


Before the Convention: The Spanish Civil War and Challenges for Research on Refugee History

Javier Rodrigo * and David Alegre Lorenz**

ABSTRACT

This article uses the tools of comparative history to address an important aspect of the Spanish Civil War: the fact that it generated waves of both internally displaced persons and cross-border refugees. Situating the conflict within the context of inter-war Europe, and particularly historical processes of deportation, forced migration, and exile, it analyses the challenges that the crisis of the war and subsequent post-war period in Spain introduced in the realm of humanitarian protection for displaced populations, and how existing international policies largely failed to protect those displaced by the conflict. Drawing on the Spanish Civil War example, the article shows how this kind of engagement with the history of refugees can produce insights that are useful for the broader body of scholarship on refugees, even for scholars who are not historians.

KEYWORDS: displacement, refugees, exile, Spanish Civil War/post-war period, Refugee Convention

1. INTRODUCTION

As has been noted by such renowned scholars as Michael Marrus and Philipp Ther, the statistical, conceptual, and historical complexity inherent to the study of a topic like refugees in contemporary Europe is a major issue that conditions research into

* Associate Professor, Departament d'Història Moderna i Contemporània Edifici B - Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona Spain. Email: javier.rodrigo@uab.es

** Postdoctoral Researcher, Departament d'Història Moderna i Contemporània Edifici B - Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona Spain. Email: david.alegre.lorenz@gmail.com

This work was supported by the following institutions: The European Commission by means of the Horizon2020 Project "Enhancing Social Cohesion through Sharing the Cultural Heritage of Forced Migrations - SO-CLOSE". SO-CLOSE project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No. 870939, The Spanish Ministerio de Ciencia, Innovación y Universidades by means of the Research Project "Posguerras civiles: violencia y (re)construcción nacional en España y Europa" (PGC2018-097724-BI00); The Institució Catalana de Recerca i Estudis Avançats (ICREA) through its ICREA-Acadèmia programme.

refugee history.¹ With noteworthy exceptions, there has been a remarkable lack of work on this subject in the field of history, in contrast to its importance as a research area in the social sciences. Of particular note is the scarcity of studies focusing on the first half of the 20th century, despite the fact that it was precisely in this period that the historical and legal framework began to be laid for dealing with the successive refugee and exile crises that took place on the continent.²

The historical and current legal frameworks for access to protection, asylum, and humanitarian treatment in both destination countries and transit countries are the result of a long and complex historical process shaped by specific contexts. In this article, we seek to reconstruct how the refugee problem emerged and developed in the context of the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939) and consider how the humanitarian crisis resulting from the conflict fits into the broader history of the development of legal frameworks for refugee protection.³ From the conviction that the Spanish conflict has a crucial place in the history of forced migration, the displacement of refugee populations, mass flight, and political exile, we aim to contribute to a better understanding of the dimensions of the “refugee question” in Europe in the years before 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees (1951 Convention).⁴

But we want to go further. We are aware that the necessarily interdisciplinary approach to the subject encompasses sociological, legal, and political aspects, in addition to historical ones. For this reason, it is expedient to explicitly state what this case study can contribute to refugee studies: 1) evidence of a humanitarian crisis situation prior to the Second World War, repeatedly forgotten in studies on the 1951

- 1 For an introduction to the topic from a historical perspective, M. Marrus, *The Unwanted: European Refugees in the Twentieth Century*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1985; T. Kushner & K. Knox, *Refugees in an Age of Genocide: Global, National and Local Perspectives during the Twentieth Century*, London, Frank Cass, 1999; R. Bessel & C. B. Haake (eds.), *Removing Peoples: Forced Removal in the Modern World*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2009; P. Gatrell, *The Making of the Modern Refugee*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013; E. Fiddian Qasmiyeh, G. Loescher, K. Long & N. Sigona (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Refugee and Forced Migration Studies*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2014; M. Frank & J. Reinisch (eds.), *Refugees in Europe, 1919–1959. A Forty Years’ Crisis?*, London, Bloomsbury, 2017; P. Ther, *The Outsiders: Refugees in Europe since 1492*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2019; D. Diaz, *En exil. Les réfugiés en Europe, de la fin du XVIIIe siècle à nos jours*, Paris, Gallimard, 2021.
- 2 C. Skran, *Refugees in Inter-War Europe: The Emergence of a Regime*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1995. A summary can be found in R. Black, “Fifty Years of Refugee Studies: From Theory to Policy”, *International Migration Review*, 1, 2001, 57–78. Another summarised account is J. O. Kleist, “The History of Refugee Protection: Conceptual and Methodological Challenges”, *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 2, 2017, 161–169.
- 3 See E. M. Kulischer, *Europe on the Move: War and Population Change, 1917-1947*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1948; M. Proudfoot, *European Refugees 1939-1952: A Study in Forced Population Movement*, London, Faber and Faber, 1957; E.H.S. Chandler, *The High Tower of Refuge: The Inspiring Story of Refugee Relief Throughout the World*, New York, Praeger, 1959; R. Kee, *Refugee World*, London, Oxford University Press, 1961. On ethnic cleansing and minorities in Europe, N. Naimark, *Fires of Hatred: Ethnic Cleansing in Twentieth-Century Europe*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2002, 45; M. Frank, *Making Minorities History: Population Transfer in Twentieth-Century Europe*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2017. S. Monaghan, *Protecting Democracy from Dissident: Population Engineering in Western Europe, 1918-1926*, London, Routledge, 2018.
- 4 On the precedents of mass flight and exile in contexts such as those of the Great War (13 million refugees, only a quarter of whom were able to return to their places of origin), P. Gatrell & L. Zhvanko (eds.), *Europe on the Move: The Great War and its Refugees*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2017; Gatrell, *The Making of the Modern Refugee*, 29.

“origins” of international refugee protection; 2) knowledge of the legal and administrative treatment received by displaced civilians in Spain as internal “refugees” (a term that was indeed used by Republican authorities for some of the internally displaced) prior to the mass flight to France that occurred in 1939; 3) the nature of this latter event, the *Retirada*, as a gigantic humanitarian and legal problem that highlighted the limits of asylum and refugee policies and the differential application of these policies by country, in the absence of an operational and recognised supra-national agency; 4) evidence that the lack of clear criteria (explicitly recognised by the different countries and political actors) made it necessary to establish normative and administrative frameworks that would guarantee the humanitarian treatment that was denied to the exiled Spanish population in 1939; and 5) that the comparative, long-term perspectives of historical research, when accompanied by the use of multidisciplinary tools, can further understanding of both the past and the present of the phenomenon of refugees and forced migrations.

