

George Watt Essay Submission
Kathleen Brown, PhD Candidate in American Culture
University of Michigan, Ann Arbor
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The Fight of the *Retaguardia*: US-American Social Workers Committee
to Aid Spanish Democracy and *Colonias Infantiles*

Aerial bombardment of Spanish, Basque, and Catalan cities was a defining feature of General Francisco Franco's war against the Second Spanish Republic between 1936-1939. New, innovative ways of killing made civilians targets of war. This was immortalized in the anguished, upturned face of a mother holding her dead child in Pablo Picasso's *Guernica*, painted shortly after German Junker pilots fire-bombed the Basque village on April 26, 1937. The effects of these bombings were disastrous for the population, leading to catastrophic death and injury as well as decline from infectious disease, hunger, and homelessness, particularly in Madrid. With cities assaulted from both the sky and sea and encroached by fascist ground troops, millions fled to safer areas, often carrying their possessions on their backs. The number of internally displaced Republican refugees was estimated to be one million in 1936, two million by August 1938, and up to three million by December of that year.¹ These numbers - each one a human tragedy - created an immense logistical and material challenge that the Republic struggled to respond to. For instance, historian Juan Fernandez cites that within the three Levant provinces, for every one bed available in 1937, there were 7.56 additional people who were in need.²

Children were - and still are - the most vulnerable population during a war, their bodies and psyches exposed to malnutrition, infectious disease, and incomprehensible violence and loss. Almost immediately after Franco's assault on the Second Spanish Republic in July of 1936, local political parties and unions began to evacuate children toward safer areas - sometimes within Loyalist Spain and other times to the exterior. From summer 1936 to March 1937 between 90,000 and 100,000 school-age children

¹ Quoted in Xavier García Ferrandis and Àlvar Martínez Vidal, "Límites de la Asistencia Médica y Social Durante la Guerra Civil Española," *Asclepio: Revista de Historia de la Medicina y de la Ciencia* 68 (2), Julio-Diciembre 2016, 158, <http://dx.doi.org/10.3989/asclepio.2016.30>.

² Juan M. Fernández Soria, "La Asistencia a la Infancia en la Guerra Civil: Las Colonias Escolares," *Historia de la Educación*, No. 6, 1987, 86.

were evacuated to the Levant region,³ characterized by Juan Fernández as an “avalanche of children, mainly from Madrid.”⁴ Up to 30,000 children were hosted in France, Belgium, the Soviet Union, Great Britain, and Mexico.⁵ The children’s situations differed: some were orphaned during the war, while others’ parents were fighting at the front or laboring in rearguard industries. Some children’s parents simply could not feed their children and turned to the state for help.

The Republic struggled to absorb millions of internally displaced people in need of food and shelter while simultaneously waging a defensive war against the far right. Seeking help, government representatives called on international solidarity to fill the immense gap in resources.⁶ Some of the aid organizations that responded operated in both Rebel and Loyalist areas, like the Friends Service Committee and the International Red Cross,⁷ while others - Communist, Socialist, and liberal - took a partisan position in favor of the Republic, aiming to defend democracy by supporting the rearguard. For these latter groups, aid was all the more important given the arms embargo levied against Spain by the United States, Britain, and France. Unable to send arms to defend Spain’s young democracy, left-wing and liberal humanitarian organizations would send relief instead. Some of these efforts included the well-known North American Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy and the American Medical Bureau, which claimed to have sent over a million dollars of aid to Spain by early 1939.⁸ This aid consisted of ambulances, field hospitals, medical personnel, medicines, tinned fish, tons of wheat, canned milk for children, soap, cash donations, and more. One of the largest motivators of aid was the fate of displaced

³ Pierre Marqués, “Ayuda Humanitaria y Evacuaciones de Niños,” *El Exilio de los Niños*, ed. Alicia Alted Vigil, Roger González Martell and María José Millán, (Madrid: Fundación Pablo Iglesias/P. Largo Caballero, 2003), 48.

⁴ Juan Fernández, 98.

⁵ Juan Fernández, 117. Additionally, Fernandez notes that because of the relative geographical isolation of Basque Country during Franco’s 1936 attack, Basque children were initially evacuated to France, not Loyalist areas. Basque children were mainly hosted by Belgium (97).

⁶ One of these appeals was made in the *Daily Worker*: “The Spanish people call out to us for bullets, guns, gas masks, food, clothing, for the barest of necessities,” “Loyalist Spain Needs Aid Urgently,” *Daily Worker*, October 1 1936, 2; Fernando de los Rios, Spanish ambassador to the United States, also made the call at mass meetings throughout the U.S.

⁷ The classic study of British Quakers continues to be by Farah Mendlesohn, *Quaker Relief Work in the Spanish Civil War* (Edwin Mellen Press, 2002) unfortunately now out of print. For a more recent case study, see Xavier García Ferrandis and Álvaro Martínez Vidal, “La Ayuda Humanitaria de los British Quakers Durante La Guerra Civil Española (1936-1939): El Caso del Hospital Infantil de Polop de la Marina (Alicante),” *Asclepio: Revista de Historia de la Medicina y de la Ciencia*, 71(1), Enero-Junio 2019, <https://doi.org/10.3989/asclepio.2019.05> or Gabriel Pretus, *La Ayuda Humanitaria en la Guerra Civil Española* (1936-1939) (Editorial Comares, 2015).

⁸ “Two Years of American Aid to Spain” Pamphlet, produced by the Medical Bureau and the North American Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy, 1939. According to this publication, between October 1936 to October 1939 the Medical Bureau and North American Committee raised \$811,087.87 in cash, shipped \$365,664.75 worth of goods, sent \$300,000 of food, clothing and material aboard the Erica Reed, established 10 homes for 600 refugee children, sent 125 doctors, nurses, and drivers, established eight American hospitals, and sent 175 ambulances, and tons of medical supplies. MS#1181, Series VII: Negro People’s Committee, 1938-1939, Box 75, Folder 1, Spanish Refugee Relief Association Records (SRRAR) 1935-1957, Rare Book and Manuscript Library (RBML) Columbia University.

and orphaned Spanish children who were menaced by Franco's bombs. In North American Committee campaign literature and appeals, no imaged features more prominently than those of children in need, which were used to stimulate fundraising appeals and campaigns again and again.

The Social Workers Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy (SWC) was the organization under the North American Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy (NAC) umbrella that was primarily concerned with Spanish children's welfare during the war. As part of a delegation to Spain, American social workers were tasked by SWC with assessing the Republic's war-time child welfare plans and working to meet those needs as quickly as possible, utilizing NAC's developing fundraising networks. Principle among the Republic's child welfare plans were the development of children's colonies, or *colonias infantiles*, which housed tens of thousands of children fleeing war. These children's homes became a central motivator of NAC and SWC fundraising as a concrete (perhaps quite literally) manifestation of international solidarity.

Although admittedly greatly insufficient for the needs of Spain's population, fundraising represented an enormous undertaking by thousands of US-American activists all across the US, who held dances, auctions, film showings, lectures, and honorary dinners to "feed Spanish children." In addition to broader NAC appeals, the SWC itself acted as a financial conduit for children's colonies, collecting funds from local SWC chapters across the United States. Indeed, the Social Workers Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy was a small but potent source of fundraising, in part because they were highly organized and because they were connected to a wide network of humanitarians and donors who opened their checkbooks for Spanish children. Most significantly, SWC representatives acted as interlocutors between Spanish women and children and American donors, interpreting their plight for an English-speaking audience.

Despite these contributions, the Social Workers Committee remains under-studied in Spanish Civil War relief, itself a relatively new field within Spanish Civil War historiography.⁹ Indeed, historiography of US-American volunteers tends to focus on military and medical services, with little said about the rearguard - either in Spain or in the United States.¹⁰ Yet the fight of the rearguard was just as

⁹ British historian Jim Fyrth's classic monograph, *The Signal Was Spain: The Spanish Aid Movement in Britain, 1936-39* (Palgrave Macmillan, 1986) was one of the first to examine the aid movement's scope and contributions. Looking across the Atlantic, Eric Smith's *American Relief Aid and the Spanish Civil War* (University of Missouri Press, 2013) gives a rich overview of aid work undertaken by political organizations, ethnic groups, and unions in the three years of the war, but the Social Workers Committee is mentioned only briefly. Gabriel Pretus, *La Ayuda Humanitaria en la Guerra Civil Española (1936-1939)* (Comares 2015) examines a range of impartial organizations: Red Cross, Quakers, Save the Children Fund, but does not include partisan organizations.

¹⁰ There is not the space to go over the vast canon of Spanish Civil War historiography here, but some of the classic, English-language Spanish Civil War studies of US-American volunteers include: Peter Carroll, *The Odyssey of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, Americans in the Spanish Civil War*, (Stanford University Press, 2004) John Gerassi's oral history collection, *Premature Antifascists*, (Praeger Publishers, 1986), Danny Duncan Collum and Robin D.G. Kelley's, *It Ain't Ethiopia, But It'll Do, African Americans and the Spanish Civil War* (GK Hall, 1992), Walter Lear's chapter "American Medical Support for Spanish Democracy, 1936-1938," *Comrades in Health* (Rutgers

critical as military defense. Marxist scholar Tithi Bhattacharya's exploration of social reproduction theory helps us see that without the rearguard, dedicated to sustaining life, military defense would not be possible.¹¹ As Bhattacharya posits, "If workers' labor produces all wealth in society, who then produces the worker?" Answering this question is the study of social reproduction: the labor to procure food, care for children, and nurse the injured back to health. Extending this question to Spain, in an existential war for survival, who produced the food to keep Republican Spain going? Who organized shelters to house the displaced? Who treated the sick and the wounded? How did Republican Spain, day after day, fight to survive? This is an argument, then, to place Republican services dedicated to social reproduction and the international aid that supplemented it, i.e., life-sustaining services of food, shelter, healthcare, and education, at the heart of Spanish Civil War historiography.

