

# Radio España Independiente, La Pirenaica: The Voice of the Victims of the Franco Regime

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## Abstract

*Radio España Independiente* (REI) (1941-1977), *La Pirenaica*, was the repository for the public remembrance of the victims of the Franco regime, through letters that its listeners regularly sent to the broadcaster's headquarters in Bucharest. A study of the 15,500 letters contained in the Spanish Communist Party's (PCE) Historical Archive in Madrid confirms this broadcaster's major role in the construction of the mythical symbolic image of the anti-Franco movement. Beyond their function as propaganda instruments of the PCE, *La Pirenaica's* letters reveal the radio station's role as a vehicle for the expression of public solidarity and ideological and cultural resistance. *La Pirenaica* was the voice of the defeated after the Spanish Civil War, and was their confidante and advisor. *La Pirenaica's* letters are the chronicle of the horror that anti-Franco society suffered and endured in Spain.

## Keywords

*Radio España Independiente* (REI), Radio Pirenaica, Franco regime, letters from radio listeners, Spanish Communist Party (PCE)

*Radio España Independiente* (REI) was the broadcaster of propaganda for the Spanish Communist Party (PCE), created in Moscow in 1941 during the first bombardments of the Russian capital by German airplanes. REI was a clandestine radio station, popularly known as *La Pirenaica*. Legend had it that the station was located on the other side of the Pyrenees, just to the north of Spain. But throughout most of its existence, the voices on REI were aired from studios in Bucharest. Its headquarters were located in the Romanian capital from 1955 to 1977, the year when it closed down following the constitution in Madrid of the first parliament of the democratic era, a year and a half after the death of the dictator Francisco Franco.

Bucharest was also the home of Radio Portugal Libre, the Portuguese Communist Party's broadcaster. It was created two decades after *La Pirenaica*, in 1962,

following the outbreak of the colonial war in Angola and the first mobilisations of the trade unions campaigning for an eight-hour day. But in similar fashion to *La Pirenaica*, the Portuguese felt that, despite the interference, the sound was coming from much closer, and believed that Radio Portugal Libre was being broadcast from "Serra da Estrela". *La Pirenaica's* slogan was: "Radio España Independiente, the only Spanish broadcaster not censored by Franco". Radio Portugal Libre opened its broadcasts by announcing that "Radio Portugal Libre is speaking, the Portuguese broadcaster at the service of the people,

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of democracy, and of national independence”.

The two clandestine broadcasters, who fought against the Salazar Dictatorship in Portugal and the Franco Dictatorship in Spain, were shrouded by many myths and legends. One of these claimed that the listeners' letters that were read out live by *La Pirenaica*'s announcers were actually invented by the radio station's own editors. The exaggerated communist propaganda on some of the programmes, especially when they spoke of the imminent end of the dictatorship, contaminated many other issues, such as the true identity of the people who had written those letters. The myth of the invented letter would also frequently lead to underestimation of *La Pirenaica*'s real communicative and political impact on Spanish society.

A study of the 15,500 letters deposited in the Pirenaica Letters Archive (FCP) in the PCE Historical Archive (AHPCE) can conclude today that the legend of the invented letters was false. The letters, mainly manuscripts, really were written by thousands and thousands of listeners from different places in Spain, as well as Spaniards that had emigrated or were in exile, and for whom *La Pirenaica* was the only means by which their lamentations concerning the dictatorship could be heard. And a second conclusion is that these 15,500 letters, mostly dated to the 1960s, are only a small part of the thousands and thousands that were sent but never reached Bucharest. Political vigilance, in collusion with the mail service, prevented many letters from ever getting to their destination. The third conclusion is evident: *La Pirenaica*, although clandestine, and which people were fined or imprisoned for listening to, was veritable mass media in the 1960s, comparable in importance at the time to *Radio Nacional de España* or Cadena SER. Given all the lies that were told on Radio Nacional, *La Pirenaica*'s listeners dubbed their channel *Radio Verdad* (Radio Truth). *La Pirenaica* managed to spread its anti-Franco message to a large amount of the Spanish population, both communist and

non-communist. These were the victims of the Franco regime, mainly members of the Spanish Republican movement that was defeated in the civil war and that had suffered the hardships of post-war repression.