In addition to our conviction that historical experience is important in the study of the experiences of refugees and policies towards them, we firmly believe that the analysis of historical contexts helps to more clearly establish, in comparative perspective, the factors that cause people to become refugees and lead to different refugee outcomes (whether they are able to obtain refugee status and integrate into the receiving society). Academic and political frameworks change and so, in turn, do the definitions of the subjects of research and policy, in this case refugees, and the rights accorded to them. And they change according to historical contingency. One of the first academic approaches to the refugee issue, the special issue on refugees which appeared in the *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* in May 1939, established that the refugee problem was basically one of (national and political) minorities marginalised and persecuted by “dominant majorities”, and this was in fact the case during and after the First World War.⁵ But the Spanish case was one of the contexts in which new elements emerged in the broader phenomenon of refugee status, the refugee regime, and the dynamics of displacement that clearly pushed the boundaries of this analytical framework. In the Spanish case, beyond the undeniably political character of exile, flight from the consequences of total war was the central factor behind 1) the generation of masses of internal refugees and 2) the flight of civilian populations. While Spanish exiles would subsequently be recognised as refugees by international agencies and by third-party states (such as Mexico), the condition of “refugee” was prior to that of “exile”, as a description used during the war that was fundamentally internal and humanitarian in nature. The reality of forced migration in Spain therefore differed profoundly from the (more or less flexible) model that had existed up until that point, and in fact contributed, albeit passively, to the reformulation of the concept of “refugee”. In this sense, and despite not being mentioned as a relevant case in the final formulation of the 1951 Convention nor in the preceding debates, the Spanish Civil War contributed to forging a new model of forced migrants and refugees, based on concrete historical experiences.

5 J.S. Roucek, “Minorities—A Basis of The Refugee Oroblem”, *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 1, 1939, 1 (we thank Giorgia Priorelli for bringing this publication to our attention).

The model codified in the 1951 Convention is the one that has been most extensively explored in the academic literature. The publication of a special issue of the *International Migration Review* in 1981 was proof of the growing interest in this field and represented a starting point for refugee studies, which subsequently began to develop as an autonomous research area. Among the 30 articles contained in this special issue, Egon Kunz's work on the elements affecting refugee outcomes in the areas preceding and succeeding flight stands out, as it delineated an analytic framework for the development of a refugee theory for the very first time.⁶ It was no longer only a question of minorities, but also a matter of flight from war, bombings, violence, and genocide.⁷ The proliferation of studies on this topic in the past four decades has made the issue of refugees so scientifically relevant as to become a major area of study, also in historical areas. However, history continues to occupy a secondary place in refugee studies and, dare we say, in the scientific consideration of scholars of this specific subject.⁸

This article discusses the specifics of the Spanish case as part of the global phenomenon of refuge, flight, and humanitarian asylum, with the aim of contributing to a better understanding of the variables that determined policies towards refugees throughout the 20th century. The body of the text will be divided into two main sections. The first will describe the dynamics of flight, refuge, and forced migration behind the front lines between 1936 and 1938, as well as the first cross-border exiles, while the second will analyse how and in what phases the *Retirada* and the mass exile of 1939 took place and discuss the significance of this event.⁹ In the conclusions, we will outline the major questions which we believe remain to be answered in the study of forced displacement and the "refugee question" in Spain. Finally, we will propose

6 E.F. Kunz, "Exile and Resettlement: Refugee theory", *International Migration Review*, 1–2, 1981, 42–51. It should be noted that this article is an extension of previous research by Kunz, published eight years earlier. See E.F. Kunz, "The Refugee in Flight: Kinetic Models and Forms of Displacement", *International Migration Review*, 2, 1973, 125–146.

7 A refugee research bibliography was also included in the volume. It consisted of more than 800 entries which, compared to the 100 bibliographical entries contained in the 1939 special issue of the *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, clearly signalled the growth of this field of research: B.N. Stein, "Refugee research bibliography", *International Migration Review*, 1–2, 1981, 331–393.

8 On the importance of comparative historical analysis, see P. Marfleet, "Refugees and History: Why We Must Address the Past", *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, 26(3), 2007, 136–148; P. Gatrell, "Refugees – What's Wrong with History?", *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 30(2), 2017, 170–189 and P. Gatrell, A. Ghoshal, K. Nowak & A. Dowdall, "Reckoning with refugeedom: refugee voices in modern history", *Social History*, 46(1), 2021, 70–95.

9 An overview of the refugee situation during the Spanish Civil War can be found in the PhD dissertation by J. Clavijo Ledesma, *La política sobre la població refugiada durant la Guerra Civil, 1936-1939*, Girona, Universitat de Girona, 2003. The book of reference on Catalonia is J. Serrallonga, *Refugiats i desplaçats dins la Catalunya en guerra, 1936-1939*, Barcelona, Base, 2004. See also J. C. Collado, *Los evacuados de la Guerra Civil de la provincia de Toledo (1936-1939)*, Madrid, Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia, 2015; E. Barranquero & L. Prieto, *Población y Guerra Civil en Málaga: caída, éxodo y refugio*, Málaga, Centro de Ediciones de la Diputación de Málaga, 2007; G. Arrien and I. Goigogana, *El primer exili dels bascos. Catalunya, 1936-1939*, Barcelona, Fundació Ramon Trias Fargas & Fundació Sabino Arana, 2000. On international agencies, G. Pretus, *La ayuda humanitaria en la Guerra Civil española (1936-1939)*, Granada, Comares, 2015. Very recent and explicitly tied to refugee studies is A. Martínez, *Las refugiadas del exilio republicano español en Francia. Género, identidades y experiencias (1939-1978)*, PhD dissertation, Universidad de Granada & Université Paris 8, 2021.

some challenges for future research – in history, but also in other fields – on forced migration, displacement, and violence, based on the Spanish case.

2. CIVILIANS IN FORCED DISPLACEMENT, 1936–1938

Synthesising the factors that determine Republican Spain's place among the major cases of forced displacement and migration in the history of the 20th century is no easy task. To begin with, the dimensions of internal forced migration during the war can only be discussed in terms of estimated figures, rather than knowledge of the exact numbers. There is a certain amount of agreement on the figure of three million displaced persons (particularly those who arrived in Murcia, Alicante, Valencia, Tarragona, Barcelona, and Girona), of whom around 1,800,000 are thought to have received institutional assistance. Similarly, the accepted figure for the exile to France of January and, above all, February 1939 is around 440,000 people.¹⁰ Vilar gives a total of 724,000 people for the “exodus of 1936-1939”, including 15,000 people displaced by the Gipuzkoa campaign in 1936, 160,000 by the campaign in the North (from Biscay to Asturias) in 1937, 24,000 from Upper Aragon in 1938, 470,000 as part of the *Retirada*, and 15,000 who fled the final offensive, as well as some 40,000 people granted asylum and exchanged¹¹ over the course of the war. This figure is open to modification, given that it is certainly possible that people evacuated from the North returned to Republican-controlled Spain, only to be displaced again as part of the *Retirada* in 1939.¹² In the Spanish Civil War, the distinction between the terms “evacuee” (those evacuated by order of authorities) and “refugees” (those who fled of their own accord) quickly lost its explanatory potential.