It was in the rearguard that New Spain attempted to shrug off the reactionary Catholic Church and landed aristocracy by implementing a host of social reforms that collectivized social reproduction, moving it from the private sphere to the public. Some of the most well-known were state-run milk dispensaries to feed malnourished babies and robust childcare centers to care for children whose mothers worked in factories. Others included medical clinics for newborn checkups, new schools, adult literacy programs, and scientific apprenticeships. As Thyra Edwards, an African American organizer and social worker who toured Republican Spain in 1937 as delegate of SWC, proclaimed to the *Associated Negro Press*:

"The story of the resistance and the strength with which the Spanish people, supported by the International brigade, disadvantaged by lack of technical equipment, have withstood, has provoked the admiration even of the indifferent and hostile. That is the front guard.

No less dramatic is the story of the mobilization of the "retaguardia" and the tremendous work of building, construction, education, common schools for common children, schools for adults, -- the liquidation of Spain's illiteracy, theatres, clubs, recreational centros, social services, and the amazing development of children's colonies. This, behind the trenches, is the fight of the rear guard."¹²

The following paper explores the contributions of the Social Workers Committee and its role in sustaining life in the rearguard. The first portion examines the Social Workers Committee's 1937

University Press, 2013), and Adam Hochschild's *Spain in Our Hearts, Americans in the Spanish Civil War*, (Mariner, 2016).

¹¹ See Tithi Bhattacharya, *Social Reproduction Theory*, (Pluto Press, 2017), 1. To answer her question, Bhattacharya underscores the dialectical relationship between social reproduction and productive labor as dependent upon each other. Or, as Meg Luxton affirms, "The production of goods and services and the production of life are part of one integrated process" (*Social Reproduction Theory*, 2).

¹² Wednesday November 24, 1937, Associated Negro Press News Releases, 1928-1964, Series A: 1928-1944, Claude A. Barnett Papers: The Associated Negro Press, 1918-1967, Part 1.

delegation to Spain, a critical “fact finding” mission that propelled future fundraising activities. The second looks at Constance Kyle, an American Social Worker who worked in Spain from August 1937-December 1938 distributing aid to internationally run children’s colonies. The last portion looks at how SWC made the case for donating to Spain, often utilizing children’s drawings and photographs to motivate donations.

The Social Workers Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy’s Child Care Commission

The Social Workers’ Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy was a nationwide organization of leftist and liberal social workers and humanitarians that developed in response to General Francisco Franco’s military assault on the liberal Second Spanish Republic over the summer of 1936. Organized in chapters across the United States, the executive committee was chaired by well-known progressive social worker Harald Lund. Helen Hall and Lillian Wald, directors of the Henry Street Settlement in the Lower East Side, were involved in an honorific capacity.¹³ Heeding Dr. Edward Barsky of the American Medical Bureau’s call for medical aid, SWC initially raised funds to send ambulances, doctors, and nurses abroad. Yet as war headed into its second year, the organization shifted their target to aiding homeless and orphaned children. Virginia Malbin, a Social Workers Committee delegate who traveled to Spain over the summer of 1937, recalled how she had organized against mass impoverishment and homelessness during the Great Depression in the US, executing relief efforts before any federal government relief existed.¹⁴ In other words, she knew how to marshal resources without much, if any, government help. Seeking to use this professional experience in Spain, the Social Workers Committee convened a five-person “Child Care Commission” to travel to Spain in August of 1937. The delegation would be expert eyewitnesses to report on the war’s consequences on the youngest of Republican Spain.

Members of the Social Workers Committee, much like the rest of the American Relief movement, arrived at the work with a range of motivations: some held a deep political commitment to struggle against ascendent fascism, while others were called to ease human suffering. For social worker Virginia Malbin, it was both: “Spain represented in a way, the one resistance - the first resistance, internationally, against Hitler and Mussolini. The first resistance of any real significance. To defeat Hitler and Mussolini

¹³ November 10, 1938 Form Letter, Helen Hall, MS#1181, Series XI: Social Workers, Box 133, Folder 18, Constance Kyle Dinner, 1938, SRRAR, RBML, Columbia University.

¹⁴ Virginia discussed how she and Constance Kyle pushed for the American Association of Social Workers to support the Social Security Act. Virginia Malbin, interview with Francis Patai, January 25, 1991, 3:00, ALBA.AUDIO.131, Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives, Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University. <https://hdl.handle.net/2333.1/cjsxm2gg>

became inextricable from helping Spain.”¹⁵ She recalled that in the midst of virulent racism and anti-Semitism in the United States and in Germany, Spain was the “one place where you could do something about it. That you could stop this horrible and brutal, uncivilized thing.”¹⁶

The Child Care Commission’s tour in Spain was both informational and organizational: social workers were to gather information about the conditions of the civilian population, assess how international might help, and facilitate meeting those needs as quickly as possible upon their return. As was reflected in their name, the committee placed special attention on the needs of evacuated and displaced infants and children. In an oral history interview decades later, Malbin recalled how Spain and international organizations struggled to coordinate and distribute aid in the first year of the war:

“At that time [August 1937] there was no coordination of any kind of civilian relief. There was help coming in from various countries in the world...and the Paris office, [Comité International de Coordination et d’Information pour l’Aide à L’Espagne Républicaine] was struggling to funnel through the help; to get supplies, to see that they were distributed. There was almost no organization in Spain itself, just the beginning of some kind of Spanish organization. The Quakers were in Spain, the International Red Cross was there, but they did not function through the Paris office, they functioned through their own international offices. We had no idea who they were helping, how much help they were giving, what the terms of the help were. These were things we were trying to find out.”¹⁷

The five US-American social workers who participated in the delegation were Mrs. Jen(nie) Berman Chakin and Mrs. Rose Leff Gregg, of New York, Mrs. Virginia Malbin and Miss Constance Kyle of Chicago, and Miss Lillian Emdor of Philadelphia. All were trained social workers with varying years of professional experience:¹⁸ Jennie Chakin was a 32-year-old caseworker in the Jewish Social Services Association of New York. Rose Gregg was a psychiatric social worker in the Bureau of Child Guidance of the Board of Education for the City of New York. Virginia Malbin was a twenty-four-year-old social worker employed by the Jewish Children’s Bureau in Chicago. Lillian Emdor, just prior to Spain, had supervised an emergency shelter for flood victims of the Ohio and Mississippi Valley flood in 1937.

¹⁵ Virginia Malbin, interview with unknown, 1985, 31:30, ALBA.AUDIO.131, Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives, Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University.

<https://hdl.handle.net/2333.1/n02v75s3>

¹⁶ Virginia Malbin, interview with Francis Patai, January 25, 1991, 17:00, ALBA.AUDIO.131, Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives, Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University:

<https://hdl.handle.net/2333.1/cjsxm2gg>

¹⁷ Virginia Malbin, interview with Francis Patai, January 25, 1991, 3:00, ALBA.AUDIO.131, Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives, Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University.

<https://hdl.handle.net/2333.1/cjsxm2gg>

¹⁸ Various letters describe the delegation’s backgrounds, MS#1181, Series XI: Social Workers, Box 133, Folder 7, Delegation to Spain, 1937-1938, SRRAR, RBML, Columbia University.

Constance Kyle, 29, had been a psychiatric worker at the University of Illinois. Many had written to the main office of the Social Workers Committee requesting to be considered for the trip, although it is not known who approved their application.

Based on correspondence records, the delegation came together over the course of three weeks in July, an extraordinarily quick turn-around given difficulties in securing a passport valid for travel to Spain. On July 15, 1937, Jean Challman, Executive Secretary of the Social Workers Committee, reached out to Constance Kyle to request that she apply for a passport valid for travel to Spain prior to her August 1 travel date to Paris. Participation in the delegation was conditional on multiple factors:

“If you can go to Europe between July 29th and August 4th, and if you can meet Mrs. Gregg and others immediately upon arrival in Paris and if you can spend two or three days there and a week in Spain doing intensive research on methods of child care, do this [apply for a passport valid for Spain] and do it immediately.”¹⁹

The next day, Kyle cabled the SWC to report she had applied for her passport. The process was bureaucratic and tentative; none were certain their applications would be approved. The North American Committee sent letters and cables to representatives of the State Department on their behalf, and by their sailing date, all five had secured permission to travel to Spain. All made sacrifices to attend: Virginia Malbin and Jennie Chakin requested leaves of absence from their jobs to accommodate the trip; all paid for their own way. Two had personal connections to Spain: Virginia Malbin’s spouse, Barney Malbin, was in Spain serving with the Medical Bureau as a surgeon. Virginia Malbin would return to Barcelona in June 1938 to process visa applications for wounded IB soldiers who could not return to their home countries because of political persecution, staying almost until the fall of the city. Jen Chakin was married to Abraham Alfred “Chick” Chakin, an International Brigade volunteer who arrived in Spain the month prior to the delegation’s visit. Ultimately, he did not make it out of Spain alive.²⁰ After the delegation’s trip to Spain, Jen Chakin worked for six months as the Executive Secretary for the Social Workers’ Committee, demonstrating the tight connection between the delegation and the day-to-day priorities of the organization.

In Paris, the five were introduced to the International Committee for Coordination and Information to Aid Republican Spain, Children’s Commission (*Comité International de Coordination et d’Information pour l’Aide à L’Espagne Républicaine, Commission des Enfants*) whose general secretary

¹⁹ Letter from Jean Challman to Constance Kyle, July 15, 1937, MS#1181, Series XI: Social Workers, Box 133, Folder 7, Delegation to Spain, 1937-1938, SRRAR, RBML, Columbia University.

²⁰ “Abraham “Chick” Chakin and “Barney Malbin” biographical entries, *Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives Database Directory*, <https://alba-valb.org/volunteers/abraham-alfred-chakin/>, <https://alba-valb.org/volunteers/barney-ivan-malbin/>.

and main contact for aid donation was Ione Boulenger.²¹ (At some point, the office name was changed to Office International Pour L'Enfance, although it is unclear why this change was made). After some time in Paris, the delegation was authorized to enter Spain where they visited Catalonia, Valencia, Madrid, Murcia, and Almeria - separately to cover more ground - with the assistance of Foreign Bureau Chief Constancia de la Mora. De la Mora was well suited to accompany the delegation, as in fall of 1936, she had evacuated over 650 children from an orphanage in Madrid and resettled them in Alicante and went on to lend her efforts to aid children and wounded soldiers. At the time of the social workers' visit, she headed the Foreign Press Bureau and had accompanied international journalists and observers throughout Spain.²² During their trip the social workers visited refugee shelters, children's homes for displaced and orphaned children, and health clinics to treat malnourished women and children, although the exact itinerary is not known.²³ Virginia Malbin recalled the shock of meeting new mothers who had lost their teeth due to calcium deficiency and the government-run, special restaurants where they would be provided with nutritious food under a doctor's prescription.²⁴ In another anecdote, she recalls meeting with a doctor in a convalescent home in Almeria who treated "batch" after "batch" of starving children. No sooner had one group recovered than another round of children would arrive, badly malnourished.²⁵

The delegation understood their task was to return to the States to relay the condition of war-time Spain through the human lens of women, children, and the elderly. Virginia Malbin described her mission in 1991: "The idea was to get information so that we could talk to groups of Americans who wanted to be of assistance; to let them know what was happening to ordinary people, to women and children who were

²¹ See various letters, MS#1181, Series XI: Social Workers, Box 133, Folder 16, International Memos, 1937-1938, SRRAR, RBML, Columbia University.

