the black men had observed that the Spaniards did this as well when they were treated in this way. The scene was repeated many times, always the same way, because it was a nice diversion.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁸ Interview with José María Muría (PHO/10/40). "Proyecto de historia oral: Refugiados españoles en México." Collection in Centro Documental de la Memoria Histórica (Salamanca), 1978/1990.

¹⁴⁹ "en Francia lo importante era tener documentos, '*Papiers, papiers,*' te los pedían siempre los gendarmes. Y cuanto más papeles se traían más contentos estaban los gendarmes y más posibilidades se tenía de salvarse del campo de concentración." Interview with José María Muría (PHO/10/40). "Proyecto de historia oral: Refugiados españoles en México." Collection in Centro Documental de la Memoria Histórica (Salamanca), 1978/1990.

¹⁵⁰ "Jugarían a españoles y soldados. Uno de los senegaleses hizo de español. El otro de centinela. Tomaba el segundo una actitud '*féroce,*' apretando los dientes y frunciendo el entrecejo. Marchaba el primero hacia él, dando tímidos pasos, la cabeza cargada sobre un hombro, la cara de lástima. Llevaba un papel en la mano. Al llegar al '*centinela,*' el '*español*' interrogaba, llamando a la compasión. Entonces el

As the guard's shout of "to the camp... to the camp!" suggests, the concentration camps were an indispensable part of the overall system of control—because it was the *threat* of being sent to the camps that enforced compliance and imbued these otherwise meaningless documents with such immense power.

But that, of course, applied only to those who, like Muría, had managed to evade the concentration camps through persistence or organizational connections or sheer luck. What kinds of mechanisms of control were put in place for those who remained *inside* the camps? To better understand this aspect of the camps, it will be useful for us to turn again to the testimony of the Spanish Communist refugee Manuel Martínez Roca, who was subjected over the course of 1939 to a series of "political punishments" within multiple different concentration camps: first, the "hippodrome" punishment of the Barcarès camp; then, a "special punishment section" within the larger camp of Saint Cyprien; then, the prison of Fort Collioure; and finally, the "punishment camp" of Vernet d'Ariege.

Martínez Roca explains that he was in the Barcarès camp from February to March 1939, when he was denounced to the French authorities (likely by other Spanish refugees, for political reasons) as a Communist.¹⁵¹ He describes how he was then detained by two gendarmes and taken to the "hippodrome": a rectangular strip on the beach about a hundred meters in length, surrounded by barbed wire, and with nothing in at all except for a water pump. To survive in the

vigilante movía la cabeza para gritar: —¡Papier! / El que hacía de refugiado lo alargaba temerosamente. El otro fingía leer, por arriba, por abajo, al dorso y, devolviéndolo, gritaba: —¡No! ¡No! / Protestaba con miedo, señalando el papel, el 'pobre internado.' / —Papier... papier... / ¡No! ¡No! Campo... ¡Campo! ¡Alé! —respondía su compañero. / Se alejaba gruñendo, porque los negros habían observado que también los españoles lo hacían cuando se les trataba de ese modo. La escena se repetía muchas veces, siempre igual, porque era una bonita diversión." Suárez, *España comienza en los Pirineos*, p. 188.

¹⁵¹ Interview with Manuel Martínez Roca (PHO/10/32). "Proyecto de historia oral: Refugiados españoles en México." Collection in Centro Documental de la Memoria Histórica (Salamanca), 1978/1990.

cold conditions without any form of shelter, “one had to act like a horse, running all day.”¹⁵² They slept on the ground, and since Roca, like many of the other internees in the “hippodrome,” had been detained without being allowed to take any possessions along with him, for the first few nights he had to share a blanket and huddle up next to other internees.¹⁵³ Martinez notes that while a small number of the internees in the “hippodrome” had been detained there for what he calls “common crimes” (the example he gives is stealing some bread—an understandable offense given the general scarcity of food in the camps), he adds that at least ninety percent were there for “political crimes” and “political motives.”¹⁵⁴

Martinez Roca was detained in the “hippodrome” at Barcarès for “eight, ten, or fifteen days,” before being sent to a “special punishment camp” within Saint-Cyprien, where he stayed for “a month or two.” Unlike the hippodrome at Barcarès, this camp had barracks—after all, this would have been March or April, three months after the camps were first set up—but these were arranged as “a kind of special prison,” and there were no beds in any of them, meaning that the internees were again obliged to sleep on the ground. Because there had to be some way to differentiate the situation of those internees being punished for “political crimes” from the general conditions prevailing in the camp, the internees in this part of the Saint-Cyprien camp were served only *half* the rations provided for the other refugees.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵² “pa’ no morir de frío, uno hacía como los caballos, corría todo el día.” Ibid.

¹⁵³ “porque se llevaron sin cosas, me detuvieron sin cosas, después me las mandaron los compañeros, la primera noche me acuerdo que no pas... que no tenía ni una triste manta, no tenía nada para dormir, y con la gente que había allí, alguien me prestó a...acurrucado ¿verdad?” Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ “Buen, allí había detenidos, también algunos detenidos, podríamos llamar, por delitos comunes [...] Porque se había robado un pan [...] sí ahí había cien personas, había noventa por delitos políticos [...] Pero, bueno, básicamente éramos por motivos políticos ¿verdad?” Ibid. For more detail on this “hippodrome” punishment, see, for instance, Ferrer, *Entre alambradas*.

¹⁵⁵ “En Saint Cyprien había un campo especial de castigo. Pero ya con barracas, una especie de cárcel especial, ahí estuve un mes o dos me parece. [...] Que ya estaba un poco mejor acondicionado, pero, bueno, también unas condiciones de, de un hambre... perruna ¿verdad? Porque, si se comía poco en el campo, en los lugares de castigo se comía a la mitad.” “¿Y había literas en esas barracas?” “No, no, no.” “Tampoco, en el suelo también.” “En el suelo, en la, en la arena.” Ibid.