In general terms, displacement during the conflict occurred in five main phases. In chronological order: forced displacement resulting from the triumph or failure of the coup d'état of July 1936 in different parts of Spain; that which occurred in the Cantabrian North in 1937; that which resulted from the occupation of eastern Aragon and western Catalonia by Franco's troops in 1938; the *Retirada* of early 1939, which was the principal origin of what is referred to as the Republican exile; and, finally, the waves of migration at the end of the war, which included people who returned to Spain from abroad, people who returned to their places of origin from elsewhere in Spain following the defeat of the Republic, and people who left Spain during the victors' final offensive.

10 J. Rubio, *La emigración de la guerra civil de 1936-1939*. Tomo I, Madrid, San Martín, 1977, 72; A. Alted, *La voz de los vencidos. El exilio republicano de 1939*, Madrid, Aguilar, 2005.

11 The mission of the International Committee of the Red Cross led by Marcel Junod played a key role in facilitating prisoner of war exchanges. Junod had previously worked for the organisation during the Italian invasion of Ethiopia. The mediation and humanitarian work carried out by his group was vital given that the Spanish Red Cross had split as a result of the coup of July 1936. They were able to observe first-hand the situation of nearly 90,000 prisoners from both sides up until August 1938, when insurgent authorities refused to allow them to continue working in the territory they controlled. See J. Rubio, *Asilos y canjes durante la guerra civil española. Aspectos humanitarios de una contenida fratricida*, Barcelona, Planeta, 1979, 355–448.

12 J. B. Vilar, *La España del exilio. Las emigraciones políticas españolas en los siglos XIX y XX*, Madrid, Síntesis, 2006.

Broadly speaking, it can be affirmed that 12 per cent of Spain's pre-war population of 1936 was affected.¹³ However, this is merely an estimate, conditioned by how the Republican Government defined refugees. This definition, published in the official journal of the Republic, the *Gaceta de Madrid*, on 14 October 1936, referred to them as “*emigrados* from occupied zones, not hostile to the regime, lacking means and any network of relatives or friends, [who have] emigrated with the permission of civilian or military authorities”. These refugees were forced migrants or evacuees who lacked resources and were unable to rely on relatives for support; they needed guaranteed aid, which the Government of the Republic – as well as the autonomous Government in Catalonia and other sub-state entities like the Madrid Defence Council (*Junta Delegada de Defensa*) – tried to provide, even as the territory under Republican control continued to shrink.¹⁴ Nonetheless, the historical definition used by the Government of the Republic is not entirely satisfactory, given that it excluded anyone who did have access to basic means of survival and was able to adapt, however minimally, to the conditions of displacement. Indeed, the definition was purely administrative and openly restrictive: refugees were, coarsely speaking, “the people we have to take care of”.

At all events, defining the problem amounted to recognising its existence. The first forced movements and migrations dated from the first days of the conflict in 1936. In the weeks that followed the July coup, people fled the revolutionary violence that broke out in Catalonia, Madrid, La Mancha, eastern Aragon, and Valencia because their lives were at risk. In many cases, these people fled to other parts of Spain, generally travelling short distances until they reached territories or spaces where they were safe. This initial flight led to the first official classification of “refugees” during the war, which the insurgents applied to the estimated 10,000 people who found asylum and refuge in international embassies and consulates.¹⁵ These early days also saw the departure of 45,000 people who departed from Catalonia (30,000 of them Spanish, 6,000 German, and the rest foreigners of other nationalities). They embarked from Republican ports for a variety of destinations, including Italy and Latin America.¹⁶ This episode is not insignificant, insofar as aid and evacuation policies were a way for Nazi Germany to demonstrate its power on the international stage, particularly before like-minded countries. By late October 1936, the German war fleet had evacuated 15,500 people, 8,000 of them citizens of the Reich,

13 S. Morón, “Refugees and Internal Displacement during the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939)”, in Javier Rodrigo and Miguel Alonso (eds.), *Forced displacements: a European history*, Kraków, Vila Decius Association, 2021.

14 D. Oviedo & A. Pérez-Olivares (eds.), *Madrid, una ciudad en guerra (1936-1948)*, Madrid, Catarata, 2016; G. Gómez Bravo, *Asedio. Historia de Madrid en la Guerra Civil, 1936-1939*, Madrid, Ediciones Complutense, 2018.

15 On the living conditions of refugees in embassies, consulates, and diplomatic missions in Madrid, J. Cervera, *Madrid en guerra. La ciudad clandestina, 1936-1939*, Madrid, Alianza, 2006, 353 ff.; A. M. Moral Roncal, *Diplomacia, humanitarismo y espionaje en la Guerra Civil española*, Madrid, Biblioteca Nueva, 2008.

16 R. Doll-Petit, *Els “catalans de Gènova”: història de l'èxode i l'adhesió d'una classe dirigent en temps de guerra*, Barcelona, Publicacions de l'Abadia de Montserrat, 2003; A. González Vilalta, *Humanitarisme, consolat i negocis bruts. Evacuacions a Barcelona (1938-1938)*, Barcelona, Base, 2020, according to which 28,000 people were evacuated by sea and 15,000 by land; and J. L. Martín Berbois (ed.), *1936: Desplaçaments forçosos i primers exilis*, Barcelona, Generalitat de Catalunya, 2020.

from Republican territory.¹⁷ Around the same time, the evolution of the campaign in Gipuzkoa led thousands of people to flee across the Basque border (crossing at Irun, via the two bridges over the Bidasoa, or by sea). It is estimated that the Gipuzkoa campaign caused 15,000 people to become refugees. The majority of them, some 10,000, quickly returned to Republican Spain.

During the first weeks and months of the war, people also fled in the face of the insurgent troops' advance on Madrid, the result of a plan of occupation and column warfare that involved taking no prisoners and pushing any civilians and soldiers who might offer armed resistance to flee. This strategy was designed to occupy the maximum amount of territory in the shortest possible amount of time, using four columns of military occupation that, starting from Andalusia, Navarra, and eastern Castile, would converge on Madrid. It produced waves of migrants, many of whom fled to the very capital that the insurgents aimed to reach. Rather than political persecution, with all it entailed, the primary factor behind forced displacement during the Spanish Civil War was the nature of total war and the conditions it created. The most common experience was to leave one's home only to face continuous displacement, insecurity, and terror. As a place of refuge, the Republican capital, which had approximately one million inhabitants at the time, became the first major destination for these fluxes of displaced persons. We do not know how many of these people came to Madrid (though the estimated total is between 300,000 and 500,000)¹⁸ because no research has been done on this specific topic. Indirect sources, such as the mayor of Madrid, Rafael Henche de la Plata, provide the figure of approximately 200,000 people who arrived after 19 July 1936.

According to the Trotskyist journalist Julián Gorkin, the number of people who came to Madrid from rural Extremadura and Toledo was equivalent to half the city's population. Some of them were transferred to pavilions on the university campus, which only had the capacity to provide food and beds for 1,500 people.¹⁹ People from nearby places "stormed all the tramways returning to Madrid", fleeing the proximity of the front lines. The "hospitality that Madrid expended in those fateful days was unlimited", the novelist Eduardo Zamacois wrote. But it was limited. The available housing was occupied by the first refugees who arrived from Toledo and Segovia, and later arrivals "scattered about the city", sleeping anywhere they could: unused commercial premises, abandoned houses and plots, parks, and squares. The archways of the *Plaza Mayor* became a place to spend the night, a "meagre campsite".²⁰ People likewise began to sleep in metro stations.