²² There is much more to be said about Constancia de la Mora's politics, including procuring one of the first divorces in Spain's history in 1932, her work with orphaned children and injured aviators in the first year of the war, her membership in the anti-fascist women's group (Agrupación de Mujeres Antifascista) and the Spanish Communist Party, and her role in accompanying international journalists like Martha Gellhorn, and Josephine Herbst in Spain. For a brief overview of her remarkable life, see Patricia Greene's biographical entry: "Mora, Constancia de la (1906-1950)," *Women in World History: A Biographical Encyclopedia*, Vol. 11, (2002): 384-388. Virginia Malbin recalls Constance de La Mora being "very well educated, very competent" in her oral history interview with Francis Patai, January 25, 1991, 13:15, ALBA.AUDIO.131, Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives, Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University, <https://hdl.handle.net/2333.1/h70rz592>

²³ Letter from Ione Boulenger to Jean Challman, Executive Secretary, 17 September 1937, MS#1181, Series XI: Social Workers, Box 133, Folder 16, International Memos, 1937-1938, SRRAR, RBML, Columbia University.

²⁴ Virginia Malbin, interview with Francis Patai, January 25, 1991, 13:15, ALBA.AUDIO.131, Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives, Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University, <https://hdl.handle.net/2333.1/cjsxm2gg>

²⁵ Virginia Malbin, interview with Francis Patai, January 25, 1991, 15:00, ALBA.AUDIO.131, Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives, Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University, <https://hdl.handle.net/2333.1/h70rz592>

bombed out or who were politically persecuted.”²⁶ This was critical given the mainstream press’s general hostility to “Red” Spain, the Catholic Church’s virulent anti-Communism, and United States entrenched isolationism that marked the era. Delegates took up this mission: Malbin and Kyle were able to get the *Chicago Sunday Times* to cover their departure, “Off to War Torn Spain, Chicago’s Women to Aid Spain’s Child Refugees,” accompanied by a photograph of the two poised over a globe.²⁷ In the fall, the delegation reported their findings in the November and December issues of the progressive trade publication *Social Work Today*, and they produced a full report for the NAC. Although not yet located, an outline exists in the Social Workers Committee archive; the report was to include the delegation’s general impressions of Spain, the Republic’s progressive response to social problems in welfare, health, and education via “government and semi-government agencies,” and “foreign relief organizations.” The report included “Methods of Care” in reference to evacuating and caring for refugees, specifically children, and ended with a summary and an appeal, ostensibly for funds.²⁸ Further research is needed to learn how this report was used and where it was circulated. Delegates were not always successful, to garner press attention. Jen Chakin, later SWC Executive Secretary, lamented that the New York chapter’s sponsorship of the Ethel Taylor colony was of little interest to the American press and requested Kyle organize a dedication ceremony for the home in El Perelló to generate interest.²⁹

Post-Spain, delegates were invited to speak about their experiences in post-tour lectures, articles, and honorary dinners. Rose Gregg cabled New York from Valencia at the end of the tour, urging the use of material in a nation-wide milk drive for Spanish children. Virginia Malbin wrote of how Barcelonians used the subway stations as impromptu bomb shelters at night, even sleeping on the tracks once the last train had passed through the station.³⁰ Constance Kyle was fêted as part of a large fundraising campaign for the American Relief Ship in October 1938, where she returned to the US to speak about the work of the children’s colonies. Her experiences were widely incorporated into NAC and SWC literature.

Constance Kyle: From Delegate to Representative

²⁶ Virginia Malbin, interview with Francis Patai, January 25, 1991, 2:30, ALBA.AUDIO.131, Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives, Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University. <https://hdl.handle.net/2333.1/cjsxm2gg>

²⁷ “Off to War-Torn Spain Chicago Women to Aid Spain’s Child Refugees,” *Chicago Sunday Times*, July 25, 1937, MS#1181, Series XI: Social Workers, Box 133, Folder 7, Delegation to Spain, 1937-1938, SRRAR, RBML, Columbia University.

²⁸ “Outline for Full Report,” MS#1181, Series XI: Social Workers, Box 133, Folder 7, Delegation to Spain, 1937-1938, SRRAR, RBML Columbia University.

²⁹ MS#1181, Series XI: Social Workers, Box 133, Folder 17, Constance Kyle correspondence, 1937-1938, SRRAR, RBML, Columbia University.

³⁰ Virginia Malbin, Untitled, MS#1181, Series XI: Social Workers, Box 133, Folder 17, Constance Kyle Correspondence, 1937-1938, SRRAR, RBML, Columbia University

While Rose, Lillian, Jen, and Virginia returned to the US, Constance Kyle was hired as representative of the Social Workers Committee and North American Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy to manage the coordination of American relief to homes for refugee children. In the first phase of this work, her duty was “to check on all funds and materials” donated by both organizations.”³¹ In doing so, she worked closely with the *Ministerio de Instrucción Pública* (Ministry of Public Instruction).

In many ways, Kyle was the face of American aid for children in Spain, yet little has been written about her, both in her personal life and her contributions in Spain.³² According to the Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives Database Directory, Kyle was born in Tamah, Washington in 1908³³ and was formally educated as a social worker as a member of the Illinois Research Department at the University of Illinois Medical School.³⁴ In the North American Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy’s Special Bulletin, “Our Children in Spain,” and the pamphlet, “Two Years of Aid to Spain,” Kyle is represented as the on-the-ground expert managing NAC donations to children’s colonies. Perhaps to demonstrate her competency and expertise, the bulletin communicates her credentials and experience: she graduated from the University of Wisconsin and Smith College for Social Work and had worked for the Family Welfare and Children’s Service Association of Madison, Wisconsin, the Family Service Association of Evanston, Illinois, and as a psychiatric worker in a teaching and research project at the University of Illinois.”³⁵

Prior to Spain, Kyle served as secretary for the Chicago Chapter of the Social Workers Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy³⁶ and even though she was white, was a member of the National Negro Congress, a Black labor and civil rights coalition which had participated in raising medical relief for Ethiopia during Italy’s invasion and organized against police violence and Jim Crow.³⁷ According to

³¹ Jen Chakin, Letter of introduction, October 7, 1937, MS#1181, Series XI: Social Workers, Box 133, Folder 7, Delegation to Spain, 1937-1938, SRRAR, RBML, Columbia University

³² Kyle is referenced in Gregg Andrews’ biography of organizer and social worker Thyra Edwards, as Edwards accompanied Kyle on her tour of children’s homes in Catalonia and Valencia in October 1937, (see Andrews, *Thyra Edwards: Black Activist in the Global Freedom Struggle*, (University of Missouri Press, 2011), 100 and in Eric Smith’s monograph, *American Relief Aid and the Spanish Civil War*, (University of Missouri Press, 2013) 48, although Smith describes her erroneously as a nurse.

³³ “Constance Kyle,” Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives Database Directory, <https://alba-valb.org/volunteers/constance-kyle/>.

³⁴ Gregg Andrews, *Thyra Edwards*, 100.

³⁵ North American Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy Bulletin, “Our Children in Spain,” Volume 1, Number 2, undated. ALBA.019, Box 8, Folder 5, Veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade Records, Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University.

³⁶ MS#1181, Series XI: Social Workers, Box 133, Folder 7, Delegation to Spain, 1937-1938, SRRAR, RBML, Columbia University.

³⁷ Gregg Andrews references Kyle as a member of the National Negro Congress in his biography on Thyra Edwards. Edwards was also a member of the National Negro Congress in the Women’s Division prior to her trips to Spain. For a longer exploration on National Negro Congress’s politics and impact, see Erik Gellman’s *Death Blow to Jim Crow*, (UNC Press, 2014).

her colleague and comrade Virginia Malbin, the two of them helped to unionize fellow social workers in the American Association of Social Work and agitated for federal relief and unemployment benefits during the Great Depression.³⁸ In the late 1980s, feminist historian Francis Patai attempted to interview Kyle for her draft monograph on US-American volunteers in Spain, *Heroines of the Good Fight*, but Kyle declined to participate. When Patai wrote again to ask for her participation, Kyle averred, “Apparently what I failed to do was to let you know that my decision was a carefully considered one not subject to change.”³⁹ Thus Constance Kyle’s contribution to Republican Spain must be pieced together through correspondence between Kyle, the Paris office *Commission des Enfants* and the Executive Secretary of the Social Workers Committee in New York City, references to her work in publications like the North American Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy’s special bulletins on children’s homes, and the experiences of those around her political circles, such as fellow social workers Thyra Edwards and Virginia Malbin.⁴⁰

From these sources, we know that the North American Committee and the Social Workers Committee split the cost of her monthly \$50 salary from September 1937 until the end of her tenure in Spain in December 1938.⁴¹ In October 1937, Kyle was joined by fellow Chicago social worker Thyra Edwards, and the pair toured children’s colonies across Valencia and Catalonia, ending the trip with a meeting of foreign aid workers from 15 different countries.⁴² In November, she traveled to Paris to attend an international conference for aid to Spanish children, where greater coordination of aid efforts was discussed at length. In December, 1937, she was promoted to coordinate all internationally sponsored children’s home aid under the aegis of the Ministry of Public Instruction.⁴³ In March of 1938 she described the horror of bombings in Barcelona and the children’s suffering in her plea for aid from

³⁸ Virginia Malbin, interview with Francis Patai, January 25, 1991, 3:00, ALBA.AUDIO.131, Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives, Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University <https://hdl.handle.net/2333.1/cjsxm2gg>

³⁹ Letter from Constance Kyle Lamb to Francis Patai, May 3, 1988, ALBA.0131, Box 2, Folder 13, Francis Patai Papers, Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives, Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University.