After spending about a month and a half in these conditions at Saint-Cyprien, Martinez Roca was sent to the prison at Fort Collioure, which he refers to as “the site of maximum punishment” (at this point in the interview, he jokes that “I always have the luck to be going from one five-star hotel to another”).¹⁵⁶ Scott Soo notes that the prison at Fort Collioure was one of the two “special camps” created for refugees considered to be “particularly dangerous”—the other being Vernet d’Ariège, which had first been created to intern Spanish anarchist refugees belonging to the former Durutti column.¹⁵⁷ Martinez Roca notes that Fort Collioure was far more “organized” than either Barcarès or Saint-Cyprien, and as such the kind of “punishment” that it meted out was qualitatively different from that which Martinez Roca had experienced in the prior two camps. Whereas the “hippodrome” in Barcarès and the “punishment camp” in Saint Cyprien had entailed a deliberate intensification of the conditions of neglect, exposure, and enforced idleness that characterized the camps more generally, the modes of punishment prevailing at Fort Collioure were more in line with our now-conventional image of how a “concentration camp” is organized: locked prison cells, frequent physical abuse, and, above all, forced labor. This is how Martinez Roca describes the conditions at Fort Collioure:

And Fort Collioure, now that was something very well-organized indeed. [...] it was a prison, there we slept on little mattresses of straw on the ground [...] The food was bad but it wasn’t as bad as in the camps, it was better, despite the fact that it was a site of self-punishment [sic]. But there we were made to march in military formation, and to work, that is, forced labor. [...] Now, all this labor was basically useless, but even so, they made us work. [...] They made us work eight, ten hours daily, with picks and shovels, forced labor. There was quite a great deal of mistreatment. Whenever anyone did anything, they took advantage of it to give you a beating. [...] Or they’d put you in the dungeon, a cell of one by twenty meters, for eight days, with nothing but bread and water; all that is to say, it was a site of punishment. [...] in a physical sense it was much

¹⁵⁶ “Eh, entonces de ahí ya no... me mandaron a Fort de Collioure, que ha sido el lugar de máximo castigo; sí, yo siempre he tenido la suerte de ir de hotel de cinco estrellas en hotel de cinco estrellas ¿verdad?” Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Soo, Scott, *The Routes to Exile: France and the Spanish Civil War Refugees, 1939-2009* (Manchester UP, 2013), p. 59. Of course, Le Vernet would later become one of the main concentration camps of the Vichy regime, when it was used to intern Jews and other “enemy aliens” awaiting deportation.

better [than the camps], but it was like being in prison. [...] And they gave us punishments, beatings... organized beatings, you see?; and we had to march in military formation. And always working, with very little food, always making us work...¹⁵⁸

The conditions prevailing at Fort Collioure, then, were in some ways the direct obverse of those in the main camps: in place of the “chaos” of the camps, here was strictly regimented order; in place of the empty expanse of sand, devoid of any shelter, here were walls, locked doors, “dungeons”; and in place of the enforced idleness, forced labor.

The contrast is a crucially important one, because it shows that, despite the general state of disorganization and neglect which *still* prevailed in the concentration camps at this time (April-May 1939), the French state *was* capable of creating well-constructed, more or less adequately-provisioned camps—it was only that these resources and energies were always directed towards constructing institutions of repression and control, like Fort Collioure or (as will be examined soon) Le Vernet, and almost never towards the improvement of the still-dismal living conditions of most of the interned refugees. It was easy enough for representatives of the French state to claim that they did not have the resources or organizational capacity to provide shelters, jobs, or other means of support to the hundreds of thousands of refugees still interned near the border; and yet this did not prevent them from launching a wide-scale effort to

¹⁵⁸ “En Fort de Collioure, aquello sí era cosa organizada. [...] era un cárcel, allí dormíamos en catres... es decir, no eran catres, había, eh, colchonetas de paja... en el suelo [...] La comida era mala pero no tan mala como en los campos, era mejor, a pesar de que era un lugar de autocastigo. Pero ahí estábamos formados militarmente, desfilando militarmente, y trabajando, en trabajos forzados. [...] Pues en trabajos básicamente inútiles, pero, eh, que nos hacían trabajar. [...] Y nos hacían trabajar ochos, diez hoas diarias, a pico y pala, trabajos forzados. Eh, muy, muchos maltratos. Cuando uno... cualquiera, aprovecha la ocasión pa’ pegarle una paliza.” “Por cualquier cosa.” “Por cualquier cosa. Pa’ meterlo en una calabozo de eso, un calabazo de un metro por uno veinte ¿no?, durante ocho días, eh, a pan y agua ¿verdad?; eh es decir, ahí era un lugar de castigo, de autocastigo.” [...] en sentido físico era mucho mejor, pero era como estar en una cárcel. [...] Y de castigos, y pegaban palizas, y... eh, pero palizas organizadas ¿no?; y desfilando militarmente. Y trabajando, con una alimentación muy baja, haciendo trabajar...” Ibid.

investigate the political backgrounds of each of these refugees, and taking measures to control those deemed most “dangerous,” if need be, by sending them to places like Fort Collioure.

Martinez Roca’s account is also notable for its emphasis on forced labor, which, as we have seen, was in sharp contrast to the conditions of enforced idleness at most of the other camps. But, at the same time, the contrast is partly superficial—because, as Martinez Roca points out, this forced labor (at least at this point in time) was *purposefully* useless, aimed not any kind of production but rather the simple aim of discipline and repression. That is to say, the purpose of this forced labor—as with the enforced idleness at the other camps—was above all to emphasize the *isolation* of the refugees from the rest of French society. This strategy created problems for the French state later on, in September 1939, when they started to recruit for the war effort among the ranks of the Spanish refugees, including those who were interned at the Fort Collioure prison. Martinez Roca describes this recruitment effort at Fort Collioure as follows:

They called us out to the courtyard and the captain of the gendarmerie gave us a grand speech about Fran... about liberty, about the fight against fascism, that’s to say, he talked just like us, and ended by asking us to enlist in the French foreign legion. And then he waited for volunteers to step forward. Of course, not a single person stepped forward.¹⁵⁹

He then recounts how the internees were questioned one-by-one and, when they still refused to enlist, were given beatings. In the end, only four or five prisoners out of about a hundred ended up enlisting. After this, there were attempts to recruit for the French army itself, but, as before, none of the internees voluntarily enlisted. In response to this attitude of non-compliance,

¹⁵⁹ “nos llamaron al, al patio y el comandante de la gendarmería nos hizo un gran discurso sobre la Fran... sobre la libertad, sobre la lucha contra el fascismo, vamos, igual que nosotros, ya hablaba como nosotros, para acabar pidiéndonos que nos alistásemos en la legión extranjera... francesa ¿verdad?, y claro, y que... todo... después de hacer esto el hombre esperaba que el que est... los voluntarios un paso adelante. Claro, no hubo ni un solo paso adelante.” Ibid.