The Government's first response was evacuation. "Evacuate Madrid. Entrust your family to the Republic" was, as is well known, one of the slogans deployed by the Propaganda and Press Office (*Delegación de Propaganda y Prensa*) of the Madrid Defence Council, used to promote the order to leave the capital. This order was made effective in January 1937, but it had in fact begun to be carried out the previous October, when the Committee for Refugees was created, and November, when the

17 I. Gómez García, *La Marina alemana y la España de Franco, 1936-1945*, PhD dissertation, Universidad del País Vasco, 2020, 78–79.

18 Alted, *La voz de los vencidos*, 31.

19 J. Gorkin, *El Proceso de Moscú en Barcelona*, Barcelona, Aymá Sociedad Editora, 1974, 33.

20 D. Jato Miranda, *Madrid capital republicana*, Barcelona, Ediciones Acervo, 1976, 638.

insurgent army was on the verge of reaching the city. The Madrid Defence Council and the Catalan *Generalitat* (where the Department of Supplies, under the Partit Socialista Unificat de Catalunya, and the Department of Health and Social Assistance, under the Confederación Nacional del Trabajo, would compete for the control of related duties) had to activate or even improvise contingency and evacuation plans.²¹ Faced with the advancing front lines and the real possibility that the city might fall into insurgent hands, many refugees left Madrid, to the extent that from October there was a full-blown exit “column” of people departing in all manner of trains and coaches. The Madrid Defence Council itself recognised in January that the city was “a large stomach difficult to provision” and that it was necessary to evacuate by force those who did not wish to leave.²²

With winter came the major evacuations of civilians to safe areas further from the front lines. As has already been mentioned, the Madrid Committee for Refugees was created in October 1936. It later became the National Committee for Refugees, which had its own provincial and local committees. Within the framework of self-Government in Catalonia, and as ordered by the *Generalitat*'s Department of Health and Social Assistance in November 1936, the four Catalan provincial capitals and all cities with more than 10,000 inhabitants had their own Refugee Aid Committees from October 1936 to August 1937.²³ In February 1937, the Republican Government, which had already moved to Valencia, created the Central Office for Evacuation and Assistance to Refugees (*Oficina Central de Evacuación y Asistencia a Refugiados*, OCEAR), which replaced the National Committee and was part of the Ministry of Health and Social Assistance. After the summer of 1937, the Commission for Assistance to Refugees (in Catalan, *Comissariat d'Assistència als Refugiats*) became the organisation charged with managing the growing refugee problem in Catalonia. It was no easy task, as demonstrated by the fact that as late as June 1937 the general in charge of the defence of Madrid, José Miaja, was still ordering the evacuation of civilians at the behest of the OCEAR: first, those who had “come from provinces invaded by the rebels”, and later those from the capital and surrounding areas. Doorkeepers and “neighbours’ committees” helped ensure compliance, reporting empty rooms that had been abandoned or seized. Furthermore, it was forbidden to rent housing or any other type of civilian or military accommodation outside the control of the Central Office for Evacuation.

Republican authorities insisted that anyone who could not contribute to the war effort leave Madrid. The number of evacuees reported by the disbanded Department of Evacuation (*Consejería de Evacuación*) was approximately 700,000 for the period from November 1936 to April 1937, and this figure therefore includes most of the compulsory evacuations from Madrid. The province of Alicante received 60,000 refugees, equivalent to nearly 12 per cent of the local population, in January 1937.²⁴ The

21 Clavijo Ledesma, *La política sobre la població refugiada durant la Guerra Civil*, 216–222.

22 J. M. Reverte, *La batalla de Madrid*, Barcelona, Crítica, 2004, 515.

23 J. Serrallonga, “Refugiats i desplaçats”, in M. Duch (ed.), *La guerra civil a la comarca del Tarragonès*, Tarragona, Arola, 2010, 111.

24 J. C. Collado, “Desplazados y evacuados de Madrid a Alicante durante el primer año y medio de la guerra”, *Historia del presente*, 27, 2016, 149–163. Refugees could encounter difficulties on arrival, particularly if they were adults; see the stories narrated (and remarkably normalised) in J. Piqué, *La crisi de la*

delegate for evacuations, Enrique Jiménez, believed that the departure of 350,000 to 400,000 people was necessary in order to ensure that the capital had enough supplies. For this reason, from January 1937 evacuation was made obligatory for everyone except those who held public office or had responsibilities related to the war effort, as well as their family members who had already been living in Madrid prior to 19 July. The Ministry of Health's Directorate of Social Assistance (*Dirección de Asistencia Social*) organised the departure of entire contingents of children, many of them orphans, for the eastern Mediterranean coast. Children's "colonies" became the symbol of the reception of vulnerable populations in Republican territory and, at the same time, gave endangered children their own space. In September 1937, the National Conference on Refugees held by International Red Aid affirmed that there were 195 group colonies, home to 12,027 unaccompanied children, and 406 colonies for families, including 33,121 children.²⁵

The brief winter respite caused by the strategic draw of 1936 was broken in February 1937 due to the initiative of the Italians and the fall of Málaga, which led to one of the most notorious and well known cases of forced displacement during the Civil War, when an estimated 150,000 civilians fled in the direction of Almería along a coastal road and were met with bombs dropped by the air force and fire from three of the insurgent navy's ships. Nonetheless, what most defined the course of the conflict in 1937 was the decision to shift the war to the Northern front following the insurgents' defeat at Guadalajara in their final attempt to attack Madrid, which by then had lost its status as the capital of the Republic. The fall of the Cantabrian North – including Bilbao, Santander, and Gijón — to the insurgents led to the departure of an estimated 125,000 to 150,000 refugees, most of them to France. Up to two thirds of these refugees were from the Basque Country, with those from Cantabria and Asturias making up a much smaller portion.²⁶ They included 4,000 Basque children evacuated to Southampton and another 4,500 to Bordeaux (for 1,495 of them, the French port was a stopover on the way to the Soviet Union), the beginning of a practice that would continue with the departure from Asturias of 1,100 children bound for the Soviet Union.²⁷ French authorities, for their part, maintained until 1938 a policy of forcibly repatriating soldiers, who were given the choice of re-crossing the border into either Republican or insurgent territory, while women, children, the elderly, and the sickly were distributed among reception centres. By the end of 1938, 45,000 Spanish refugees, nearly half of them children, had been sent to departments in inland France.

Thus, while not approaching the numbers that would be seen in January and February 1939, the fact is that there was already a significant contingent of displaced persons in France. In addition, there was a minimal infrastructure for evacuating people in Spain. In order to centralise resources, the Government of the Republic

rereguarda. Revolución i guerra civil a Tarragona (1936-1939), Barcelona, Publicacions de l'Abadia de Montserrat, 1998, 611.