⁴⁰ Archives referenced include Francis Patai’s biographical files in Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archive, NYU; Kyle’s correspondence with the North American Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy files (Spanish Refugee Relief Association Files at University Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University), the oral histories of Virginia Malbin, a social worker who accompanied “Connie” to Spain in August of 1937 was in Barcelona at the same time between June and December 1938.

⁴¹ Letter from Ione Boulenger, General Secretary, Commission des Enfants to Jean Challman, Executive Secretary of SWC, September 10, 1937, MS#1181, Series XI: Social Workers, Box 133, Folder 16, International Memos, 1937-1938, SRRAR, RBML, Columbia University.

⁴² Constance Kyle, “Relief Workers Council Meets in Spain!” Flash, October 24, 1937, MS#1181, Series XI: Social Workers, Box 133, Folder 16, International Memos, 1937-1938, SRRAR, RBML.

⁴³ Letter from Jen Chakin to Ione Boulenger, December 9, 1937, MS#1181, Series XI: Social Workers, Box 133, Folder 16, International Memos, 1937-1938, SRRAR, RBML, Columbia University.

America.⁴⁴ In July she traveled to Paris for an international conference to coordinate aid distribution and was joined by former delegates Virginia Malbin and Rose Gregg, who also attended.⁴⁵ In October of 1938 she returned to the United States for a fundraising tour for the American Relief Ship, the SS Erica Reed, which sailed to Barcelona in November of 1938 filled with tons of medical and food aid. In November 1938, Kyle, alongside representatives of the Republic such as Dolores Ibárruri, “La Pasionaria,” received the ship in Barcelona with much fanfare.⁴⁶ Kyle stayed in Barcelona until the end of 1938 or beginnings of 1939 and returned to the US on February 12 aboard the SS Aquitania.⁴⁷

Often writing from the road, she reported to NAC and SWC on her efforts to coordinate the care of refugee children. Week after week and month after month, Kyle reported to the Social Workers Committee on her visits to children’s colonies and state-run milk dispensaries and health clinics and sent out emergency telegrams at critical moments during Franco’s offensive, which were later reproduced in publicity material. Weekly and bi-weekly communiques would pass through the Paris office, “*Commission des Enfants*” and on to New York City, home of the NAC and SWC main office, where excerpts of her reports were often employed for publicity purposes. Correspondence in the other direction passed through the hands of General Secretary Ione Boulenger in the Paris office, into a diplomatic bag, and onto the capital of the Republic: first Valencia, and later Barcelona. Jen Chakin and later Belle Taub and Blanche Mahler - all executive secretaries of the Social Workers Committee between 1937 and 1939 - would update Boulenger on amounts raised from the US chapters, often requesting publicity materials to aid in their endeavors, which was then relayed to Kyle.

The work was exhausting. We are given a glimpse of Kyle’s duties through correspondence between John Rhodes of the *Commission des Enfants* and Dr. Herman Reissig, Executive Secretary of NAC. Rhodes outlined Kyle’s responsibilities managing the distribution of aid, worth quoting at length:

“You have frequently asked exactly what work Miss Kyle is doing in Spain, and how much of it we can say is work for the NAC...Miss Kyle has been accepted by the Ministry of Public Instruction as the official delegate from our organisation, [*Commission des Enfants*] and has her office now in the Ministry’s headquarters. As our delegate, she must, therefore, handle all problems which arise in connection with the relief work for children coming from abroad to the Ministry. There is a great amount of work to be done. The following countries, for example, are

⁴⁴ “A Cable from Spain,” March 28, 1938, ALBA.0131, Box 2, Folder 13, Francis Patai Papers, Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives, Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University.

⁴⁵ Letter from Jen Chakin, SWC Executive Secretary to Madeleine Braun, Comité International de Coordinación, July 11, 1938, MS#118, Series X1: Social Workers, Box 133, Folder 7, Delegations to Spain 1937-1938, SRRAR, RBML, Columbia University.

⁴⁶ “Erica Reed, American Relief Ship, 1938,” MS#118, Series XV: Photographs, Box 172, Folder 1, SRRAR, RBML, Columbia University.

⁴⁷ “Constance Kyle,” Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives Database Directory, <https://alba-valb.org/volunteers/constance-kyle/>.

carrying on their children's relief work through us: England, Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Belgium, Holland, Switzerland, France, Canada, the USA, Colombia, Argentina, Chili [sic], Uruguay and Egypt, and almost all of these countries have one or more children's colonies in Spain, and all of them send through supplies of food and milk for general relief to the children. For all of them we have the same requirements - photos, articles, list of children, etc. - that we are trying so hard to get to America each time colonies are adopted.

There is also a very large technical job to be done in connection with shipments arriving from abroad. Each time a shipment arrives Miss Kyle must check personally, before distribution to the various centres. She has been aided slightly in this work by two or three delegates from other foreign committees, but in general these people have been assigned to some specific area and have not, up till now, given very much assistance in this work."⁴⁸

One major hindrance to Kyle's work was the lack of reliable transportation to travel between port cities, distribution centers, and children's homes. She pleaded with Ione Boulenger, "I would give almost anything these days to be able to go to the garage at six in the morning and start off to make the rounds."⁴⁹ Without one, Kyle was dependent upon the *Ministerio* for use of a car, but according to her report they only had two for all their work, one of which was for medical purposes. Without regular access to a car, Kyle was unable to make visits with any regularity, greatly hindering her coordination work and interrupting regular publicity materials requested by NAC and SWC group home sponsors.

The formation of *Colonias Infantiles*

As stated, Kyle's main responsibility was to inspect Republican-run, internationally funded children's homes to direct aid efforts effectively. Children's colonies were not new to Spain, as summer colonies for urban children existed in the early 20th century, but they had never been employed year-round and nor at such a scale. In 1937, officials hoped that the colonies could meet the urgent psychological and educational needs of thousands of displaced children, and in the process, help prepare children for a socialist Spain. It seems that collective children's homes, *colonias infantiles*, really began to emerge as government policy between January and July of 1937, spurred by greater centralization and organization of the evacuation process.

⁴⁸ Letter from Peter Rhodes, American delegate of the Commission des Enfants and husband of Ione Boulenger, Executive Secretary of the Office Internationale Pour L'Enfance to Dr. Herman Reissig, February 10, 1938, MS#118, Series XI: Social Workers, Box 133, Folder 16, International Memos, 1937-1938, SRRAR, RBML, Columbia University.

⁴⁹ December 17, 1937, letter from Constance Kyle to Ione Boulenger, MS#118, Series XI: Social Workers, Box 133, Folder 17, Constance Kyle Correspondence, 1937-1938, SRRAR, RBML, Columbia University.

At the beginning of the war in July 1936, the evacuation of children was a decentralized process, often organized by regional political parties, labor unions, and overlapping government ministries.⁵⁰ The ad-hoc nature of evacuation meant that the government ministries did not always know how many children had been resettled - or even exactly where they were living.⁵¹ At times representatives had difficulty answering questions from parents seeking information about their children.⁵² This was due to the number of ministries and organizations involved in local evacuations and the disorganization of the Republican government, recently decamped to Valencia. The Republic began to centralize evacuation efforts over the winter of 1937 and by August of that year officials had created *Consejo Nacional de la Infancia Evacuada*, (National Council for Evacuated Children) which was responsible for overseeing all evacuations - both internally within Spain and abroad.⁵³

There was a political motivation for the children's colonies as well. The Republican government was concerned that children evacuated to the exterior would be “denationalized,” and lose their connection to Spain, their acculturation, even their *lengua materna*.⁵⁴ For example, in the early months of the war, many children were sent to France through the designs of *Comité d'accueil aux Enfants d'Espagne* (CAEE), a subcommittee of the French trade union confederation *Confédération Générale du Travail* (CGT) and were placed with French families. As the war continued, the Republic's Ministry of Education representatives in Paris, known as the *Delegación Española para la Infancia Evacuada*, (DEIE), attempted to strengthen oversight of children's placements. One outcome was the development of collective children's colonies in the exterior to ensure that Spanish children would be taught by Spanish teachers, retaining their connection to the *patria* so that they could return with little cultural “loss.”⁵⁵ Ideally, children would not have to leave Spain at all. Thus, the appeal for relief to Spain was to permit the fledgling Republic to keep children in Spain instead of housing them internationally in conditions the Republic had no control over.⁵⁶

⁵⁰ Célia Keren, “From International Aid to State Policy: The Cross-Border Trajectory of the Spanish Child Evacuation scheme, 1936–1939,” *Public and Private Welfare in Modern Europe; Productive Entanglements*, (Routledge, 2022), identifies four different phases of child evacuation from Spain, focusing on the relationship between French unionists and child welfare ministries of the fledgling Spanish Republic. Keren posits that anarchist Federica Montseny was pivotal in bringing multiple child welfare agencies under her command in the winter of 1937, an important step toward state centralization (139).

⁵¹ Fernandez, 117: “Todavía en noviembre de 1937, la DEIE admite la posibilidad de que existan niños españoles viviendo en colonias colectivas de cuya existencia no tenga conocimiento.”

⁵² Fernandez, 97, and Keren, 140.

⁵³ Fernandez, 100.

⁵⁴ Keren, 146.

⁵⁵ While the Republic controlled pedagogic decisions, I am not sure how the Republic dealt with the distinct Basque, Valencian, and Catalan identities in their campaign against denationalization.