Martinez Roca explains, “there was harsh repression, people sent to the dungeon, redoubled beatings, workload doubled, food cut in half, etc.”¹⁶⁰

Soon after this, the prison at Fort Collioure was closed so that the fort could be used to train French troops, and so Martinez Roca, along with many other internees, was transferred to the “punishment camp” of Vernet d’Ariège. As noted above, this camp was first constructed to intern Spanish anarchist refugees, and at the outbreak of the Second World War it was expanded under the Daladier government to intern various categories of “enemy aliens.” Le Vernet, along with Fort Collioure, was one of the two main “punishment camps” for Spanish internees; but its model of repression and control differed significantly from that of Fort Collioure. Martinez Roca describes some of those differences as follows:

It was a punishment camp, too, in which prisoners were disciplined [...] but we were given some more freedom there, more than at Collioure. Because, even though we were in conditions, in a physical place, that was much worse than in Collioure, we at least didn’t have to face the permanent coercion, or the forced labor, none of those things.¹⁶¹

He notes that, by the time he arrived at Le Vernet, in the fall of 1939, most of the internees were either former members of the International Brigades (of various nationalities), foreign residents of France (most of whom, he notes, had been living in the country “legally”), or Spanish refugees. He calls it a “camp of the French Minister of the Interior,” which was used to intern people who were effectively “expelled” from the country—“expulsé inexpulsable,” he says, is the term they used, meaning something like “undeportable deportee.” That is to say, Le Vernet—like all of the concentration camps for Spanish refugees—was a product of that basic

¹⁶⁰ “después de aquello vino una represión muy fuerte, gente al calabozo, palizas redobladas ¿verdad?” Ibid.

¹⁶¹ “Era un campo de castigo también, en el cual llevaban disciplina, donde no se trabajaba por eso, eh, donde, eh estaba aquello bastante mal, pero donde ya estábamos en más libertad, mejor que el Collioure. Porque, eh, aunque estábamos en condiciones, en un lugar físico, más malas que en Collioure, pues no teníamos las coacción permanente, ni el trabajo forzado, ni estas cosas ¿verdad?” Ibid.

contradiction in French policy which we have examined earlier: between the perceived need to exclude “undesirable foreigners” from French political life, on the one hand; and, on the other, the desire to maintain at least some kind of apparent commitment to French traditions of humanitarianism and asylum. Therefore, concentration camps like Le Vernet provided a mode of what we might call “internal deportation”—to provide a means of separating these “undesirables” from the rest of French society, yet without going so far as to give up the right to asylum entirely.

However, this reluctant commitment to “asylum” certainly did not prevent the French government from nonetheless trying to forcibly repatriate large numbers of Spanish refugees. In a letter to the prefects dated 14 February 1939, the Minister of the Interior wrote: “I remind you of the importance I attach to the very rapid repatriation of these Spaniards [...] Please take all necessary measures to ensure that this evacuation takes place through collective departures, at an accelerated rhythm.”¹⁶² He links this repatriation effort to the instructions that he had given to the Prefects and Prefect of Police earlier that same week, on 10 February 1939, about surveillance measures to be taken against Spanish refugees. The entire text of this short circular is as follows:

The considerable number of refugees from Spain that our country has been obliged to admit onto its soil makes it indispensable for us to enact extremely severe surveillance measures on these foreigners. Therefore, I request that you give very rigorous instructions to all the police forces under your authority for this surveillance to be carried out without the least failing, and for it to be brought to bear, notably, on all milieus susceptible to maintain relations with dubious foreign elements.¹⁶³

¹⁶² “Je vous rappelle l’intérêt que j’attache au repatriement très rapide de ces espagnols et des instructions, qu’à cet effet, je vous ai communiquées par ma Circulaire du 10 Février 1938. Vous voudrez bien prendre toutes mesures pour cette évacuation ai lieu par départs collectifs, à un rythme accéléré.” Letter from the Minister of the Interior to the Governor-General of Algeria, the Prefect of the Police, and the Prefects. 14 February 1939.

¹⁶³ “Le nombre considérable de réfugiés provenant d’Espagne que notre Pays a été dans la nécessité d’admettre sur son sol rend indispensable le renforcement extrêmement sévère de la surveillance des étrangers. Je vous prie, en conséquence, de bien vouloir donner des instructions très rigoureuses à tous les services de police placés sous votre autorité, pour que cette surveillance s’exerce sans la moindre

That is to say, from the very beginning, the forced repatriation campaign was linked to the efforts of the French state to impose surveillance measures on the Spanish refugees. The nature of this link is not stated explicitly in either of these two letters from the Minister of the Interior, but the implication is clear enough—forced repatriation was to be used as the ultimate mode of punishment against refugees whose political activities rendered them too “dangerous” to stay in France.

This is reflected in the way in which repatriations were carried out over the course of 1939. As Scott Soo notes, although the Minister of the Interior never explicitly called for the use of force in these repatriation efforts, his instructions—for instance, his order quoted above that “all necessary measures” should be taken to ensure the “very rapid repatriation” of refugees—often implicitly suggested that coercion could and should be used when necessary.¹⁶⁴ Soo points out that the vagueness of these directions made it possible for local authorities to intercede on the behalf of internees in order to prevent forced repatriations;¹⁶⁵ but the flip side of this, I would argue, is that the amount of discretion given to local officials made it possible for forcible repatriations to be used selectively against those who had already been labeled as “suspect” through the surveillance measures taken against them. The threat of repatriation could therefore serve as a means of disciplining even those refugees who, like Martinez Roca, were already being subjected to the most severe forms of internment and punishment that the French state

défaillance, et pour qu'elle porte, notamment, sur tous les milieux susceptible d'entretenir des relations avec les éléments étrangers douteux.” Letter from the Minister of the Interior to the Prefect of Police and to the Prefects, in communication with the Governor-General of Algeria, 10 February 1939. Archives Nationales, F/7/15172.”

¹⁶⁴ Letter from the Minister of the Interior to the Governor-General of Algeria, the Prefect of the Police, and the Prefects. 14 February 1939. Archives Nationales (Pierrefitte-sur-Seine), F/7/15172 See Soo, *The Routes to Exile*, 77.