The current research, based on an analysis of the content of the 15,500 letters, has created a profile of the audience who listened to the channel on a daily basis and has established a classification of the problems suffered by Spanish anti-Franco society, which certifies the public impact achieved by this powerful PCE propaganda instrument among the Spanish population.

The authors believe that this study will make new contributions to the historiography of the media and of the Franco regime, confirming the theory that “history” and “historical memory” positively feed upon each other. Radio, due to its status as the main popular medium, constitutes an extraordinary historical source; especially because of the peculiar way that this medium has always been able to achieve a certain symbolic representation of a majority sector of society. The ritual of communicative interaction that occurs on a daily basis through radio is represented in *La Pirenaica*'s letters.

## THE VOICES OF LA PIRENAICA

*La Pirenaica*'s editorial team was originally formed by reporters and PCE political chiefs that worked extensively on propaganda projects during the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939). After the war, they were exiled to Moscow and recruited there to join the staff of REI or for Spanish language broadcasts on Radio Moscow. In the second phase, especially from the 1960s, the *La Pirenaica* editorial team drew from communist militants that had been forced to flee from Spain to avoid new arrests and imprisonments. This second generation of younger professionals had not fought in the civil war and were ideologically raised in the context of the destalinization initiated by Nikita Khrushchev in 1956.

Of the different voices heard on *La Pirenaica*, we have chosen two representative figures, both women, who acquired the sentimental and political status of popular icons of the anti-Franco movement. Pilar Aragón was the voice of the letters written to *La Pirenaica*. Dolores Ibárruri, Pasionaria, the founder of the radio station and the leader of the PCE was the indisputable mentor for the channel's listeners.

### *Pilar Aragón*

Josefina López Sanmartín (1919-1989) chose the pseudonym Pilar Aragón when working as a journalist and presenter for REI. She was very young when she joined the communist youth, and was exiled in 1939 along with other cadres of the party and sought refuge in the Soviet Union. In Moscow, she obtained a degree in Slavic Studies, and was appointed as a presenter on *La Pirenaica* in 1943, where she worked in the Moscow and Bucharest branches until her definitive return to Spain in 1969. In the early 1980s, she left the communist party to join the *Partido Socialista Obrero Español* (PSOE) (Spanish Socialist Worker's Party), and became a socialist senator for Castellon in 1987.

With her grave but warm voice, perfect diction, and energetic tone, Pilar Aragón was the lady who read out the letters that arrived in Bucharest to be included in the *Correo de la Pirenaica* (*La Pirenaica* Mail) show. She also fronted the *Página de la Mujer* (Woman's Page) and *Charlas Femeninas* (Female Chats) shows. For Spanish listeners, she became a kind of anti-Franco Elena Francis<sup>1</sup> and a distant friend who people could tell about their everyday woes. A letter from listener Juan de la Torre Zambra depicts the effect of Pilar Aragón's voice: "You can't even have the remotest idea of the hopeful impression that your talks have on the women of this nation. They listen to your broadcasts with spellbound joy, and I believe it's the only moment of the day when they forget about their sorrows"<sup>2</sup>.

In 1961, Pilar Aragón took over the *Página de la*

*Mujer*, where she performed extraordinary educational work. In Franco's Spain, where the Catholic Church exerted abusive and reactionary control over women's customs and ideas, Pilar Aragón spoke of contraception, of their right to have the children they could raise or the need to be educated in order not to become dependent on men. On *Página de la Mujer*, the heroines, the role models, were Soviet cosmonaut Valentina Tereshkova and the leader of the Asturian mining union, Tina Pérez. The presenter made most of any matter of concern, such as increases in the costs of goods and services, to stimulate political awareness among her listeners, most of whom were housewives or working women with no hope of ever entering higher education. The letters read by the popular presenter included an abundance of anti-American statements and *vice versa* (i.e., in favour of Khrushchev) as a very basic and often sentimental echo of the political arguments used in her editorials.