⁵⁶ Keren 149, and Virginia Malbin, interview with unknown, 1985, 11:00, ALBA.AUDIO.131, Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives, Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University. “The real

The decision to shift toward collective children's colonies was also pragmatic. The institutions that existed before the war were incapable of accommodating tens of thousands of displaced children; they did not have the physical capacity, nor the specific training needed to care for traumatized children. In the early months of the war, the Ministry of Public Education (*Ministerio de Instrucción Pública y Sanidad*) placed children in private homes under the "family model."⁵⁷ Under this model, fifty or so children were relocated to a safe village, where they were housed in private homes. Their host families received a government stipend in return for hosting and the children attended the local school, taught by a teacher who also supervised their placements. This proved less than ideal, as teachers were overwhelmed with educating, supervising, and advocating for fifty children. As historians Sjaak Braster & María del Mar del Pozo Andrés found, some teachers deposited their charges in a village and went straight to the front to fight.⁵⁸ The decentralization of children's placement meant variable living conditions, which were dependent upon families' means. Some children were not sent to school but put to house or farm work. Some were mistreated and some struggled to adapt to life in a different culture and language. Constance Kyle commented on the inadequacy of these private initiatives during her first delegation trip: "The children needed special supervision, special medical care, careful planning of studies and recreation...the Republican government of Spain is anxious that the children of Spain should bear as few scars from this war as is humanly possible to prevent their bearing."⁵⁹

For these reasons, by February of 1937 the Republic had begun to shift toward a more centralized model, creating the Central Delegation for Colonies (*Delegación Central de Colonias*) which operated under the *Dirección General de Primera Enseñanza*. In August 1937, the Republic replaced the Central Delegation for Colonies with the National Council for Evacuated Children (*Consejo Nacional de la Infancia Evacuada*), whose stated goal was to supervise all efforts related to the evacuation and care of children evacuated internally and externally. By October 1937, Kyle reported working with Juan Comas, who headed the Spanish Delegation for Evacuated Children (*Delegación Española para la Infancia Evacuada* or DEIE) overseeing the placement of children in the exterior, from the Paris office, and the *Ministerio (de Instrucción Pública)* in Barcelona, which "arranged to give us every facility that they have

purpose [in aiding Spain] was to do the kind of a job to secure sufficient food so that Spanish children would not have to be evacuated to France." <https://hdl.handle.net/2333.1/n02v75s3>.

⁵⁷ Ministry of Public Education, *Children's Colonies*, National Council for Evacuated Children, November 1937, MS#118, Series XI: Social Workers, Box 133, Folder 13, SRRAR, RBML, Columbia University.

⁵⁸ Sjaak Braster & María del Mar del Pozo Andrés, "Education and the children's colonies in the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939): The Images of the Community Ideal," *Paedagogica Historica: International Journal of the History of Education*, Vol. 51, No. 4, (July 2015) 458.

⁵⁹ Constance Kyle, "Children of Madrid," August 1937, MS#118, Series XI: Social Workers, Box 133, Folder 13, SRRAR, RBML, Columbia University.

available,” including office space. She also reported working closely with Esperanza Gonzalez, former university professor in Madrid.⁶⁰ All of these signs point to tighter organizational operations.

Children’s Colonies

Historians have identified approximately 200 government-sponsored *colonias infantiles*, supplemented by other *colonias* or *hogares* run by unions and charitable organizations.⁶¹ Numbers are difficult to assess given the changing nature of the front in war-time Spain, but as a snapshot in time, in November 1937 up to 12,124 children were housed in 153 *colonias infantiles*, while 45,246 children were housed the “family” model.⁶² The collective children’s colonies varied in location, size, and condition, but the majority held between 25-100 children, supervised by directors, teachers, and nurses.⁶³ Many were housed in large villas that had been abandoned by Spain’s wealthy elite. These homes, according to the Social Workers Committee’s Child Care Commission’s observations, were “frequently set in the midst of a beautiful garden, with spacious grounds, and perhaps a luxurious swimming pool and tennis courts.”⁶⁴ Others, like El Perelló, followed the “cottage” model, with 10-20 children living together in each of four or five houses situated close to one another.⁶⁵ In early 1939, relief literature spoke about scaling up this project into a large-scale “Children’s City” or “Children’s Republic” that would house thousands of children in sections sponsored by international countries as a response to the mass influx of hundreds of thousands of child refugees experienced that winter.⁶⁶ Instead, the end of the Republic came all at once on April 1, 1939. At the end of the war, most *colonias* were dismantled, while others moved operations to France.

According to historians Sjaak Braster & María del Mar del Pozo Andrés, colonies often consisted of children from the same grade school in Madrid or other urban areas, which permitted greater social bonds and group cohesion. Teachers lived with the children, alongside a resident nurse, director, and

⁶⁰ Letter from Constance Kyle to Jen Chatlkin (sic), October 28, 1937, MS#118, Series XI: Social Workers, Box 133, Folder 17, Constance Kyle Correspondence, 1937-1938, SRRAR, RBML, Columbia University.

⁶¹ This number is difficult to parse, given the fluctuating line of the front and the increasing number of refugees as the war went on. See Juan M. Fernández, 112.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ministry of Public Education, *Children’s Colonies*, National Council for Evacuated Children, November 1937, MS#118, Series XI: Social Workers, Box 133, Folder 13, SRRAR, RBML, Columbia University.

⁶⁴ Child Care Commission, “Case Record of New Spain, I,” *Social Work Today*, Vol. V, No. 2, November 1937, 9-11.

⁶⁵ Letter from Ione Boulanger to Constance Kyle, August 10, 1938, describing the bombing of El Perelló colony, MS#118, Series XI: Social Workers, Box 133, Folder 17, Constance Kyle Correspondence, 1937-1938, SRRAR, RBML, Columbia University.

⁶⁶ “Two Years of American Aid to Spain” Pamphlet, produced by the Medical Bureau and the North American Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy, 1939, MS#118, Series VII: Negro People’s Committee, 1938-1939, Box 75, Folder 1, SRRAR, RBML, Columbia University.

housekeepers. The children's day to day began with an early wake-up, then a light breakfast, classes, a substantial lunch, singing or conversation around the table, playtime, dinner, and after-dinner entertainment.⁶⁷ On special days the children might go on outings to other villages, or on a hike in the mountains or a visit to the beach. When Christmas neared, the *Ministerio* organized an alternative to Epiphany in the form of Children's Week (*Semana del Niño*) complete with mass theater excursions in the cities and parties at each *colonia*. While directors attempted to offer children a stable and calm quotidian life, they were challenged by air raids, bombing attacks, scarcity of food, and inadequate clothing for the children, especially as the war entered its third year.

The purpose of such homes was to create a physical and psychological buffer from the war; to create a protected, idyllic, and healthy environment where children could move about freely. The environment and programming were to aid in children's development and psychological needs, which were so badly scarred from the war. Teachers were encouraged to nurture children's curiosity, with "spontaneous lessons" arising out of children's interests. Here the distinction between academic instruction (*instrucción escolar*) and education (*educación*) is helpful; above all the *colonias* emphasized *educación*, or the formation of a child's character. In this way, the *colonias* were not simply supervising young people separated from their parents, they were intended to be sites of socialization and self-realization. As a propaganda poster in Barcelona insisted, "Children are the Adults of Tomorrow."⁶⁸

According to the government's recommendations, health, cleanliness, and "good taste" were paramount in the *colonia infantil*. The Spanish Republic's Ministry of Public Education's pamphlet *Children's Colonies*, printed in English, French, and Spanish for an international audience, offers very specific directives on the day-to-day routine of a colony. The Ministry gives considerable directions on how to create an aesthetically pleasing environment ("bedspreads in harmonious colors, colorful napkins"), hygienic habits ("table linens and napkins should be changed at least once a week, sheets, as often as possible") and showers or baths mandated "*twice a week at the very least*" (Original emphasis). Under no circumstances were children permitted to share a bed. Most importantly, the child's life needed to reflect "complete order and regularity," with a consistent daily routine that encouraged the child's participation and decision-making.⁶⁹

The children's homes played an important role in building children's identification with New Spain by encouraging cooperation and self-initiative. This required children to have a sense of

⁶⁷ Sjaak Braster & María del Mar del Pozo Andrés, "Education and the children's colonies in the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939): the Images of the Community Ideal," *Paedagogica Historica: International Journal of the History of Education*, Vol. 51, No. 4, (July 2015) 461.

⁶⁸ Constance Kyle, "Children of Madrid," August 1937, MS#118, Series XI: Social Workers, Box 133, Folder 13, SRRAR, RBML, Columbia University.

⁶⁹ Ministry of Public Education, *Children's Colonies*, National Council for Evacuated Children, November 1937, MS#118, Series XI: Social Workers, Box 133, Folder 13, SRRAR, RBML, Columbia University.

responsibility in their day-to-day life. Children were encouraged to take ownership over growing food, cleaning their living space, preparing food, even minding younger children. Each colony was encouraged to discuss its key, salient characteristic, and to produce a weekly newspaper or wall newspaper to keep children abreast of developments in the colony and in Spain. Chores, such as tending the vegetable patch, cleaning the bedrooms, setting the dining table, were done in groups, “organized among collective lines.” Older children were asked to guide and mentor younger ones.⁷⁰ Everyone was expected to contribute to make the *colonia* a success.

When Thyra Edwards and Constance Kyle toured the children’s colonies in October 1937, they were impressed with the children’s initiative. Writing about the children at the Rosa Luxemburg Home, they describe how the entire colony organized to give them a send-off party: The children moved up the dinner hour so as to accommodate Edwards and Kyle’s train departure, and the cook used the week’s meat ration to make a special meal. Constance Kyle noted: “The children were rather quiet until it was time for us to get our bags and start the dash to the station, then it developed that they had plans of their own. They began to sing a beautiful youth song and two of the girls stepped forward to present us with great bunches of dahlias from the garden. Three of the ten-year olds had been elected to help take us to the train and their coats hidden so we should not discover their surprise.”⁷¹ The two had to practically “tear themselves away” from the colony.

Kyle and Edwards wrote highly of the colonies and the *responsables* (directors) sensitive treatment of children. The farm colony at Cornell Cottage, sponsored by Anna Louise Strong, was described as being particularly therapeutic on traumatized adolescent boys. The “troubled” teenagers, who had ripped up their beds in a previous placement, seemed to be calmer at Cornell. Director Friedl Funk noted how hard the adolescent boys worked, despite their traumatic past: “You’d hardly call them bad boys,” he pointed out, “Actually most of them are originally from good families in Madrid. They’re disintegrated by the war experience, Not only the children but many grown ups have been finished up under it. Had you been in the North as I have, smelling powder all the time for weeks as I did you’d have lost your memory, your mind.”⁷² Similarly, Kyle wrote how impressed she was by “stable, intelligent supervision” the children received at the Ayuda Infantil in Barcelona. The children remained calm as the

⁷⁰Ibid.