¹⁶⁵ Soo, *The Routes to Exile*, 79.

could organize. For instance, when the war broke out in September 1939 and the French state began to recruit for the Foreign Legion among the ranks of the Spanish refugees (as we saw above in Martinez Roca's account), the threat of forced repatriation was used as a means of enforcing compliance among internees who otherwise resisted these recruitment efforts.¹⁶⁶

And yet, despite the efforts of the French state to rigorously carry out a policy of mass repatriation, in this early period it was still possible for refugees to evade or openly resist these efforts. For instance, Soo recounts an incident in October 1939 in which a train transporting ninety-five Spanish refugees (mostly women and children) destined to return to Spain was halted through the actions of the refugees—as the train slowed to a stop at a station, passengers in one carriage threw their luggage onto the platform, jumped off the train, and refused to continue the journey to Spain. The women, claiming that they had been deceived in undergoing the journey in the first place, negotiated with French officials until they agreed to return all ninety-five refugees to their refuge in the interior.¹⁶⁷ Tactics like these were not always successful, however, especially as time went on: in December, a group of refugees again attempted to halt a train bringing them to the Spanish border, but they managed only to delay the train for a short period of time because the French authorities quickly mobilized twenty gendarmes, officers, and soldiers to force the refugees to get back on board.¹⁶⁸

That being said, however, the fact that it was still possible, in many instances, for refugees to successfully push back against the coercive repatriation policy, through these kinds of acts of collective resistance, demonstrates once again the imperfect nature of the French state's control over the refugees. Of course, the system of concentration camps could be quite

¹⁶⁶ Soo, *The Routes to Exile*, 78.

¹⁶⁷ Soo, *The Routes to Exile*, 78.

¹⁶⁸ Soo, *The Routes to Exile*, 78.

repressive when it came to dealing with those refugees who, like Martinez Roca, were deemed particularly dangerous due to their political activities—special “punishment” sections like those set up within the larger camps of Barcarès and Saint-Cyprien, or specialized “punishment camps” like the prison at Fort Collioure or the camp at Le Vernet, were used to quarantine these “suspect foreigners” not just from the wider French population but also from the general population of Spanish refugees, with the aim of depoliticizing the other refugees and rendering them less likely to resist the measures of control enacted by the French state. But, as we will see in the next chapter, this aim was not entirely achieved, as the camps continued to serve as sites for political organizing in spite of official French efforts to clamp down on this activity. The relatively ad hoc nature of French policies regarding the refugees in this early period not only enabled refugees to evade and resist the various measures of control and repression that the state sought to enact—it also opened up spaces, within the camps themselves, for new forms of self-organization, for the creation of new forms of community out of the wreckage of defeat and exile. It is this aspect of life in the concentration camps—the obverse side of the repressive aspect which we have examined here—that we will turn to in our final chapter.



Robert Capa: “three men around cauldron at a concentration camp for Spanish refugees, Argelès-sur-Mer, France,” 1939.



Robert Capa: “Woman helps a child inside a concentration camp for Spanish refugees, Argelès-sur-Mer, France,” 1939.

Chapter 4: To Live Free in Prison

“City of defeat. Your history finds no stone on which to inscribe itself.” This is how Agustí Bartra addresses the camp of Argelès-sur-Mer in the opening chapter of *Cristo de 200.000 brazos*.¹⁶⁹ This description—“city of defeat”—becomes an almost incessant refrain in Bartra’s book, perhaps because the purely negative quality of that term “defeat” captured something of the character of the camps themselves, which seemed defined above all by what they lacked. As we examined in earlier chapters, the camps were initially experienced, above all, as sites of absence, of “nothingness”—the culmination of a process of stripping-away of past identities which had begun with the retreat from Catalonia and had become even more acute at the moment of crossing the Spanish-French border. But the term “city of defeat” also contains a certain ambiguity, in that the word “city” implies something that we ordinarily would not associate with a concentration camp—a certain level of self-organization among the internees, perhaps, and above all, a way of life which is not characterized purely by discipline and repression. Indeed, this was one of the central paradoxes of these camps: the same feature which made life in them so difficult—their “improvisation,” their lack of organization—was also what enabled the internees to start re-constituting the various bonds of solidarity and of belonging which had been damaged (though not destroyed) through the process of defeat as well as by their treatment by the French state, to a much greater degree than would have been possible in a more regimented camp.

¹⁶⁹ “Ciudad de derrota. Su historia no encuentra piedra donde grabarse.” Bartra, *Cristo de 200.000 brazos*, p. 8.

The fact that “the French organized very little”¹⁷⁰ when it came to providing basic necessities, of course, constituted a certain form of repression in its own right, since the terrible living conditions which resulted from this neglect often compelled internees either to return to Nationalist Spain or, later on, to enlist in work companies or in the Foreign Legion. But, as we noted in the previous chapter, the flip side of this lack of organization was also a relative lack of direct repression—a factor that made many of the refugees prefer this early, “improvised” period of internment, in spite of all its material difficulties, to the more regimented, “disciplined” period that would follow. As Ricardo Mestre Ventura had put it: “a well-organized concentration camp is a camp that grates on you [...] Here [in Argelès] we have more liberty.”¹⁷¹ Celso Amieva, in his poem “De Argelès al Barcarès,” captures something of the same sentiment when he writes, on the subject of his transfer, in May 1939, from the first camp to the other:

Argelès is mass. / Argelès is chaos. [...] A great quantity / in which unity is lost / to live free in prison / Iberian and anarchically. / Barcarès is the “standard” man / in the “standard” barrack / in the “standard” island / with a “standard” ration / and “standard” discipline. / It’s a pigeonhole of sand / in which to get bored and give up hope / geometrically.¹⁷²

¹⁷⁰ “Los franceses organizaron muy poco, muy poco.” Interview with Manuel Martínez Roca (PHO/10/32). “Proyecto de historia oral: Refugiados españoles en México.” Collection in Centro Documental de la Memoria Histórica (Salamanca), 1978/1990. See also the interview with Antonio Ordovas (PHO/10/51), in which he makes essentially the same claim: “Esta primera parte, los franceses intervienen muy poco en la organización del campo.” [“In this first period, the French intervened very little in the organization of the camp.”]

¹⁷¹ “Digo: ‘Prefiero quedarme aquí, porque un campo de concentración bien organizado es un, un campo que, que te amuelan—además era verdad—te amuelan más a tí. ‘Allí tenemos más libertad.’” Interview with Ricardo Mestre Ventura (PHO/10/99). “Proyecto de historia oral: Refugiados españoles en México.” Collection in Centro Documental de la Memoria Histórica (Salamanca), 1978/1990.