Pilar Aragón became extraordinarily popular in Spain, where listeners considered the clandestine channel to be a guaranteed source of truthful information about domestic and international affairs. The "voice of *La Pirenaica*" must have been a comfort for the station's audience, the people that had been so humiliated and aggrieved by the Franco regime, as well as being a call for them to join the ranks of the PCE. Pilar Aragón's life was also associated with the successive ruptures that befell the core of the PCE and the tension caused by the representatives of the "old guard" and that was renewed by such events as destalinization, the invasion of Czechoslovakia, and the generational shifts in the organisation's central committee.

### *Dolores Ibárruri*

The most important woman in Spanish politics in the twentieth century was also the founder and promoter of REI. And she fundamentally became the main figure head of the anti-Franco movement, venerated and revered by her audience, who came both from the

generation that had endured the war and from the one that grew up under the dictatorship, who listened to her as if listening to somebody mythical.

Dolores Ibárruri, Pasionaria, the wife of a miner from the Basque Country and mother of several children, and who rapidly rose through the PCE ranks to become its general secretary, was the voice of the Republican propaganda that defended Madrid with a cry of "They shall not pass!" in 1936. In July 1941, her voice sounded again on the REI speakers to condemn the Franco regime's complicity with Nazism. That message surely reached very few listeners in the isolated Spain of the post-war period, where only a few privileged could afford a radio receiver.

Ibárruri always maintained very close relations with the radio station that she founded with support from Komintern, the organisation that propagated the Soviet Union's communist ideology. Despite the geographic distance, for she always lived in Moscow, far from the broadcaster's headquarters in Bucharest, she wrote numerous editorial articles under the male pseudonyms of Antonio de Guevara and Juan de Guernica to set forth the PCE's political stance. Although Pasionaria was forced to resign as general secretary of the PCE a month after the failure of the call for the General Political Strike (HGP) of 1959, her audience never learned the details of her slow downfall, or of her substitution by Santiago Carrillo. On the contrary, her new position of party president started reinforcing her symbolic and propagandistic role. Radio Pirenaica read out her editorial articles, extraordinarily efficacious, well written examples of journalistic tirade, dressed with a fine-crafted blend of sentimentalism and militant doctrine. For two years, from 1962 to 1963, Radio Pirenaica broadcasts included readings of chapters of her autobiography, *El únicocamino* (*The Only Way*) on the Sunday night prime time, undoubtedly the most celebrated book among her listeners, who eagerly ordered copies by mail. The life story of this hardy Basque lady enthralled the people listening from thousands of

kilometres away, increasing her aura as the woman and mother of the people. As can be gleaned from their letters, they all worshipped that woman "as much as I do my mother", who is "the navigator's lighthouse, the board that gives hope and faith to solitary castaways, and consolation to the afflicted", and who was the "flag that guides the way, the passion in the hands of the poor peasants, the soul of the reconquest, the burning fire in the wind of the Communist Party"<sup>3</sup>.

Although there is no question that REI principally existed to promote orders for political action as decided by the PCE central committee, there were many other "minor" tasks to attend to, one of which was the monitoring of the specific cases that reached Bucharest and that implicated the responsibility of the party in one way or other. Pasionaria took direct charge of these sometimes delicate tasks. To give one example, in August 1962, a letter arrived in Bucharest from Francisco Bustos, the parish priest of Villarta de los Montes (Badajoz) via the communist newspaper *L'Humanité*. He had been delivered a new-born baby, the son of two "Maquis" or "guerrillas" that were operating undercover. The priest took responsibility for the child, Víctor del Val, but as he grew up and the humiliations because of his improper origin intensified, he did not think twice about contacting the PCE, to which the child's parents belonged, to ensure that he was given a proper education. Pasionaria took an interest in the case, and sent an envoy to interview the priest. That envoy was writer Antonio Ferres, who remembered how "we went to that town in Toledo by order of Dolores. Pasionaria was very interested in the matter..."<sup>4</sup> more than 50 years later. Ferres would know nothing more about the case, for he went into exile to teach Spanish literature at different North American universities in 1964.