⁷¹ Constance Kyle to Chicago Chapter of Social Workers Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy, October 23, 1937, MS#118, Series XI: Social Workers, Box 133, Folder 7, Constance Kyle Correspondence, SRRAR, RBML, Columbia University.

⁷² Wednesday November 24, 1937, Part 1: Associated Negro Press News Releases, 1928-1964, Series A: 1928-1944, The Claude A. Barnett Papers: The Associated Negro Press, 1918-1967.

air raid sirens and anti-battery explosions began, something that would have sent the children “into a panic” before their arrival to the home.⁷³

Virginia Malbin, in Spain in August 1937 and again between June and December 1938, was struck by the care and attention that children received. Fifty-five years later, she recalled how impactful it was to see the children’s homes: “The biggest lift that I got was when I went to the children’s homes that were located in beautiful estates - homes that had been deserted by supporters of Franco. There were 50-60 kids in a home, and they were being cared for in such a loving way with a real respect for them as children...I had worked in child welfare in the United States and I knew what happened to kids here.” In contrast, Spanish children were given “all the good things” children needed to grow, develop, and realize their potential, despite being “in the middle of this war-torn country. I actually saw it in action.”⁷⁴ In Malbin’s view, Spanish children were given as much as the Republic could invest.

Of course, despite the overwhelmingly positive impression of *colonias infantiles* and the care and attention the children received, the separation between child and parents was profoundly traumatic.⁷⁵ Surprisingly, at least to this author, none of the relief literature nor correspondence between the Social Workers Committee and Constance Kyle refers to parent-child separation nor how *responsables* helped children process such a traumatic break. The only reference I have found that refers to the separation of parents and children is an undated article by Kate Mangan, in which she relays conversation with a bus driver responsible for chauffeuring evacuated children. He describes the “heart-rending farewells with the parents” as the evacuation begins. The first hour of the journey is full of “crying and car-sick children,” who eventually become interested and excited in the journey and sing “Pop-eye the Sailor Man.”⁷⁶ In Mangan’s anecdote, the children are sad only for a short time, but soon recover from the separation. Even the NAC Bulletin on Children’s Homes, shows a photograph of children eagerly inspecting mail, not from their parents, but from American children.⁷⁷

⁷³ Kyle to Jen Chakin, SWC Executive Secretary, October 19, 1937, MS#118, Series XI: Social Work, Box 133, Folder 16, International Memos, SRRAR, RBML, Columbia University.

⁷⁴ Virginia Malbin, interview with Francis Patai, January 25, 1991, 22:00, ALBA.AUDIO.131, Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives, Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University <https://hdl.handle.net/2333.1/h70rz592>.

⁷⁵ Adult children who had been evacuated later recalled their experiences with numerous memoirs published between the late 1980s and early 2000s. A smattering of these titles include J.J. Alonso Carballés, *1937: los Niños Vascos Evacuados a Francia y Bélgica: Historia y Memoria de un Éxodo Infantil, 1936–1940* (1998); Veronica Sierra, *Palabras Huérfanas: Los Niños y la Guerra Civil* (2009); Alicia Pozo-Gutierrez and Padmini Broomfield, *‘Here, Look After Him’: Voices of Basque Evacuee Children of the Spanish Civil War* (2012).

⁷⁶ Kate Mangan, ND, MS#118, Series XV: Photographs, Box 170, Folder 14, Children’s Art Exhibition, SRRAR, RBML, Columbia University.

⁷⁷ North American Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy Bulletin, “Our Children in Spain,” Volume 1, ND, ALBA.019, Box 8, Folder 5, Veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade Records, Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University.

The absence of recognition of children's trauma in being separated from their families is peculiar, but perhaps can be understood in the context of the war. Evacuation was viewed as a painful but necessary step to keep children safe and was promoted heavily among friends of Spain to "Save Spain's Children." Nonetheless, Francoist propaganda slammed the evacuations as evidence of the Republic's "stealing children," a step toward communist destruction of the family.⁷⁸ Ironically, it would be under Franco's rule that officials and hospital staff forcefully removed children from their parents well into the 1950s.⁷⁹ Looking closely at evacuated children's writings and drawings, there is quite a lot of evidence of the children's pain. Drawings rendered by evacuated children depict a variety of scenes from their pre-war life to the trauma of inescapable aerial bombardment. In one picture exhibited in Valencia, a small child cries out in fear next to her mother as airplanes drop bombs around the pair. In another, a child depicts a residential building destroyed by planes in Madrid, commenting "I witnessed [the bombing] when I went with my brothers to bring lunch to my father." Others are more positive, crowds swimming in the Mediterranean, or a memory of mending fishing nets with their mother before their father goes out to fish.⁸⁰

Children's drawings would go on to garner great national and international attention. In Valencia, 118 children's drawings were exhibited for two weeks in May 1937 much to the excitement of the child artists and the exhibition was later sent to England and the United States. A smaller selection of drawings was exhibited by the American Friends Service Committee, in the collection "They Still Draw Pictures!" which included an introduction by Aldous Huxley and sold as a fundraiser for children's aid in 1938.⁸¹ For the North American Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy and Social Workers Committee, children's drawings and letters spoke to sponsoring chapters over 5,000 kilometers away, where they built a parasocial relationship between colony and sponsor. They were also excellent material for publicity and fundraising purposes.

Colonias and Relief Sponsored by the North American Committee

Ten *colonias* throughout Loyalist Spain were sponsored by the North American Coalition to Aid Spanish Democracy.⁸² Through fundraising campaigns, monthly pledges, and chapter-based and even

⁷⁸ Veronica Sierra, *Palabras Huérfanas: Los Niños y la Guerra Civil*, (Taurus 2009) Chapter 10

⁷⁹ Up to 300,000 babies were removed from socially and politically undesirable families between 1930 and the 1950s; Sandrine Mercier, Juan Gordillo Hidalgo, directors, *The Stolen: Spain's Missing Babies*, Java Films, 2013.

⁸⁰ MS#118, Series XV: Photographs, Box 170, Folder 14, Children's Art Exhibition, 1937, RBML, Columbia University.

⁸¹ *They Still Draw Pictures!* The Spanish Child Welfare Association of America, New York, MS#118, Series XVI: Publicity, Box 252, SRRAR, RBML, Columbia University.

⁸² In a January 1938 article titled "Life in Balance," published in *The Fight* Dr. Herman Reissig of the NAC describes ten sponsored children's homes which shelter 500 children out of an estimated 750,000 child refugees (Francis Patai Papers, ALBA.0131, Box 2, Folder 13, Constance Kyle). In the *North American Committee Special*

brigade-based sponsorship, money and goods in kind went to sustain these colonies every month. North American Committee publications state that up to 600 children were sponsored by North American donations.⁸³ Some of the most well-known include the Thomas Jefferson House in Cantonigrós, sponsored by the Youth Committee of the North American Committee, and the Ethel Taylor Memorial Home in El Perelló, sponsored by the New York chapter of the Social Workers' Committee at a monthly cost of \$262, or approximately \$5,500 in today's dollars.⁸⁴

In October 1937 Thyra Edwards accompanied Constance Kyle for two and a half weeks on her tour of children's colonies. The pair visited multiple internationally sponsored children's homes, including the Puigcerda farm colony ("Cornell Cottage"), the Thomas Jefferson House in "Con Toni Gros," and the Rosa Luxemburg House in Barcelona, before traveling to Valencia for the monthly meeting of international relief delegates. Kyle's own words describe the scope and purpose of the visit, which are worth quoting at length:

"Thyra and I left Paris on the 5th [of October 1937], entering Spain by way of Puigcerda and visiting the many colonies in the region. Pla Mala Mort is just outside of Puigcerda and is the place selected by Anna Louise Strong for a farm colony. We spent the day out there, talking with the boys, their maestros and learning more about how the farm is progressing under guidance of Friedl Funk and the International Voluntary Service for Peace. From Puigcerda we went to Con Toni Gros, (sic) living in the Youth Committee Thomas Jefferson home from Sunday to Wednesday. On both of those centers I sent Paris detailed accounts of the situation, in regard to supplies. Administration in so far as it concerns work from the foreign end, and recommendations based on discussions with the various *responsables* et cetera, as well as those who have helped us directly in our work. I had the opportunity to talk more informally with the children and *responsables* and sent Paris quite a collection of their drawings and letters about their life in an American colony. From Con Toni Gros, (sic) we went to Barcelona, and lived at the colony, Residencia Rosa Luxemburg, for a week while checking up on NAC supplies en route from

Bulletin, also published in January 1938, nine homes are listed: Thomas Jefferson Home, "Can Toni Gras" in the Pyrenees Mountains in Catalonia, Las Planas, Can Toni Gras (sic) in the Pyrenees Mountains in Catalonia, Joseph-Seligman-Julius Rosenthal Home, Picaña, near Valencia, Washington Friends of Spanish Democracy International Workers Order - American Friends of Spanish Democracy Infants Home, Villagordo del Jucar, near Valencia; Joe York-James Ashford Youth Home, Villagordo del Jucar, near Valencia; American League for Peace and Democracy Home with "Anita Garibaldi" Sueca, near Valencia, Jane Addams Home with Progressive Women's Council wing, Quart de Poblet, near Valencia, supported by the Chicago Chapter of the SWC, Ben Leider Memorial Home with "Solidarity" wing, Benimamet, near Valencia, named after fallen ALB volunteer; Ethel Taylor Memorial Home in El Perelló, just outside Valencia, maintained by the Social Workers Committee. (NAC *Special Bulletin*, January 1938, ALBA.019, Box 7, Folder 7.)

⁸³ "Two Years of American Aid to Spain" Pamphlet, produced by the Medical Bureau and the North American Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy, 1939, MS#118, Series VII: Negro People's Committee, 1938-1939, Box 75, Folder 1, SRRAR, RBML, Columbia University.