¹⁷² “Argelès era masa. / Argelès era caos. / Bosque que impedía ver los árboles. / Cantidad / En donde la Unidad se perdía / para vivir libre en prisión / ibérica y anárquicamente. / Barcarès es el hombre ‘standard’ / en la barraca ‘standard’ / del islote ‘standard’ / con ración ‘standard’ / y disciplina ‘standard’ . / Es un casillero de arena / para aburrirse y desesperarse / geoméricamente. (Mayo 1939)” Amieva, *La almohada de arena*, “De Argelès al Barcarès.” As noted earlier, Barcarès was by far the smallest as well as the most “organized” of the three main camps of this early period of winter-spring 1939 (it was the only one, for instance, which actually had barracks, although these were still inadequate). However, the sharp contrast which Amieva draws here might be due not simply to the differences between Argelès and Barcarès, but also to the differences between the earlier and later periods of 1939. Already, by May 1939,

In short, then, the lack of organization which characterized the early camps enabled the internees to step in and, so as far as possible, organize their own conditions of life—not only, on the most basic level, to ensure their own survival, but also to find ways, as Amieva had put it, of “living free in prison.” This aspect of the early concentration camps had even led the anarchist Abel Paz, in *Entre la niebla*, to suggest ironically: “the communitarian experience of the French concentration camps will provide anthropologists with data to study societies without authority and without a state,” before concluding that “however, they might prefer to look for traces in other places less troubled by capitalist society.”¹⁷³

Leaving aside the irony in Abel Paz’s observation, it actually does capture one of the most surprising and paradoxical characteristics of the early camps. On the one hand, *any* kind of concentration camp is a product of the utmost exercise of state authority and repression—it could not exist in the first place were it not for the state’s ability to exert near-total control over people’s freedom of movement and their conditions of life. But on the other hand, in the fairly unique case of the French concentration camps of 1939, and especially in the first few months of their existence, the primary mode through which this repression took place was, in fact, through neglect—a situation which actually created the conditions for internees to set up a kind of improvised microcosm of society, one which conformed, in some respects, to the egalitarian and communitarian ideals that many of these ex-militiamen shared. The extent of this, of course, should not be over-emphasized—the constraints on the internees’ actions, both through the

the process of increasing “organization,” and along with it regimentation and “discipline,” was proceeding, to varying degrees, in all of the camps.

¹⁷³ “la experiencia comunitaria de los campos de concentración franceses suministra a los antropólogos datos para estudiar sociedades sin autoridad ni Estado, pero ellos prefieren buscar rastros en otros lugares menos molestos para la sociedad capitalista...” Paz, Abel, *Entre la niebla*, quoted in Simón, *La escritura de las alambradas*, p. 203.

constant presence of the forces of the French state, and through the various forms of material deprivation which were imposed on them, were far too great. Nevertheless, however, these improvised attempts to not only survive, but also to somehow “live free” within the concentration camps, served as the first, crucial stage of a long process in which the refugees sought to reconstruct a sense of collective identity following the trauma of defeat and exile.

One of the many constraints on this process, however, was a total prohibition of anything that the French authorities deemed to be a “political activity.” This prohibition was a source of considerable resentment among the highly-politicized internees, as Ferrer recounts:

Over the loudspeaker they reiterated the order of the French authorities, prohibiting all kinds of political propaganda, written and oral. We all protested against this inquisitorial action taken against men who had fought for liberty and who were in a country with a tradition of love for liberty. The order was not followed, and various political groups met up and circulated their manifestos.¹⁷⁴

As Ferrer suggests here, the French authorities at this time were scarcely in any position to ensure strict compliance with this prohibition, and consequently various forms of political organization began to take place in the camps almost immediately. As Manuel Martinez Roca recalls, referring to the earliest days of the camp at Barcarès: “We began our life there and in particular we started up a very active political life, very active, at our level, at the level of [...] the JSU [Unified Socialist Youth] and of the PSUC [Unified Socialist Party of Catalonia] and of the Communist Party, yes? [...] A great amount of political activity, we organized that immediately.”¹⁷⁵

¹⁷⁴ “Por el altavoz se nos reitera la orden del mando francés, prohibiendo toda clase de propaganda política, escrita y oral. Todos protestamos por la inquisitorial medida contra unos hombres que han luchado por la libertad y están en un país con tradición de amor a la libertad. La orden no se cumple y los distintos grupos políticos se reúnen y circulan sus manifestos.” Ferrer, *Entre alambradas*, p. 71.

¹⁷⁵ “ahí empezamos nuestra vida y empezó precisamente la vida política activísima, muy activa, a nivel nuestro, a nivel de [...] los JSU y del PSUC y del Partido Comunista ¿verdad? [...] Una gran actividad política, nos organizamos inmediatamente.” Interview with Manuel Martinez Roca (PHO/10/32).

In fact, it was impossible to make a firm distinction between “political” and “non-political” activities in the camps, something which made it difficult for the French authorities to crack down on political activity as they had intended to do. Many internees managed to find a way around the prohibition by organizing cultural, social, and educational activities—ranging from classes teaching French or basic literacy, to philosophy lectures, poetry recitals, theater performances, and sports teams¹⁷⁶—which did not necessarily seem explicitly “political” but which in fact served the quite crucial and political function of raising the morale of the internees and therefore enabling them to more effectively protest against the conditions of the camps. Moreover, more explicitly political activity arose quite naturally from the initial process of trying to ameliorate conditions in the camps, as the comments of Antonio Ordovas, responding to an interviewer’s question about “political propaganda,” suggest: “Immediately we formed organizations, of course [...] and we formed a committee that was dedicated to putting on festivals, that was dedicated to improving the sanitary situation as much as possible, the food situation as much as possible.”¹⁷⁷

As Ordovas points out here, political organizing in the camps were often closely linked not only to attempts to improve the dismal living conditions of the camps but, equally, to the various forms of commemorative activity which started up in the camps almost immediately.

“Proyecto de historia oral: Refugiados españoles en México.” Collection in Centro Documental de la Memoria Histórica (Salamanca), 1978/1990.

¹⁷⁶ See for example Ferrer, *Entre alambradas*, p. 23; or the interview with Adrian Olmedilla (PHO/10/ESP 25), a former teacher who organized a “cultural barrack” at Barcarès and taught lessons on basic literacy.