In 1963, on occasion of the trial and execution of a member of the PCE central committee, Julián Grimau, Pasionaria, who as party president travelled around the world attending international conferences, recovered

the media presence that Santiago Carrillo, the general secretary of the PCE, was unable to achieve due to his dry oratory skills and lack of popular appeal. The campaign to save Grimau, who was arrested in Madrid and brutally tortured at the headquarters of the General Direction of Security, was a priority for REI, whose programmes focused heavily on generating a favourable public opinion of the convict and preventing his execution. REI transmitted one of the oratory masterpieces of its Basque manager, the recording of which has survived, where Pasionaria states that “iniquity has consumed (...) *El Caudillo*, whose regime is wobbling, who has defied the world by ignoring the humanism-charged voices that in his great honour have been directed at him from all countries to prevent the inevitable”. And she concludes with a dramatic cry of “Long live our dead!”<sup>5</sup>, her way of paying homage to the traumatic bloodshed of PCE militants, killed by order of the powers that be or executed in the harshest years of the dictatorship.

### LA PIRENAICA'S LISTENERS

The statistical chart shown in the following figure, produced on the basis of the 15,429 letters conserved in the AHPCE, allows us to establish a direct correlation between the huge waves of correspondence that were sent and the most important events that Spanish society underwent in the 1960s. The first strikes in Asturias of 1962 (1,184 letters) and the trial and execution of Julián Grimau in 1963 (4,378 letters) marked the “ceiling” of the volume of letters, after which there would be a gradual reduction down to very small numbers from 1970, when REI began to lose its audience (see Figure 1).

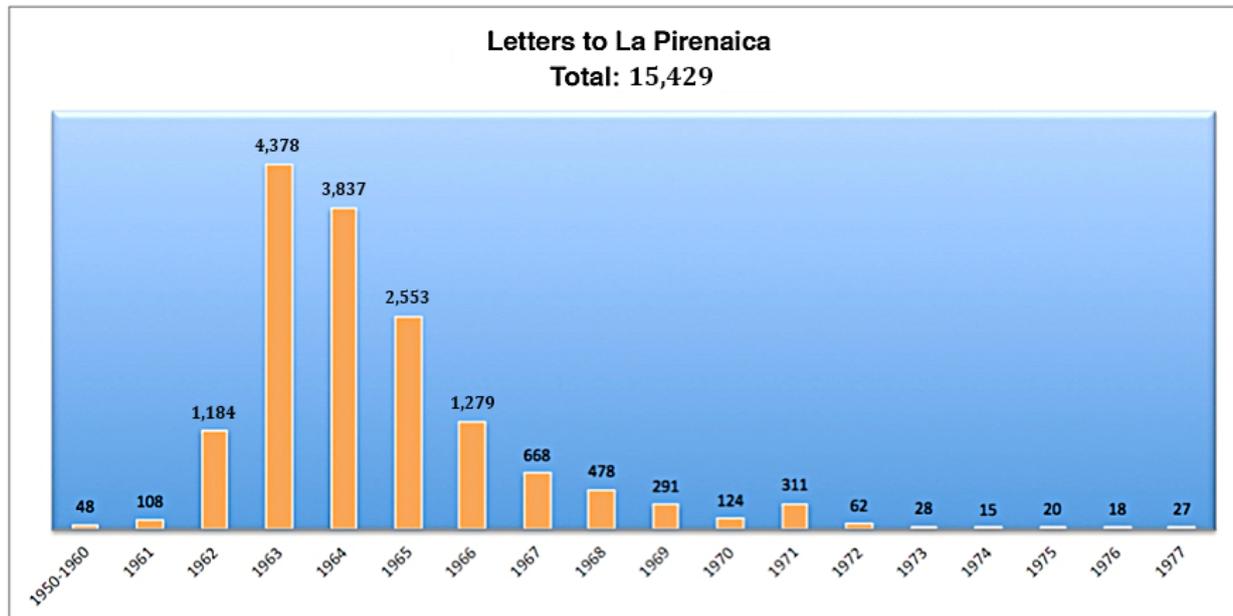
Although it is impossible to certify the number of listeners to REI, we can use the conserved letters to define the different audience profiles. According to the main topics that were dealt with, the audience can be classified into five main categories: (1) supporters