⁸⁴ The Ethel Taylor Memorial Home was named after the executive secretary of the SWC who passed away in June 1937. Announced in *Social Work Today*, Vol. V, No. 4, January 1938, 25. Inflation calculation from US Bureau of Labor Statistics, https://www.bls.gov/data/inflation_calculator.htm

Havre... You can imagine the excitement about five and a half tons of corn beef and a large shipment of clothing for the Catalonia region, and more on the way.”⁸⁵

From this description we can gather that Kyle was quite involved in the colonies, hearing directly from the directors what type of aid was needed and then communicating that need back to Paris and the NAC and SWC. From there, it was up to the chapters in the United States to raise the funds needed to purchase supplies. In a letter to the US from Ione Boulenger, she encourages a supporter to purchase powdered eggs, soap, sugar, powdered or tinned milk, dried/smoked/salted fish, tinned meat, chickpeas, dried beans, powdered cocoa, dried fruit, jams, and honey, and warm clothing or wool,⁸⁶ communicating how dependent the colonies were on food from the exterior. This need only grew as the war pressed on into its second and third years.

Kyle’s communications took on a more urgent tone by March 1938, after the fascist bombings of Barcelona killed thousands of civilians in the city. The ideal of the “complete order and regularity” was replaced with more urgent tasks of feeding and housing homeless and orphaned children. As Kyle writes to the Paris office: “The one big aim now is to give these children shelter and a reasonable minimum of food.”⁸⁷ The previously strict instruction to keep children one to a bed had been replaced with doubling children up in sleeping arrangements. Kyle cabled New York after the Barcelona bombing on March 28, 1939, pleading for donations: “Air raid Tuesday destroyed baby creche Barcelona maternity home luckily all babies refused [rescued] in time none killed stop found their empty cots mass mangled steel, shreds bedclothes feathers everywhere stop...can America open subscription to rebuild creche.”⁸⁸

In the second half of the year, the international movement to “Lift the Embargo” gained momentum, coinciding with a large push for relief aid. From the United States, a two-month long campaign to fill the American Relief Ship launched, buoyed by fundraising dances, concerts, lectures, and film showing. Constance Kyle traveled to the States to campaign for the Relief Ship. A dinner was held in her honor in New York, with a triumphant fundraising total of \$3,000 USD (approximately \$67,000 in 2024 dollars).⁸⁹ The Duchess of Atholl held a fundraising dinner in New York City that same month,

⁸⁵ Letter from Constance Kyle to Jen Chakin, SWC Executive Secretary, October 28, 1937, MS#118, Box 133, Social Workers, Folder 17, Constance Kyle Correspondence, 1937-1938, SRRAR, RBML, Columbia University.

⁸⁶ Letter from Ione Boulenger, Commission des Enfants to Ben Goldman, Social Service Workers Committee, September 1, 1937, MS#118, Box 133, Social Workers, Folder 16, International Memos, 1937-1938, SRRAR, RBML, Columbia University.

⁸⁷ Letter from Constance Kyle to Peter Rhodes, Paris Office, March 19, 1938, MS#118, Box 133, Social Workers, Folder 17, Constance Kyle Correspondence, 1937-1938, SRRAR, RBML, Columbia University.

⁸⁸ “A Cable from Spain,” March 28, 1938, ALBA.0131, Box 2, Folder 13, Francis Patai Papers, Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives, Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University.

⁸⁹ Inflation calculation from US Bureau of Labor Statistics, https://www.bls.gov/data/inflation_calculator.htm

netting \$5,000 (approximately \$112,000 in today's dollars) for the Relief Ship.⁹⁰ The Negro People's Ambulance, whose funds were organized by Thyra Edwards in August and September of 1938, was also aboard the ship.⁹¹

On November 28, 1938, *Time Magazine* reported that the SS Erica Reed, the "American Relief Ship" to Spain, had arrived in Barcelona delivering "5,000 tons of wheat, enough to make 7,480,000 pound loaves of bread, bought from the U. S. Federal Surplus Commodities Corporation; 28,540 lbs. of powdered milk (500,000 glasses); substantial quantities of canned meats and vegetables, rice and beans; 400 bales of clothing; 590,000 vitamin tablets, 100,000 quinine tablets, 100,000 aspirin, 26 lbs. of nicotinic acid for pellagra victims." While *Time Magazine* described the aid as just a "crumb in Leftist Spain's empty dinner pail," the ship represented months of intense activity by US-American organizers to send food, medical supplies, clothing, and even ambulances to Spain.⁹² Photographs from the Spanish Refugee Relief Archives document the ship's arrival and unloading, reflecting its symbolic importance to the Republic in the face of unrelenting fascist advance. The crew wear matching shirts with the name "SS Erica Reed" emblazoned on the front and the ship's deck shows silos full of grain, waiting to be unloaded. An ambulance, "For the Spanish Children from the North American Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy" is parked on the deck. Constance Kyle is present on the ship's bow, alongside the crew, and again next to an ambulance donated from the People of the Lower East Side.⁹³ As Franco's forces continued to eat up Loyalist territory, the American Relief Ship would be the last major campaign by the NAC and SWC before the fall of Barcelona in January 1939.

Photographs and Relief Literature

While it is not known exactly how the SS Erica Reed photographs were used by the NAC or SWC, it is evident that photographs played a very important role in both motivating donations and evidencing their implementation. Photography, as other scholars have observed, was a critical weapon of the war. Photographs and films showed the scale of urban bombings, dramatically depicting the smashed Puerta del Sol in Madrid or the skeleton of a building, surrounded by rubble. Photographs proved the involvement of German and Italian fascists in the war, demonstrating their defiance of non-intervention.

⁹⁰ Erica Reed Arrival, American Relief Ship, 1938, MS#118, Series XV: Photographs, Box 172, Folder 1, SRRAR, RBML, Columbia University; Inflation calculation from US Bureau of Labor Statistics, https://www.bls.gov/data/inflation_calculator.htm

⁹¹ MS#118, Series VII: Negro People's Committee, Box 75, Folder 1, 1938-1939, SRRAR, RBML, Columbia University.

⁹² Foreign News, "Bread and Liberty." *Time Magazine*, Monday, Nov. 28, 1938. <https://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,771197,00.html>

⁹³ Erica Reed Arrival, American Relief Ship, 1938, MS#118, Series XV: Photographs, Box 172, Folder 1, SRRAR, RBML, Columbia University.

And photographs, more than anything, communicated civilian suffering: a child amputee with a wooden leg, a starving baby in their mother's arms, and even graphic photographs of dead children, lined up in rows; each photograph calling for the potential donor to act - to do *something* to stop such horror.

For many relief organizations, that *something* was to give generously to the Spanish cause to relieve the suffering of the Spanish people. Thus, relief photography needed to offer demonstrable evidence of effectiveness and application. This was important in the face of State Department accusations that much less than the \$1 million raised by the NAC ever made it to Spain, or that administrative costs took up a large percentage of funds raised. The brochure, *Two Years of American Aid to Spain* seemingly refutes these accusations with a full-page accounting of money and goods in kind received, noting that all donations are audited by public accountants and reported to the State Department each month and that only 7.8% of every dollar raised went to administration.⁹⁴ For that reason, photographs of children posing with relief seem to be especially important. In the Spanish Refugee Relief Archive Records' photograph collection, there are many photographs to this effect. In one photograph, a baby is seated with cans of tinned milk around them; in another photograph children are posed with specially enriched bags of flour. In an undated photo, three children from the colony "Can Toni Gros" smile in front of an ambulance donated by the North American Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy, while another child sits in the driver's seat.⁹⁵

⁹⁴ "Two Years of American Aid to Spain" Pamphlet, produced by the Medical Bureau and the North American Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy, 1939, MS#118, Series VII: Negro People's Committee, 1938-1939, Box 75, Folder 1, SRRAR, RBML, Columbia University.

⁹⁵ MS#118, Series XV: Photographs, Box 170, Folder 15, Children's Colonies and Schools, SRRAR, RBML, Columbia University.



Photographs of the children's colony were evidence of a donor's funds at work, but also "proof" of the small humans on the other side of the long logistical chain of solicitations, donations, bank transfers, purchasing, transportation, distribution - and finally, use. In correspondence, the SWC chapters pressed Kyle again and again for photographs of the children in the colonies. Chapters and groups that directly sponsored colonies wanted photographs showing the interior and exterior of the home, ideally with the sponsored name visible. At one point, there was an attempt to have donors sponsor specific sibling groups in a colony, which required an enormous logistical undertaking of listing, tracking, photographing, and matching donors with children. The initiative appears to have been dropped quickly thereafter, although there are photographs of sibling groups from El Perelló with "SWC" scribbled on the back. When Constance Kyle could not get regular transportation, she insisted: "Either we must find a way to get a car, or we must halt all talk of individual photos [of the children] and detailed propaganda of that nature."⁹⁶

⁹⁶ Letter from Constance Kyle to Ione Boulenger, December 17, 1937, MS#118, Series XI: Social Workers, Box 133, Folder 17, Constance Kyle Correspondence, 1937-1938, SRRAR, RBML, Columbia University.

Jen Chakin of the Social Workers Committee asks again and again for photographs and materials from the American-run children's homes to aid in fundraising appeals. It is perhaps for that reason that so many of the photographs of children's homes are named and identified in the SRRAR Series XV. Identification permitted sponsoring groups a window into "their" colony and encouraged feelings of connection. In addition, letters and drawings from children were in high demand for SWC chapters. Given the geographical distance and the general lack of coverage on the conditions of refugees, this material helped donors feel closer to the children. Blanche Mahler wrote to Ione Boulenger that the office framed children's drawings to display them at meetings, conferences, and dinners: "it makes the maintenance of the home a *vital and living project* to which our American social workers are deeply attached (emphasis added)."⁹⁷ SWC found that children's drawings were particularly useful for fundraising. Again, Mahler writes to Boulenger: "Children's work always has a special appeal, and I find these drawings catch the attention of the wealthy group in New York, who can, sometimes, be reached with a purely humanitarian appeal."⁹⁸

Peter Rhodes, in the same letter written to Dr. Herman Reissig stressing the need for reliable transportation for Constance Kyle, described just how important the work of collecting print materials from the colonies was for the maintenance of the homes:

"While we are gradually getting the "*responsables*" of each colony to understand the publicity needs of the foreign committees supporting their homes and getting them to provide photos, stories, etc, it has been necessary in the past to visit most of the colonies directly, in order to get the desired information. This has kept Miss Kyle rushing about and has tired her considerably. The shipment of the American truck for her to use for these trips as well as for the transport of goods to the different colonies, will go a great way toward solving this problem."⁹⁹

Photographs not only captured individual children, but also illustrated the collective nature of life in the colony. Children are almost always photographed in groups. In one photograph of the Thomas Jefferson house, children with cut, short hair (perhaps due to lice infestation) are seated in the sun on the steps of the home, reading and laughing together. In El Perelló, children are shown building sandcastles on the beach. At Benimamet, children are shown attending class in a large, airy classroom. Photographs also attempt to convey the children's day-to-day routine, possibly to help donors imagine what life is like in the colonies, or to demonstrate the competency and progressive nature of the homes. One photograph shows a circle of boys learning how to sew; another shows girls peeling potatoes in meal preparation.