25 On children's experiences of the war, see V. Sierra, *Palabras huérfanas. Los niños y la Guerra Civil*, Madrid, Taurus, 2009.

26 Rubio, *La emigración de la guerra civil de 1936-1939*. Tomo I, 38.

27 A. Alted (ed.), *El exilio español de la guerra civil: los niños de la guerra*, Madrid, Ministerio de Cultura-Fundación Largo Caballero, 1995.

replaced the OCEAR with a new General Directorate for Evacuation and Refugees (*Dirección General de Evacuación y Refugiados*) in January 1938. The eastern Mediterranean coastal regions, from Catalonia to eastern Andalusia, were receiving the majority of displaced persons and evacuees. For instance, in 1938, the city of Almería had 65,000 inhabitants and 10,000 refugees; there were 7,000 refugees under the age of 12 in Murcia; and, according to the International Commission and Commissioner Malcolm de Lilliehöök, Madrid had become home to up to 198,000 refugee children, 65,000 of whom were under 5 years of age, while there were around 100,000 in Catalonia. In his opinion, there were as many as 100,000 children suffering from malnutrition and 200,000 from severe undernourishment in Republican Spain, while up to 100,000 were at risk of starvation, primarily as a result of internal displacement and deficiencies in evacuation and aid networks. While the exact number of children under 14 who died from causes related to the war between 1936 and 1939 has not been calculated, it has been estimated that the number was around 138,000, with the most common causes being starvation, exposure to the elements, and disease.²⁸

Evacuation and aid networks always acted in reaction to the course of the war. Each major battle generated a new flux of refugees. Particularly significant was the evacuation of as many as 12,000 people from Teruel and nearby towns, organised by Republican authorities while fighting for control of the city was ongoing.²⁹ Indeed, the characteristics of total war seen in the winter of 1937–1938 would be maintained throughout the rest of the conflict. This, in turn, meant a change in policies of occupation and for controlling the population. Beginning with the battle of Teruel, events such as the bombardment of civilian targets became even more commonplace. These factors had a considerable impact on the acceptance of flight and refuge as a means of escaping the war. The occupation of Upper Aragon between April and June 1938 caused 24,000 people to flee to Republican territory, which was continuing to shrink and becoming increasingly unsafe. The loss of territory, along with population growth due to previous evacuations and displacements, led to worsening living conditions. By November 1938, the estimated number of refugees in Catalonia, which had a population of 2.8 million people, was 600,000. This amounted to a 25 per cent increase in the total number of people living in Catalonia. Some 600 children arrived in Barcelona by train each day, and some days there were as many as 2,500. They were taken to the *Casa de Misericordia*. In addition to Catalonia's population of nearly three million people, according to the 1936 census, there were an additional one million people in transit during the war. There were 399,000 from Extremadura, 153,000 from Andalusia, 60,200 from Madrid and Castile, 50,000 from the Basque Country, and 39,000 from Asturias and Santander, in addition to displaced persons and refugees from elsewhere in Catalonia.³⁰ As for these Catalan refugees, they came

28 R. Salas Larrazábal, *Pérdidas de la guerra*, Barcelona, Planeta, 1977, 52, 426.

29 A. Peiró, *¡Evacuad Teruel! La odisea de 12.000 turolenses durante la Guerra Civil española*, Zaragoza, Comuniter, 2014. Most of them ended up in the Valencian *comarca* of Alto Palancia, which borders the province of Teruel to the south-east, or in the city of Valencia, where they experienced numerous conflicts with the local population. D. Alegre Lorenz, *La batalla de Teruel: guerra total en España*, Madrid, La Esfera de los Libros, 2018, 125–129, 332–336.

30 Serrallonga, *Refugiats i desplaçats dins la Catalunya en guerra*, 150.

from places that had been subject to the violence carried out by insurgent troops as part of their occupation policies in Catalonia.

However, the problem was (and is) in fact far-reaching. In wartime, displacement was provisional and constant. Displaced persons were generally in continuous movement, escaping from everyday conflicts in the places they passed through, which would explain the impulse to flee towards the border. Furthermore, the dynamics of the war itself gradually reduced the capacity to absorb fluxes of refugees as the areas still under Republican control continued to shrink, forced people to flee newly occupied territories, and generated new waves of displacement, such as the people who left other parts of Catalonia for Barcelona. This flight increased the strain on the systems in place to receive, provision, and maintain refugees, which were already compromised. There were evacuated persons, with and without legal refugee status, living in confiscated flats and buildings, cinemas, theatres, hotels, churches, bullfighting rings, and railway stations. People also slept in the metro or outdoors in public spaces, including large squares and parks, in building entryways and in shanty dwellings. Communities far from the front lines were required to provide accommodation to refugees under one of two systems, the first with institutional backing and the second being taken in by direct relatives. The latter system was used whenever possible. However, the reality was infinitely more complex.

Feeding the refugee population was a serious problem in the areas behind the front lines.³¹ As is well known, civilian evacuees were aided by international organisations that set up soup kitchens, hospitals, and children's colonies using limited resources. However, how the problem was handled is not a settled topic. As we have already mentioned, the situation led to conflicts among some local populations. It is estimated that no more than 12–15 per cent of the refugee population was suitable for work – only a small portion of displaced adult women. In mid-1938, the Catalan agriculturists' union *Unió de Rabassaires* requested that, given the shortage of workers and the intensification of production imposed by authorities, women and refugees who had not been assigned other jobs be employed working the fields. The Republic's Foreign Minister, Julio Álvarez de Vayo, himself spoke of “three million refugees, in round numbers” in the areas behind the front lines. It is evident that the magnitude of the phenomenon was far greater than had been prepared for, particularly at a time, in 1938, when economic blockades, the duration of the war, and a dwindling capacity to secure provisions made hunger an increasingly common experience in Republican territory. In the Madrid embassies, rumours were exchanged among refugees as to the privileges enjoyed by some and the scarcity faced by others. In Barcelona, the imposed moral duty to offer refuge, and therefore food, shelter, and medical care, to helpless and vulnerable civilians was also the source of tensions between communities. After all, more than half of the total refugee population was in

31 A. Calzado, “Los abastecimientos como eje central de la moral de guerra y de la simbología de los nuevos poderes en la retaguardia republicana durante la Guerra Civil”, in S. Valero & M. García Carrión (eds.), *Desde la capital de la República. Nuevas perspectivas y estudios sobre la Guerra Civil Española*, Valencia, PUV, 2018, 295–314. Some of the tensions surrounding resource distribution and feeding the refugee population are discussed in M. Seidman, *Republic of Egos: A Social History of the Spanish Civil War*, Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 2002, 143.

the same city, which was being bombed by the German Condor Legion and the Italian *Aviazione Legionaria* and facing news of the eminent arrival of Franco's troops.