of unity among all anti-Franco movements; (2) victims of the civil war and the post-war repression; (3) victims of misery and famine; (4) militants from the resistance; and (5) exposures of confidants and informants.

Within these five main categories, there are a wide range of particular types that made up the “Pirenaica Galaxy”, with the following profiles: (1) workers, labourers, and peasants; (2) ex-Republican combatants in the civil war; (3) communist guerrillas; (4) housewives describing the difficulties of everyday subsistence; (5) wives and mothers of prisoners and detainees; (6) non-communist listeners to REI; (7) Catholic listeners and priests; (8) exiles; (9) listeners who sent in their literary works, memoirs, and poems; and (10) children.

A sizeable number of letters were written by listeners that *La Pirenaica* identified as being of “correspondent” status. These correspondents were initially party members, political figures, or journalists and writers by trade, distributed throughout Spain in the 1950s. The use of the correspondent titles became more extensive over the years, and numerous listeners started referring to themselves as such in the 1960s. Becoming a correspondent, or the “eyes and ears of *La Pirenaica*”, meant being “a serious person that reported on rigorously precise facts” and “formal enough to regularly send letters”<sup>6</sup>. Correspondents reported on labour disputes, reprisals, and abuses by the authorities or in the indignant mood among the working classes in the face of rising costs and wage cuts. This was the kind of news that the official press did not cover, but that was the very *raison d'être* of REI.

Particularly, assiduous correspondents included Don Curioso, an aviator in the civil war, exiled in France, who was an active collaborator on the *España fuera de España* (Spain Outside of Spain) show, as well as organising “bridges”, which was the term used for people who received letters and messages to get around Francoist censorship and get



**Figure 1.** Number of Letters to *La Pirenaica*.

them to their destinations in Bucharest or Paris. Another correspondent, who went by the pseudonym of “La Golondrina”, 50 years old from Valladolid with a little picture of the hammer and sickle, captured in a few lines of a very common biography among typical REI listeners:

I stopped going to school when I was 11. I learned no more than the alphabet and a book called *Catón*. When I was 21, I worked in the fields. Now I work in a factory. I’ve been doing it for 20 years and they treat us worse and worse. The bosses say that workers should be treated like lemons: Squeeze out the juice and then throw them away...<sup>7</sup>.

Correspondent Joan Sardá Doménech used the pseudonyms of Ramón Doménech, José López and Ramón Seguí to sign his reports about the city of Barcelona. Sardá was working as an attorney in the Banca Rosés in the Catalan capital when he was sat at his desk and refused to go out onto the balcony to salute Franco’s delegation when they visited Barcelona. Sardá paid for that action with the loss of

his job but, undaunted, he continued to send numerous reports and letters in which, for example, he lectured on the correct drafting of pamphlets or defended the virtues of the cyclostyle to print them<sup>8</sup>.

Being a REI correspondent was not risk-free. Assiduous collaborator “El Veleño”, from *Vélez Málaga* (Malaga), was arrested when collecting donations for political prisoners in a bar. Led away in handcuffs to the Guardia Civil’s quarters in his town, he was accused of having listened to *La Pirenaica*, which he ironically described as “the most serious crime that exists today”<sup>9</sup>.

