

**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.

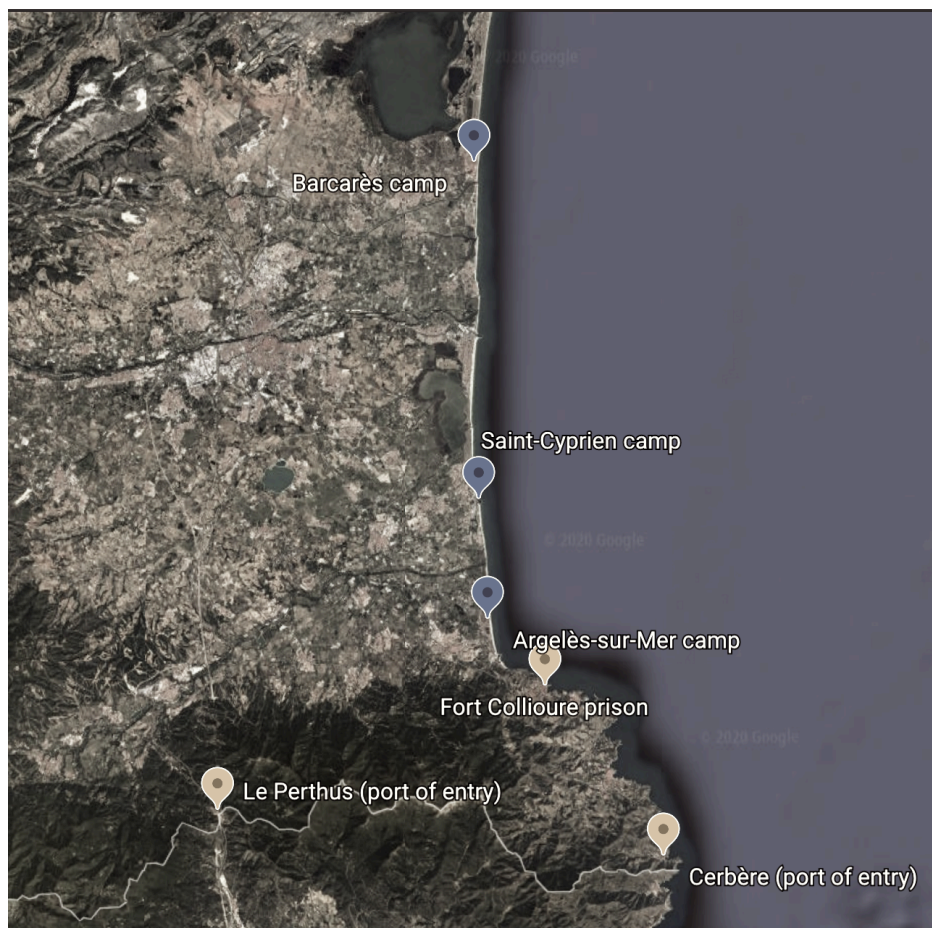


Figure 2: the beach camps of the Roussillon, 1939.

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 jugáramos 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 Academica 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.

[Note: pages 17-82 have been cut from this thesis for the sake of length. The full thesis can be found here: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Mb16dM3BvYoeNRRMtkohOYQMr0Mqc-9X/view?usp=sharing>]

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 Argeles-sur-Mer in the opening chapter of *Cristo de 200.000 brazos*.²⁸ 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.

²⁸ “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”²⁹ 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.”³⁰ 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.³¹

²⁹ “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.”]

³⁰ “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.

³¹ “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 / geométricamente. (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.”³²

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.

³² “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.³³

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.”³⁴

³³ “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.

³⁴ “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 teams³⁵—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.”³⁶

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.

Eulalio Ferrer, for instance, decides to begin writing his concentration camp diary on April 14,

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

³⁵ 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.

³⁶ “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.

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!’”³⁷ 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.”³⁸ 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

³⁷ “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.

³⁸ “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.”³⁹

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.”⁴⁰ 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.⁴¹

“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

³⁹ “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.

⁴⁰ Said, *Reflections on Exile and other Essays* (Harvard UP, 2002), p. 140.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 141.

oftentimes even within Spain itself; and, as Francie Cate-Arries has argued,⁴² 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 isolation⁴³—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.”⁴⁴ 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:

⁴² 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.

⁴³ 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.

⁴⁴ “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.⁴⁵

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.”⁴⁶ 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.

⁴⁵ “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.

⁴⁶ “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.⁴⁷

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.⁴⁸

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

⁴⁷ Molins i Fàbrega, *Campos de concentración, 1939-194...*, p. 155.

⁴⁸ “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*.”⁴⁹

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,”⁵⁰ 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.⁵¹

⁴⁹ “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

⁵⁰ “la desgracia de España era el principio de la desgracia de Francia.” Suárez, *España comienza en los Pirineos*, p. 256.

⁵¹ 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?"⁵² 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.

⁵² "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."⁵³

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

⁵³ 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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- 12) Interview with Mercedes Maestre Marti (PHO/10/28)
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