¹⁷⁷ “Inmediatamente nos constituimos en organizaciones, esto es evidente y organizamos nuestra vida orgánica inmediatamente y constituimos en el campo, en el trozo de campo que nosotros estábamos, pues, un comité que se dedicó a hacer festivales, que se dedicó a mejorar la cosa sanitaria en lo posible, la cosa alimenticia en lo posible.” Interview with Antonio Ordovas (PHO/10/51). “Proyecto de historia oral: Refugiados españoles en México.” Collection in Centro Documental de la Memoria Histórica (Salamanca), 1978/1990.

Eulalio Ferrer, for instance, decides to begin writing his concentration camp diary on April 14, the eighth anniversary of the founding of the Spanish Republic, and spends much of this first entry describing the strange festival atmosphere—at once mournful and optimistic—that briefly overtakes the camp at Argelès-sur-Mer. Even in this moment of utter defeat, the internees used this anniversary to try to keep their hope for future victory alive, as Ferrer relates: “When it seems as though hope has been defeated in personal confessions, it resurges impulsively in collective manifestations. As if this festival were necessary not only for today, but for all the past days and for all the days which are still to come. The ‘long live the Republic!’ is also a ‘long live life!’”¹⁷⁸ Of course, even on this anniversary, it is impossible for Ferrer and the other internees to keep from thinking about the terrible defeat that has just destroyed not only the Spanish Republic, but also the various revolutionary movements in Spain, as Ferrer writes later on in this same entry: “From various angles they lament the tragic frustration of an experience that ought to have given new life to Spain. What pains them the most is the defeat of a working-class movement which took so many years to develop and which proved so decisive on the 14th of April and the 19th of June.”¹⁷⁹ But he nonetheless ends this entry with an affirmation of a new sense of collective identity—one which was not only based on a shared set of ideals but which, moreover, had been forged through the very process of internment: “Today’s celebrations have given me a profound awareness of the relationship of brotherhood in which we have been

¹⁷⁸ “Cuando la esperanza parecía derrotada en la confesión personal, resurge impetuosa en esta manifestación colectiva. Como si la fiesta fuese necesaria no sólo por el día, sino por los días pasados y por los días que nos esperan. El ¡viva la República! es también un ¡viva la vida!” Ferrer, *Entre alambradas*, p. 22.

¹⁷⁹ “Desde ángulos distintos lamentan la frustración trágica de una experiencia que debió haber dado una nueva vida a España. Lo que más les duele es la pérdida de un movimiento obrero que tantos años tardó en formarse y que tan decisivo fue el 14 de abril y el 19 de junio.” Ferrer, *Entre alambradas*, p. 22.

baptized in this confinement. Brotherhood in the love of liberty, in the love of social justice. It is a love which triumphs over defeat and which is worth as much as life itself.”¹⁸⁰

Ferrer’s remarks on the celebrations of April 14—which will later be re-iterated through his descriptions of similar commemorative activities on May Day, Bastille Day, and the anniversary of the July 19 workers’ uprising in Spain—point to the way in which these desolate beaches of the Roussillon provided unexpectedly fertile ground for the formation of new forms of solidarity and collective identity during these early months of the “Exile of 1939.” In a certain sense, this process began as a simple attempt at survival, a way to somehow push back against the hegemonic power of the ascendant Franco regime and of the Daladier government which had each, in their own ways, relegated the refugees to that “perilous territory of not-belonging” which Said writes about in “Reflections on Exile.”¹⁸¹ As Said points out, this very process of trying to survive in the hostile setting of exile almost necessarily leads towards an attempt to re-constitute new forms of community:

Exile, unlike nationalism, is fundamentally a discontinuous state of being. Exiles are cut off from their roots, their land, their past. [...] Exiles feel, therefore, an urgent need to reconstitute their broken lives, usually by choosing to see themselves as part of a triumphant ideology or a restored people. The crucial thing is that a state of exile free from this triumphant ideology—designed to reassemble an exile’s broken history into a new whole—is virtually unbearable and virtually impossible in today’s world.¹⁸²

“To reassemble a broken history into a new whole”—this, in a sense, was precisely what the “exiles of 1939” would spend much of the next few decades trying to do, from France, from Mexico, from Argentina, from countless other countries across Latin America and Europe, and

¹⁸⁰ “el día de hoy me ha dado profunda conciencia del parentesco de hermandad con el que nos ha bautizado este confinamiento. La hermandad en el amor a la libertad, en el amor a la justicia social. Es un amor que venca a las derrotas y vale tanto como la vida misma.” Ferrer, *Entre alambradas*, p. 23.

¹⁸¹ Said, *Reflections on Exile and other Essays* (Harvard UP, 2002), p. 140.

¹⁸² *Ibid*, p. 141.

oftentimes even within Spain itself; and, as Francie Cate-Arries has argued,¹⁸³ the concentration camps of 1939, through which nearly all of these exiles passed, served not only as the initial site on which this “new national identity” would take shape, but also provided it with its most enduring image.

But to call this a “national identity” would, perhaps, be misleadingly narrow; for the majority of internees in 1939, these ties of solidarity and belonging extended to groups either much smaller or much more wide-ranging than that represented by the borders of a national community. The “nation of four” represented by the group of friends who share a *chabola* in Bartra’s *Cristo de 200.000 brazos*—with its central message that solidarity in captivity is better than freedom in isolation¹⁸⁴—suggests one such model of community. This same ideal of solidarity in the face of the utmost conditions of privation and oppression can be found in José María Muría’s remark, as he recounts how his fellow-soldiers crossed the Pyrenees: “I remember that one of my companions didn’t have a blanket, he didn’t know how to warm himself, and was dying of the cold—and so with my blanket I covered up the two of us. One of those acts of solidarity and of help that arose during the war and which had a power which is completely unknown to those who haven’t lived through moments like that, through circumstances like that.”¹⁸⁵ The same impulse is at work in Manuel Martínez Roca’s explanation of why he chose not to try to escape from the camp at Barcarès:

¹⁸³ Cate-Arries, Francie, *Spanish Culture Behind Barbed Wire: Memory and Representation of the French Concentration Camps, 1939-1945* (Bucknell University Press, 2004), pp. 23-24.