3. CROSS-BORDER EXILE, FORCED REPATRIATIONS AND THE END OF THE WAR

All these factors, as well as the exile's essentially political dimension, set the stage for the final humanitarian disaster, the *Retirada* of 1939, which began with a sort of "great terror" that came over people as news arrived of the killings and other violence carried out by advancing insurgent forces. This explains why hundreds of thousands of people headed for the border *at the same time*. To a large extent, it amounted to a continuation of the dynamics of forced migration seen in 1936-38, but with specific and noteworthy characteristics, the most significant being the departure *en masse* of a large number of people as a result of the final push by Franco's victorious armies.³² The form that this mass exodus took was also a consequence of the collapse of the forces loyal to the Republic, which left civilians with hardly any protection during their chaotic and terror-stricken flight.³³ Half a million people took to the road in a matter of days, weeks at most, from Tarragona and western Catalonia to Barcelona, and from the Catalan capital to Girona and Figueres. They fled on lorries, on wagons, or on foot, with the few belongings they had managed to gather or with only the clothes on their backs, while under fire from the air by the Italians and the Germans. Women, children, and elderly people accompanied soldiers. Without any actual military orders to retreat, beyond the instructions given by Vicente Rojo (or Negrín's order to evacuate goods such as culturally significant works of art), and without any arrangements for receiving non-combatants along the way and at the border, the magnitude of this northward flight made the voluntary/forced population displacement which occurred over a few weeks in January and February 1939 the largest in European history up until that point, and in the shortest period of time.

- 32 One case that is of interest due to its similarities to Spain occurred in the second half of May 1945, at what is now the border between Slovenia and Austria, when Germany's surrender and the resulting military collapse of the Axis led to the formation of a column of refugees stretching fifty kilometres, probably more than 250,000 people in total. Two thirds of them were collaborationist Croatian, Slovenian, and Serbian authorities, soldiers, and militiamen, while the rest were civilians. They had to force their way through attacks by Yugoslavian forces. Some 60,000 people managed to reach Austria and were interned in improvised camps set up by occupying British forces. Nearly 200,000 were trapped on the other side of the border. Up to 70,000 people, 50,000 of whom were of Croatian origin, were killed in the ensuing massacres. Today, these massacres amount to one of the most controversial historical episodes in European collective memory due to their place in the martyrology and narratives of Croatian nationalism. V. Pavlakovic, "Deyfing the Defeated: Commemorating Bleiburg since 1990", *L'Europe en Formation*, 3(357), 2010, 125-147. For Yugoslavian authorities, as for those of Franco's Spain in 1939, the return of these people was a matter of vital importance because their very sovereignty within the country was at stake. J. Tomasevich, *War and Revolution in Yugoslavia, 1941-1945: Occupation and Collaboration*, San Francisco, Stanford University Press, 2001, 758-765, and M. Portmann, "Communist Retaliation and Persecution on Yugoslav Territory During and After the World War II (1943-1950)", *Tokovi istorije*, 1(2), 2004, 45-74.
- 33 J. M. Reverte & M. Martínez Zauner, *De Madrid al Ebro. Las grandes batallas de la guerra civil española*, Barcelona, Galaxia Gutenberg, 2016, 335, 337; J. Gaitx, *Itineraris de la retirada de 1939*, Barcelona, Generalitat de Catalunya, 2020.

The figures are well known because they come from official estimates made by French authorities: 440,000 people, 170,000 of them women, elderly people, and children; 40,000 non-mobilised civilians; 10,000 wounded men; and 220,000 combatants. The laws passed after Édouard Daladier became prime minister in April 1938 allowed the administrative detention of foreigners considered “undesirable”.³⁴ This measure was justified by citing the desire to guarantee “national security” and “the preservation of public order”. French authorities – who were more concerned with public order than humanitarian duties – had a variety of plans for those who arrived from Spain. These included moving soldiers and the wounded to military facilities, pending the readying of internment camps where the former could be housed in good conditions and so that the latter would not overburden the hospitals of southern France.

However, any existing plans proved thoroughly insufficient to respond to the *Retirada* of 1939. The vast numbers of people departing Spain for France drastically surpassed the expectations of the Daladier Government and Interior Minister Albert Saurraut, who had attempted to contain this influx by closing borders. This policy, which other Western European countries also applied to Jews fleeing Germany, proved futile in the face of the continuous arrival of desperate people who almost never had legal documents for entering and staying in destination countries.³⁵ Thus, on 5 February, responding to *faits accomplis*, France’s new authorities (concretely, Édouard Daladier) gave the order to open the border to unarmed soldiers, days after authorising the entry of civilians.³⁶ Military units soon began to gather at the border. Their retreat was covered by the 26th Division and what was left of the Army of the Ebro, complicating the task of separating civilians from combatants. On 9 February, the Republic’s 26th Division crossed the border at Llívia (a Spanish enclave located in French half of the divided Cerdanya valley), while the rest of what remained of the Republican army used the last available crossing points along an approximately 150-kilometre stretch of the border.³⁷ Shortly thereafter, the insurgent general Juan Bautista Sánchez reached the border at Le Perthus. Puigcerdà, in the Spanish part of the Cerdanya valley, fell the following day. The entire border with France was in Franco’s hands.

Some 50,000 members of the French Gendarmerie, Police, and Mobile Republican Guard ruled this gigantesque space of selection and incentivised return, a militarised border that was literally in a state of siege.³⁸ Border crossing points were

34 G. Dreyfus-Armand, *El exilio de los republicanos españoles en Francia. De la guerra civil a la muerte de Franco*, Barcelona, Crítica, 2000 [1999], 58–59.

35 V. Caron, “Unwilling Refugee: France and the Dilemma of Illegal Immigration, 1933-1939”, in F. Caestecker & B. Moore (eds.), *Refugees from Nazi Germany and the Liberal European States*, New York & Oxford Berghahn, 2010, 57–81.

36 Dreyfus-Armand, *El exilio de los republicanos españoles en Francia*, 44. For an exhaustive study of policies, treatment in the press, and social attitudes in France regarding the Spanish Republican exodus, M. Martín Gijón, *Dos repúblicas contra el fascismo. Españoles y franceses desde la Guerra Civil hasta la Segunda Guerra Mundial*, Granada, Comares, 2019.

37 Alted, *La voz de los vencidos*, 66–67.

38 E. Forcada & G. Tuban, “Topografía dels camps de concentració de la Catalunya del Nord”, in E. Pujol (ed.), *L’exili català del 1936-1939. Un balanç*, Girona, Cercle d’Estudis Històrics i Socials, 2003, 57; M.-C. Rafaneau-Boj, *Los campos de concentración de los refugiados españoles en Francia (1939-1945)*, Barcelona,

the site of the first phase of separating men of military age from other arrivals (women, the elderly, and children). Non-combatants who were not returning to Spain were sent to departments in the French interior (but not to Paris), generally by train. Camps such as those at Argèles-sur-Mer, Saint-Cyprien and, soon after, Barcarès, Bram (Aude), Agde (Hérault), and Rivesaltes (which at least had barracks) became the scene of the Republican defeat for combatants, “defenceless bodies among the shacks and holes dug in the sand to escape the cold”.³⁹ Two thirds of all internees spent the first weeks in Argèles-sur-Mer or Saint-Cyprien, despite the complete lack of suitable facilities in these improvised camps. The Gurs camp, for people who had fled from the Basque Country, and the Vernet d’Ariège disciplinary camp were subsequently added.