As for the second type of listener, the category is a broad one and includes people who were motivated to write due to specific circumstances (e.g., the execution of Julián Grimau), sometimes with banal details about their everyday lives and that generally contained words praising the broadcaster. Letters from “Maribel” in Catalonia have been conserved without interruption from 1968 to 1977. None of these provide relevant

information, but an REI editor respectfully wrote the following in the margin of one of her missives: “Maribel. Elderly lady. Very assiduous listener and communicator, but her letters are disorderly. She is ill. Of you”<sup>10</sup>. Numerous listeners took the pen to describe their impressions immediately after listening to the radio, for example, to answer many surveys conducted by REI about the increases in consumer costs, the continuity of the American bases, or how expensive it was to marry.

REI was a party radio station, but since the definition of a policy of national reconciliation in 1958, the PCE propagated unity among all anti-Franco groups, even those that were hostile to communism. Meanwhile, the schedules avoided any statements in the letters to *La Pirenaica* that defended interests or policies that were opposed to such national reconciliation in order to win new support among the emerging middle classes, professionals, and even more open members of the church and army.

## LA PIRENAICA’S LETTERS: THEMES AND HEROES

There is no doubt that the letters to *La Pirenaica* contain a single line of argument: complaints. Listeners who wrote in confessed were impotent regarding the political, labour, social, and economic situation. Hence, an analysis of the REI archive reveals a mosaic of affronts, old and new, as the letters say, were inflicted by the Franco regime on the “humiliated and offended” people that had lost the war and their children’s generation. A classification of these “complaints” made by listeners presents the following main topics.

### *Memories of the Disasters of the War*

Assignations, rapes, humiliations, and revenge happened in the rebel areas and in the immediate post-war period. What the letters say enables us to draw a preliminary map of the mass graves (burials in

the same places as the shootings), which has been confirmed in recent years by archaeological digs and forensic examinations conducted by the Historical Memory Associations.

### *Famine and Financial Hardships*

Many testimonies provide details of the famine of the post-war period, especially in the rural areas of Andalusia and Extremadura. In the 1960s, the shortage of basic products and the lack of homes were the main grievances. Such denunciations were associated with the economic upturn encouraged by Francoist Development Plans and the creation of a new and wealthy middle class with the capacity for consumption. In the 1960s, a majority segment of the population was left on the fringe of economic progress.

### *The Thirst for Culture and Education*

The right to education, with the implicit dream of a better future for their children, was another demand made by listeners. There was an abundance of protests about the dreadful level of public education and against the ideology of private and religious education. Listeners also discussed their cultural tastes. The film *Spartacus* (Stanley Kubrick 1960) was a favourite film among listeners, while singer-song writers Chicho Sánchez Ferlosio and Raimon were top of the list of musical requests.

### *The Vicissitudes of Emigration*

Between 1960 and 1973, more than seven million Spaniards left their hometowns. Of these, some two million headed for Europe: Six hundred thousand Spaniards, mainly Andalusians and Galicians, settled in the German Federal Republic. Meanwhile, almost five million people left rural areas between 1960 and 1975 to work in the construction and industrial sectors of Madrid, Catalonia, Levante, and the Basque Country. A large amount of the correspondence in the archive consists of the tales of emigrants criticising

the exploitation of labour and the appalling living conditions.

### *Franco and His "Camarilla"*

The correspondence contains plenty of examples of sarcastic and satirical humour. Through poems, drawings, and jokes, listeners got their revenge on the regime by making fun of its leaders. Franco was the butt of constant insults, most of which compared him to animals.

### *The REI Hero: Julián Grimau*

REI took off as a mass media sensation as a result of the "Grimau case". Julián Grimau was arrested, tortured, and subjected to the war council, and executed in Madrid on April 20, 1963. During the weeks building up to his trial, REI regularly reported on the case, gaining thousands of new listeners who wanted to hear the news without it being censored by Franco. REI presented Grimau as a hero, a simple man who was sacrificing himself for Spain, while Radio Nacional and the regime's media portrayed him as a civil war assassin. The programmes stimulated anti-Franco sentiment and won numerous listeners to the PCE cause, who went on to join the party.