⁹⁷ Nov 15, 1938, letter from Blanche Mahler, SWC Executive Secretary, to Ione Boulenger, MS#118, Series XI: Social Workers, Box 133, Folder 16, International Memos, 1937-1938, SRRAR, RBML, Columbia University.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Letter from Peter Rhodes, American Delegate to Dr. Herman Reissig, February 10, 1938, MS#118, Series XI: Social Workers, Box 133, Folder 16, International Memos, 1937-1938, SRRAR, RBML, Columbia University.

Another photograph shows children making their beds in the morning. In this way, we are encouraged to read children as active, responsible participants in the colony model, all contributing to its operational success.¹⁰⁰



WORK: The Thomas Jefferson Home, Can Toni Gros, #6
in Catalonia.
The girls will meal. — so peel the potatoes



¹⁰⁰ MS#118, Series XV: Photographs 1937-1939, Box 170, Folder 16, Children's Homes in Spain, SRRAR, RBML, Columbia University

These photographs also demonstrated how relief literature acted as interlocutors for children in the colonies; in essence, speaking on their behalf. The imposition of the captions on the children's activities and the posed nature of some of the photographs, however, raise questions about their performativity. How much should we think about these photographs as representational of life in the children's colonies? This paper is not in a position to fully assess the "authenticity" of the photographs, even if it were possible, but rather to note the ambiguity present in these images.¹⁰¹ The photographs, although showing scenes from daily life, are not for the children, but international sponsors and donors, which raises questions about children's agency. The children's subjectivity is ambiguous: the children cast are both victims of the war, in need of aid, but are also represented as self-realized, confident, and happy in colony photos. Photographs show donor's their "dollars at work" to demonstrate relief in action; but they also reflect a deep utopian longing by the supporters of Republican Spain.

The photographs of the rearguard can be read as communist or socialist future that many in Spain dreamed about: from each according to their ability, to each according to their need. It was a Spain where children could live peacefully and cooperatively with full bellies, with swimming pools and tennis courts for all. That future might include plump babies fattened with milk from government-run dispensaries, children being fed in "Children's Restaurant #39," sponsored by an army battalion, and schools with large, well-appointed classrooms filled with children learning to read. In other words, despite the scarcity, hunger, and deprivation of the war, these colony photos projected a world without want. In photograph after photograph, children are playing, studying, and working cooperatively together at the *colonias infantiles*. These are photographs of a government and a movement deeply hopeful about an anti-fascist future.

The photographs of the Republic's children's colonies, milk dispensaries, and children's restaurants stand in such stark relief from the reality of Franco's advance and the mass death toll of the war. The Republic's experimental programs attempted to preserve social reproduction in the rearguard by marshaling foreign resources against terrible scarcity and hunger. The *colonias infantiles* were one such experiment, which through the relief literature, photographs, and correspondence from Constance Kyle, the enormous amount of labor and resources poured into the rearguard is made visible, even if it was "just a crumb in Leftist Spain's empty dinner pail."

¹⁰¹ Siân Roberts explores the performativity in children's aid colony photographs with great sensitivity, raising important questions about child agency and surveillance, of passive victim of war and active participant. See Siân Roberts, "Activism, agency and archive: British activists and the representation of educational colonies in Spain during and after the Spanish Civil War," *Paedagogica Historica, International Journal of the History of Education*, 49:6, (2013), 796-812.

Conclusion

Unfortunately, the future depicted in the photographs of *colonias infantiles* did not come to pass. The relatively stable and prosperous period of children's colonies in 1937 gave way to further hardship and bombings in 1938 and 1939 as refugee numbers skyrocketed. As the Republic faltered and bombs reached the "safe" areas of the Republic, like El Perelló and Silla, parents came to retrieve their children. Hundreds of thousands, if not millions, walked onward to France, where concentration camps and further exile awaited many of them. Those who were turned back to Spain faced Franco's retribution in the form of mass executions and prison. As relatively logistically "easy" as it was to evacuate one's child, under Franco it was exceedingly difficult to reunite with them. As historian Veronica Sierra has documented, parents who wanted to claim their children were required to answer an extensive questionnaire that compelled them to self-implicate, i.e. to list their political activities, job, and social references. Attempts to reclaim children outside of official channels were criminally punished; before families were permitted to receive their children, they had to prove they had the means to care for them. Children who were not approved for reunification were placed under the *Junta Provisional de Menores* and then often into religious institutions that looked quite different from *colonias infantiles* of the Republic. Children of political prisoners were sent to asylums, orphanages, convents, and reformatories, and even adopted out to Falangist parents in an effort to secure Spain's anti-Communist future.¹⁰²

In early 1939 the efforts of the NAC and SWC shifted to aid Spanish refugees pouring to France, spurred by the fall of Barcelona in January and finally Madrid on April 1, 1939. The Republic's collapse upended the NAC and SWC's close working relationship with *Ministerios*, which dissolved overnight. This made fundraising all the more difficult even as the need was at its greatest. Geopolitical shifts introduced fissures into the organization. The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of August 1939 and France's decision in September 1939 to expel hundreds of thousands of Spanish Republican refugees to Francoist Spain fractured the NAC's previous political unity, and in 1940 the organization split along ideological lines into the liberal Spanish Refugee Relief Campaign (SRRC), headed by Dr. Herman Reissig, and the Communist-led Joint Anti-Fascist Refugee Committee (JAFRC), headed by Dr. Edward Barsky. Neither would go on to marshal the same level of resources as during the height of the relief campaign.¹⁰³

In September 1939, SWC Chairman Harald Lund urged the Social Workers Committee to keep going by expanding its relief work to other war-related problems: "Much would be lost if this effort to get social workers to function as a unit on projects of major political significance would be allowed to collapse...the committee should broaden out the function in connection not only to the Spanish refugees but to other problems which will arise out of the war...why would this be left to Quakers and Red Cross

¹⁰² Veronica Sierra, *Palabras Huérfanas: Los Niños y la Guerra Civil*, (Taurus 2009) Chapter 10.

¹⁰³ Eric Smith, *American Relief Aid and the Spanish Civil War*, 103.

exclusively? A truly democratic group is needed.”¹⁰⁴ Further research is required to understand if and how the Social Workers Committee to Aid Spain Democracy refashioned itself to respond to ever-greater waves of European refugees as the war commenced, and if the political differences that split the NAC also divided their organization.

The history of Constance Kyle after 1939 is opaque. Among the archival records in the Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives and Spanish Refugee Relief Association Records, Kyle’s history after 1939 is not yet found. Virginia Malbin, who was in Barcelona just prior to its fall in December 1938, was on the last train out of the city with the remaining internationals.¹⁰⁵ It is likely Kyle was also on that train. In February 1939 Kyle left France on the SS Aquitania. How did she feel leaving the children for whom she cared so deeply about? What - or who - greeted her upon her return to the States? Did she continue to raise funds for Spanish children from Chicago? Did she travel to Mexico to aid in refugee resettlement, like her colleague Thyra Edwards? Did she visit the exiled Constancia de la Mora in Cuernavaca, Mexico, after 1940? Did she join the war effort a few years later? Was she persecuted for her political commitment to aid the children of Spain, targeted by the anti-Communist forces? It seems impossible to believe that Kyle, who had unionized social workers, agitated for federal relief in the US, and threw herself into raising children’s aid in Spain would simply stop with the fall of the Republic.

Perhaps Kyle thought of her mission, as Muriel Rukeyser did as a young poet and journalist in Spain, heeding the call of the Republic: “If you have felt inactivity, that is over now. Your work begins. It is your work now to go back, to tell your countries what you have seen in Spain.”¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ Letter from Harald Lund to Blanche Mahler, SWC Executive Secretary, September 8, 1939, Series XI Social Workers, MS#118, Box 133, Folder 1, Administrative National Committee, SRRAR, RBML, Columbia University.

¹⁰⁵ Virginia Malbin, interview with Francis Patai, January 25, 1991, 06:45, ALBA.AUDIO.131, Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives, Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University: <https://hdl.handle.net/2333.1/h70rz592>

¹⁰⁶ Muriel Rukeyser, *Savage Coast*, (New York, Feminist Press 1936, 2013) 269.



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¹⁰⁷ “Photograph of Constance Kyle and Thyra Edwards visiting a children’s colony near Barcelona,” likely taken October 1937. MS#118, Series XV: Photographs 1937-1939, Box 170, Folder 16, Children’s Homes in Spain, SRRAR, RBML, Columbia University.



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¹⁰⁸ Constance Kyle at a reception for the American Relief Ship with the “Women’s Aid Committee, reading the message of the American people,” November 1938, MS#118, Series XV: Photographs 1937-1939, Box 172, Folder 1, Erica Reed, SRRAR, RBML, Columbia University.

¹⁰⁹ Constance Kyle and others [unknown] receiving an ambulance from the People of the Lower East Side, “Presentation of Ambulances sent on Relief Ship to the Inspector General of Sanidad Militar,” November 26, 1938, MS#118, Series XV: Photographs 1937-1939, Box 172, Folder 1, Erica Reed Relief Ship, SRRAR, RBML, Columbia University.



¹¹⁰ Constance Kyle in the cab of a truck, "Office International Pour L'Enfance," ND, MS#118, Series XV: Photographs 1937-1939, Box 172, Folder 32, Constance Kyle, SRRAR, RBML, Columbia University.