From a comparative perspective, it is important to note that this situation, while not completely unprecedented, was still relatively novel in the history of the regime for managing refugee populations.⁴⁰ What today is commonplace (according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) 40 per cent of refugees live in camps) emerged progressively. It did so, in the first place, at the initiative of the belligerent countries of the Great War as a way of dealing with naturalised foreign populations and people displaced by the revolutionary civil wars that broke out after 1917. Later, in October 1938, the Belgian Government set up a camp at Merksplas in northern Belgium, at the behest of Belgian Jewish civic organisations, to house a thousand of the 25,000 Jews who would arrive in the country over the course of those months, and the French Government responded to the respective Jewish and Spanish refugee crises by opening camps.

Despite French authorities’ humanitarian declarations, from the very beginning they tried to bring about the rapid repatriation of arrivals from Spain using policies which amounted to a *de facto* disregard for the right to asylum, using words and deeds (such as poor living conditions and emotional blackmail using family members) to pressure civilians and soldiers into returning.⁴¹ France’s right-wing press called them “fugitives, deserters, and murderers”, while the Government viewed them as “human hordes [that] have crossed all barriers [. . .], sowing panic”, in the words of the Minister of Public Works, Anatole de Monzie.⁴² Repatriation was a truly complex process, quick in some cases, but desperately slow in others. Many displaced persons along the western part of the Pyrenean border quickly re-entered Spain at Irun, as the Prisoner Concentration Camps Inspectorate (*Inspección de Campos de Concentración de Prisioneros*, ICCP) noted: as many as 67,709 from 1 to

Omega, 1995; G. Tuban, *Camps d'étrangers. Le contrôle des réfugiés venus d'Espagne (1939-1944)*, Paris, Nouveau Monde, 2018.

39 A. Vilanova, *Los olvidados. Los exiliados españoles en la segunda guerra mundial*, Paris, Ruedo Ibérico, 1969, 10. On the nature and re-use of French concentration camps, see A. González Ruibal, *Volver a las trincheras. Una arqueología de la guerra civil española*, Madrid, Alianza, 2016, 224–225.

40 A. J. Kaminsky, *I campi di concentramento dal 1896 a oggi. Storia, funzioni, tipologia*, Turin, Bollati Boringhieri, 1997 [1982]; A. Kramer and B. Greiner (eds.), *Die Welt der Lager. Zur »Erfolgsgeschichte« einer Institution*, Hamburg, Hamburger Edition, 2013.

41 Martínez, *Las refugiadas del exilio republicano español en Francia*.

42 Martín Gijón, *Dos repúblicas contra el fascismo*, 49.

19 February, while more than 80,000 had requested to return.⁴³ Forced repatriations of civilians were also carried out at the border. In the space of a few days, 190,000 people, most of them civilians, were evacuated to other parts of France, but some 275,000 remained interned in camps in the South. Such was the situation when, on 27 February, the Bérard-Jordana agreement, in which France recognised the Burgos Government as the legitimate Government of Spain, was made public. France was increasingly motivated to incentivise refugee contingents to return to Spain, particularly given the cost to the public purse of maintaining them – more than six million francs per day, according to authorities – not to mention the deployment of crucial military and police personnel – as France’s new ambassador to Spain, Philippe Pétain, would note – months before the outbreak of a European war that was already on the horizon.⁴⁴

By the summer of 1939, more than 250,000 refugees had returned to Spain under France’s policy of incentivised return, including those who entered the by then well-oiled system of reception, classification, and internment or evacuation run by the ICCP. The undecided were subject to a variety of measures, such as forced conscription in the French army (some 7,000 joined the Foreign Legion, where they made up a quarter of all troops and faced humiliating treatment at the hands of prejudiced officers) or in the Companies of Foreign Workers (between 50,000 and 60,000 people). Thus, many experiences of flight ended with refugees returning to their places of origin, with the hope of being able to return to a normal home life, despite the risk of being subject to the new regime’s policies of political persecution. By December, only 162,000 of the initial half a million people remained in exile, according to Javier Rubio’s calculations, while Dreyfus-Armand gives the figure of 180,000.⁴⁵ The vast majority of those who had lost the war remained in Spain or soon returned.

However, some did not: up to 15,000 managed to join the French Resistance during the German occupation, while the majority of those who remained in France spent the years of the European war moving from camp to camp, at least until 1942, as labourers with the Groups of Foreign Workers or the German Organisation Todt.⁴⁶ Others, including children, were unable to return; the defeat of the Republic caused Spain to lose some 17,200 of the nearly 37,500 children who had been sent abroad during the conflict as part of rescue operations. Lastly, there was a permanent exile made up of a minority of “a few thousand privileged [people]”, according to the famous Catalan poster illustrator Carles Fontserè (who was, in his own words, a “third-rate exile”), whereas the majority of those who had lost the war were “defeated

43 P. Barruso, “El difícil regreso. La política del Nuevo Estado ante el exilio guipuzcoano en Francia (1936-1939)”, *Sancho el Sabio*, 11, 1999, 101–140. J. Rodrigo, *Cautivos. Campos de concentración en la España franquista, 1936-1947*, Barcelona, Crítica, 2005.

44 P. Barruso, “Los acuerdos Jordana-Bérard y el regreso de los exiliados españoles (abril-septiembre de 1939)”, in F. Gil & J. C. Ara (eds.), *La España exiliada de 1939*, Huesca, Institución Fernando el Católico, 2001, 141–160. On the subsequent period, see A. Martínez, “La miseria de la emigración clandestina. Refugiados políticos y económicos en Francia, 1945-1950”, in M. A. del Arco (ed.), *Los años del hambre. Historia y memoria de la posguerra franquista*, Madrid, Marcial Pons, 2020, 317–344.