### *Anti-American Feelings*

"Yankees go home" was the slogan, in English, that typified the visceral hate of the United States. REI spurred anti-US sentiment in accordance with its servitude to the Soviet Union's foreign policy. The successive Spain-US treaties, which established and guaranteed the permanence of United States bases in Spain, were among the main issues of *La Pirenaica* propaganda. The Palomares bomb incident of January 1966, which was underplayed in collaboration with the Ministry of Information and Tourism managed by Manuel Fraga Iribarne, was used on the airwaves to swell the mood of adversity toward Americans. Many letters expressed the fear of a nuclear catastrophe and considered Khrushchev to be the artifice that

had achieved world peace. Likewise, information regularly arrived from cities with American bases about the behaviour of soldiers, and these were always negative.

## CONCLUSIONS

The study the authors have presented here confirms, first of all, the importance of the *Correo de la Pirenaica* documents conserved in the AHPCE in Madrid. This is the first time that this archive has been examined in its entirety. No fewer than 15,500 letters managed to escape censorship by Franco and the difficulties for communicating with *La Pirenaica*'s headquarters in Bucharest, on the other side of the impenetrable iron curtain. No doubt many of them were lost on the way or never sent through fear of being detected by Franco's police force.

The documentary archive also reveals the excellent organisation of the PCE's radio station, REI, whose editorial team conserved, archived, and annotated their listeners' missives and gathered every cent of their generous donations. The sheer volume of correspondence that reached Bucharest obliged REI to create new channels for participation. The *Correo de la Pirenaica* programme dictated extracts from the letters, but the AHPCE conserves them in their complete form, just as they arrived, containing hundreds of fascinating accounts. Not all of them were read, or only small fragments made it onto the airwaves. This study was based on complete letters, just as they were written, without them being edited or summarised.

Second, the letters show the enormous influence of REI on an audience consisting mainly of the defeated Spaniards of 1939. A Spaniard who was in the 1960s could not be considered informed if they only received the official media. Listeners felt that real and proven information could only be obtained from *La Pirenaica*, "Radio Truth", while *Radio Nacional de España* was "Radio Lies". Despite

working undercover, REI was a formidable example of the mass media, and was greatly feared by Franco's propaganda machine, which used sophisticated systems to create interference on the airwaves to prevent people from listening to it.

Third, a meticulous reading of the letters totally refutes the legend that they were simply invented by the broadcaster's own writers. Indeed, many of the letters were written by militant correspondents, but these were clearly in the minority in comparison with the huge amount of authentic messages, which were spontaneously written, often with many spelling mistakes but highly charged with emotion. Further proof that they were not all invented is found in the drawings, postcards, and family photographs that were sent to the REI offices.

Finally, by reading the written testimonies, we can clearly appreciate the regime's intention to suppress, avenge, and punish any vestige of Republican Spain. The REI letters archive constitutes a silenced fresco of the oppression suffered by the victims of the dictatorship, in a setting of isolation and self-censorship caused by fear. REI was their only contact with "another" reality, one populated with false legends, lies, and exaggerations. But REI gave its listeners something fundamental: the hope that another better world was possible.

## Notes

1. The Elena Francis' advice column was in the prototype women's radio show, during the Franco era.
2. AHPCE, FCP, folder 175/7, letter 3.
3. Verses by the poet Rafael Alberti dedicated to Pasionaria in *Coplas de Juan Panadero*.
4. Personal interview between the authors and Antonio Ferres on April 14-15, 2013.
5. AHPCE, Audio Archive, DVD 16, cut 7.
6. AHPCE, REI scripts, broadcast of April 10, 1963.
7. AHPCE, FCP, folder 176/2, letter 16.
8. AHPCE, FCP, folder 174/9, letter 75.
9. AHPCE, FCP, folder 174/1, letter 62.
10. AHPCE, FCP, folder 191a/17, letter 101.

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