¹⁸⁴ For instance, after one of the friends unsuccessfully tries to escape, the narrator reflects: “he had wanted to be defeated because he could not escape alone [...] Yes, liberty, like love, can only exist as a shared fortune.” [“había deseado ser vencido porque no podía huir solo. [...] Sí, la libertad, como el amor, sólo podía existir como una riqueza compartida.”] Bartra, *Cristo de 200.000 brazos*, p. 78.

¹⁸⁵ “Recuerdo que uno de mis compañeros no traía manta, no sabía cómo abrigarse, muerto de frío: y con mi manta nos abrigamos los dos. Uno de los actos de solidaridad y de ayuda que ya he explicado antes y que se viven en la guerra y que tienen una fuerza completamente desconocida por los que no han vivido

[Martinez Roca:] those of us who had a position in one of the political organizations had instructions not to leave the camp—but rather to stay in the camp together with the mass of internees, with our soldiers, with our people.

[Interviewer:] To help them?

[Martinez Roca:] To help them, to maintain morale as much as possible... that is to say, we couldn't, we didn't have the moral right to desert, to search for our own individual solution.¹⁸⁶

Alongside this emphasis on small-scale acts of solidarity among the internees was also a conception of a broader community to which the refugees belonged, one which transcended the boundaries of the nation-state—this is to be found, for instance, in the recognition of the shared interests which could, potentially, unite the largely working-class Spanish refugees with the workers of France, in spite of all the barriers that had been erected between the two groups. During the May Day celebrations in Argelès-sur-Mer, for instance, Ferrer describes a placard which proclaimed: “On this first of May of 1939 the Spanish refugees salute the French proletariat.”¹⁸⁷ In a similar vein, Molins i Fàbrega chose to end his *Campos de concentración, 1939-194...* by re-iterating that his anger is not directed towards the whole of France, but rather only towards a particular class within French society, and emphasizing that between the refugees and the “true France” there is considerable potential for solidarity:

The fraternity of struggle creates the basis for the future happy collaboration between the two peoples. We do not attack this true France nor do we hold anything against it. It is also ours—even more so after so much of our own blood has been shed on its soil by victims of the same enemy that betrayed and sold the French people. We detest and we

estos momentos, estas circunstancias.” Interview with José María Muría (PHO/10/40). “Proyecto de historia oral:Refugiados españoles en México.” Collection in Centro Documental de la Memoria Histórica (Salamanca), 1978/1990.

¹⁸⁶ “Además nosotros estábamos, eh, los que tenían la posición que yo y... la cosa política que yo, teníamos instrucciones de no irnos al campo. Sino de estar en el campo junto con la masa, y con nuestros soldados, con nuestro gente.” “¿Para apoyarles?” “Para apoyarles, para poder mantener la moral en lo posible, para... es decir, que no podíamos, no teníamos derecho moral a desertar, a buscar nuestra solución individual.” Interview with Manuel Martínez Roca (PHO/10/32). “Proyecto de historia oral: Refugiados españoles en México.” Collection in Centro Documental de la Memoria Histórica (Salamanca), 1978/1990.

¹⁸⁷ “En el 1 de Mayo de 1939 los refugiados españoles saludamos al proletariado francés.” Ferrer, *Entre alambradas*, p. 37.

condemn the France that tortured and humiliated our brothers. For the new France that surges forth from the ashes of defeat, and with so much heroism washes away the sins that others committed in its name, we could not feel more love and admiration.¹⁸⁸

There is perhaps no better symbol for this “love and admiration” for the French people who had, like them, been “betrayed and sold” by the “powerful of this earth,” than the refugees’ adoption of *La Marseillaise* as a kind of anthem of their own struggle. As Ferrer relates:

We were very moved by the *Marseillaise*, that most beautiful of hymns. We sang its verses as if it were our own anthem. In our childhood we had alternated it with the *Internationale* and *Hijos del pueblo*: the trio of songs of social emancipation. Anyone who had looked at those ragged, shirtless men that we were would have been reminded of those ragged, shirtless men of the French Revolution. Next to the full-dress uniforms of our guards, the spectacle that we offered must have been impressive.¹⁸⁹

The *Marseillaise* also appears in the closing scene of Max Aub’s *Campo francés*, the final installment of his novel cycle about the Spanish Civil War, set mainly in the concentration camp of Le Vernet at the outbreak of the Second World War. It follows immediately after the climactic scene of the novel, when the protagonist is killed by a French guard during a botched escape attempt, leading his wife to start up a revolt in the women’s section of the camp, demanding a stop to the impending deportations of internees to work camps in Algeria. As the male internees join in and confront the guards, the French authorities, scrambling to restore order, announce the suspension of the deportations, and soon the brief prisoners’ revolt is put to an end. At this point, one of the characters, a Spanish Communist and former Republican soldier, who had been injured in the altercation with the guards, starts up a rendition of *La Marseillaise*: “Villanueva starts to sing *La Marseillaise* in a broken voice. [...] Everyone—men, women, lined up or in

¹⁸⁸ Molins i Fàbrega, *Campos de concentración, 1939-194...*, p. 155.

¹⁸⁹ “Nos emociona *La marsellesa*, el más bello de los himnos. Cantamos sus estrofas como si fuera nuestro propio himno. En nuestra infancia la hemos alternado con *La internacional* y con *Hijos del pueblo*: el trío de los cantos de la emancipación social. Quien viera a estos descamisados, que somos nosotros, evocaría a los descamisados de la revolución francesa. Frente a los uniformes de gala de nuestros cuidadores, el espectáculo que ofrecemos debe ser impresionante.” Ferrer, *Entre alambradas*, p. 82.

groups—little by little, joins in with the song, the unharmed and the wounded alike. A slow, tragic *Marseillaise*. [...] The face of the mobile guard, with tears in his eyes. *La Marseillaise*.”¹⁹⁰

Coming at the end of this novel which had moved from the retreat from Catalonia through to the concentration camps of early 1939, the “Débâcle” of 1940, and finally the establishment of the Vichy regime, this “slow, tragic” rendition of the *Marseillaise*—which, briefly, manages to erode even the barrier between prisoners and guards—captures a sense of the dual tragedy which has overtaken both Spain and France. This ending is at once bitterly ironic and yet, at the same time, strangely moving—a moment which marks the continuation of a struggle that has now extended beyond Spain to include France and all of Europe as well. If, as Suárez had written at the end of *España comienza en los Pirineos*, “the misfortune of Spain was the beginning of the misfortune of France,”¹⁹¹ then so, too, the liberation of one of these peoples might mean the beginning of the liberation of the other. This, at least, was the hope which sustained many of these refugees throughout the dark years of World War II and of the early Franco regime, as they built fortifications on the French-German border, enlisted in the French army, faced internment in the concentration camps of Vichy, toiled in the stone quarries of Mauthausen or on the tracks of the Trans-Saharan railway, or joined the French resistance. In many ways it was a hope that, like so many others, would end up betrayed, unfulfilled. But at the same time it was impossible to live without it.¹⁹²

¹⁹⁰ “Villanueva empieza a cantar *La Marsellesa* con voz desgarrada. [...] Todos—hombres, mujeres, alineados o formando grupos—poco a poco, se van sumando al canto, sanos y heridos. Una *Marsellesa* lenta, trágica. [...] La cara del guardia móvil, en cuyos ojos asoman lágrimas. / *La Marsellesa*.” Aub, *Campo francés*, p. 478-479

¹⁹¹ “la desgracia de España era el principio de la desgracia de Francia.” Suárez, *España comienza en los Pirineos*, p. 256.

¹⁹² As Ferrer had put it, early on in his concentration camp diary: “Renunciar a la esperanza, me digo, sería la ruina mayor. Pero además yo no sé vivir sin esperanza. Ni creo que valdría la pena vivir con la esperanza castrada.” [“To give up hope, I said to myself, would be the worst disaster. But, in any case, I

Conclusion

When the protagonist of Max Aub's *Campo francés* is arrested by the French authorities at the outbreak of war with Germany, he asks the police in desperation: "But who are we waging war against? Against the fascists? If so, then why are we arresting the anti-fascists?"¹⁹³ Julio Hoffman's remark here captures a central paradox noted by nearly all of the former internees of the camps of 1939: the same country which claimed to be fighting against Nazi Germany in the name of the ideals of democracy and human rights was, at the same time, enacting repressive measures against its own "undesirable" population—measures which were not so dissimilar, in many respects, from the concentration camps set up by fascist regimes.

This paradox, as we have seen, was a direct consequence of the fissures which ran through French society in the late 1930s. On the one hand, French officials were unwilling to completely give up the image of French as a humanitarian "nation of asylum," and yet at the same time sought to find ways to restrict immigration in a period of economic anxieties and growing xenophobia. This contradiction was particularly acute in the case of the Spanish refugees, whose defeated cause was associated both with the defense of republican ideals and with the prospect of social revolution—the latter of which still haunted the political imaginary of a substantial segment of the French middle and upper classes, in the wake of a period of substantial labor militancy and class conflict within France itself.

The creation of the concentration camps in January-February 1939 can be traced back directly to French officials' attempts to manage these contradictory pressures. On the one hand, forcibly repatriating large numbers of Spanish refugees to a Nationalist regime which sought to

don't know how to live without hope. I don't think that it would be worth it to live with hope cut off."] *Entre alambradas*, p. 38.

¹⁹³ "Pero, ¿contra quién hace la guerra? ¿Contra los fascistas? Entonces, ¿por qué detienen a los antifascistas?" Aub, *Campo francés*, p. 222.

imprison or execute them would have marked too sharp a break with France's self-image as a "humanitarian" nation; but at the same time, there was clearly a perceived need on the part of French officials to isolate the "dangerous" refugees from the rest of the French nation, which rendered the prospect of their permanent residence within the country politically impossible. Under these circumstances, an unprecedented policy of mass internment paradoxically presented itself as the only possible "humanitarian" solution to French authorities.

The concentration camps, then, began as an improvised response to this set of contradictory circumstances which French officials confronted—not so much as an intentional act of repression against political refugees. However, as time went on, the camps became increasingly regimented, and their function morphed increasingly into that of a repressive apparatus designed to "discipline" the refugees in the interests of the French state. These camps, and the increasingly elaborate network of surveillance and control which they were a part of, would soon provide the Vichy regime with its own, far more severe, apparatus of repression—as Julian Jackson put it, "Vichy was to find its concentration camps already in existence."¹⁹⁴

And yet, at the same time, internees' experience of the camps cannot be reduced simply to this repressive function—because, especially in the early stages, the disorganized state of the camps, and overall neglect on the part of French authorities, actually opened up a certain limited amount of freedom for internees to organize politically within the camps, and to begin forging new links of solidarity within the context of exile. In this way, the "cities of defeat" that Bartra described became not simply spaces of absence, nor purely sites of discipline and repression, but also contained within them the germ of a new exilic community. This community existed uneasily on the margins of both Spanish and French national identity—both of which were, at

¹⁹⁴ Jackson, *The Dark Years*, p. 105.

this same time, in the process of being re-defined to exclude the refugees, from the “national community” as the governments of Franco and Daladier sought to define it.

This process of exclusion has had a long afterlife. Even today, despite the opening up of historiographical debates in the past four decades, the “politics of forgetting” still reign, to some degree, over the historical memory of the concentration camps in Spain and France alike. It is my hope that in this thesis I have managed to show how the experience of the camps of 1939 was inextricably bound up with the wider trajectory of French history in this period—that their creation cannot be understood outside the context of the politics of exclusion which reigned in the last years of the French Third Republic. However, this thesis can only be a preliminary study—far more research is needed to fully examine, for instance, the question of the intentions and motivations of the Daladier government, or the question of the continuity between these camps and the repressive apparatus later set up by Vichy.

Further historiographical examination of the concentration camps—the factors that led to their creation, the functions they served, and their relation to other policies enacted by the Third Republic and the Vichy regime—is, in my view, crucially important for understanding not only the state of French and, more broadly, European politics in this critical period of the late 1930s and early 1940s, but also for putting our own historical moment into clearer perspective. We can find echoes of the concentration camps of 1939 all around us today—in the refugee camps of Lebanon or Greece, in the internment centers of the U.S.-Mexico border, and everywhere in the world where people are excluded, criminalized, and interned for the simple fact of having been forced to flee from their homes. To understand these mechanisms of repression put in place by nation-states to determine who does or does not belong to the “national community”—whether in France of 1939, or in Europe or the United States of 2020—is truly to write a “history of the

present,” one which strikes me as urgently necessary in a world where the difference between solidarity and exclusion, between freedom and internment, is also, increasingly, a matter of life and death.

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