45 Dreyfus-Armand, *El exilio de los republicanos españoles en Francia*, 44.

46 D. Gaspar, *La guerra continúa: voluntarios españoles al servicio de la Francia Libre*, Madrid, Marcial Pons, 2015.

people lacking the ability, the determination, the will, or the opportunity to leave Spain, whether using their own means or the means of the exile [community].⁴⁷ Mexico (home to half of all permanent Spanish exiles in the Americas, around 30,000), Russia, and, to a lesser extent, the United States and Uruguay benefited from the arrival of exiled artists, scientists, and intellectuals under the refugee status granted in 1945.⁴⁸ In this regard, as Alba Martínez has indicated, because Spanish political organisations in exile played a key role in obtaining refugee status, patriarchal norms among communities of exiles limited women's access to refugee status and have subsequently conditioned scholarly work on the phenomenon of exile as a whole. The Spanish Republican exile has been portrayed as being limited to a community of men, or even of particularly prominent men, thus excluding women exiles. As in other comparable situations worldwide, the experience of forced displacement and exile varied according to age and gender.⁴⁹

As Peter Gatrell has underscored, Republican exiles did not present themselves as victims expelled from their country, but rather as active subjects in the fight against fascism, unlike other European refugee groups at the time, such as Jews fleeing Nazi Germany.⁵⁰ This argument was reinforced by exiles' membership in the Spanish Refugee Evacuation Service (*Servicio de Evacuación de los Refugiados Españoles*) and the Council for Aid to Spanish Republicans (*Junta de Ayuda a los Republicanos Españoles*).⁵¹ There may be a certain degree of idealisation behind this affirmation, and it is undoubtedly difficult to situate those who returned to Spain within a definition based on anti-fascist activism, but it does acknowledge one of the defining aspects that differentiates the Spanish exile from other population movements that defined the era: a proactive decision to leave.⁵²

When all had been lost, the last major population movements occurred during the victors' final offensive. With no plans for evacuating or protecting civilians, the

47 J. Gracia, *A la intemperie: exilio y cultura en España*, Madrid, Anagrama, 2010, 40, 35.

48 Among the extensive bibliography on this subject, a recent and original addition is M. Eiroa's book on Spanish exiles behind the Iron Curtain, *Españoles tras el Telón de Acero. El exilio republicano y comunista en la Europa socialista*, Madrid, Marcial Pons, 2018.

49 J. Freedman, *Gendering the International Asylum and Refugee Debate*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. A. Martínez, "Motherhood, Labor, and Anti-Fascism: The Construction of Refugee Identity by Spanish Women Exiled in France, 1939–1976", *Journal of Iberian and Latin American Studies*, 27/1, 2021, 7–26.

50 Peter Gatrell, *The Making of the Modern Refugee*, 116.

51 A. Mateos, *La batalla de México. Final de la Guerra Civil y ayuda a los refugiados, 1939-1945*, Madrid, Alianza, 2009.

52 Strong political identity has been also underlined in the case of exiles from the Greek Civil War, which can be separated into identifiable waves – as in Spain – such as that which occurred in 1945 in response to the "white terror" but also, most importantly, the flight of the Communist army across the border to Albania and Yugoslavia in 1949, which caused those who left to lose their Greek citizenship and be recognised as refugees by Yugoslavia, the Soviet Union, and Soviet Bloc countries (Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Albania), after a period of preventative detention in concentration camps such as those located at Rúbic (Albania), Berkovitsa (Bulgaria), and Bulkes (Yugoslavia). D. H. Close (ed.), *The Greek Civil War, 1943-1950. Studies on polarization*, London, Routledge, 1993; R. Van Boeschoten, "Enemies of the Nation. A Nation of Enemies: The Long Greek Civil War", in B. Kissane (ed.), *After Civil War: Division, Reconstruction, and Reconciliation in Contemporary Europe*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015, 93–120; K. Karpozilos, "The Defeated of the Greek Civil War: From Fighters to Political Refugees in the Cold War", *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 16(3), 2014, 62–87.

retreat of March 1939 was, once again, chaotic, though it did not involve as many people as in January. Insurgent authorities did not consider themselves bound by any supranational legal framework, nor by any law other than that which emanated from the War Edicts (*Bandos de Guerra*) of 1936. Franco's troops faced no resistance whatsoever in capturing nearly all the soldiers of the remaining Republican units and occupying what was left of Republican territory. Madrid, Jaén, and Ciudad Real fell, while the last defenders of the Republic headed for Alicante, which was occupied on 30 March by the Italian troops of the *Corpo di Truppe Volontarie* (CTV). The following day, Almería, Murcia, and Cartagena were taken, and all of Spain was under Franco's control. The ports of these cities were the setting for the final attempts to leave Spain at the end of war. Between 10,000 and 20,000 people managed to escape from Cartagena, Valencia, Alicante, and Almería, some reaching southern France and others Algeria.⁵³ What occurred in Alicante is well known because it has been described in memoirs and works of fiction: only some 10 per cent of those who attempted to flee managed to embark from the port, while the majority entered the Franco regime's system of concentration camps. This same fate awaited those who returned from France. Having been evacuees, refugees, exiles, and finally returnees, displaced persons and forced migrants were seen by the victors as fugitives.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The Spanish case shows the specificities of the intersection between the phenomenon of total war, civil war and asylum and refuge, but it also clearly shows the changes that occurred in the (heterogeneous) history of mass flight in the 20th century, which would be addressed in political terms in the 1951 Convention, and in academia starting in the 1980s. The Spanish experience demonstrates that forced mixed migration, a situation typical of our time, already existed in the context of interwar Europe. The refuge-exile-return process of Spanish Republicans included internally displaced persons, recognised refugees, and returnees. However, the two remaining categories of "mixed migration" were not present in this case: asylum seekers, because no legal refugee status yet existed, and stateless persons, because at no point did the Franco administration take away Republicans' national legal status.⁵⁴

The evacuations and exile of 1936–1939, which occurred alongside the arrival of Jews from Central Europe fleeing the persecution driven by Nazi Germany, laid bare the gross inadequacy of existing mechanisms for dealing with humanitarian crises in Europe. This was the case with regard to both humanitarian agencies and the recognition of the right to asylum and non-refoulement. The migration policies of each individual country and the desire to appease both local public opinion and the fascist powers carried far greater weight than any humanitarian consideration for refugee populations. The case of the Spanish Republicans who fled to France stands out, though it does include one exception: they were recognised by Mexico in 1939–1940.

53 J. Martínez Leal, "Vencidos, evacuados y desterrados: la emigración a Argelia de los últimos resistentes republicanos", *Actas del Seminario Memoria del exilio español en Argelia*, Orán, Archivo de la Frontera, 2019, 137–152.

54 Mixed Migration categories, in T. Christiansen, "Refugiados y migrantes: situación actual y perspectivas históricas y futuras", *Ayer*, 121, 2021, 335–351.

This created judicial and administrative complications regarding the situation of a group of refugees (in reality recognised individually as “political asylees”) whose status was guaranteed by a third country (Mexico) on foreign soil (in France).⁵⁵

Many of those who joined the mass exile of 1939 promptly returned to Spain – which must be considered as a distinct historical experience – and their stories must be examined as part of a dynamic of flight, refuge, exile, and return. There was also a long-term “cultural” exile, which is probably the best-known and has received the most attention from historians.⁵⁶ The dominant narrative focuses primarily on the long duration of the Republican exile, yet most migrants (displaced and evacuated persons) spent more time as refugees than as exiles. Displacement was often internal: they were refugees within Republican Spain and, once they had left the country, they were neither recognised as refugees nor aided by supranational agencies. Refugee status in fact existed only in relative terms, because it was applied by Republican Government to its own citizens as a measure offering protection and shelter, but without any international recognition. Lastly, it should be emphasised that the lack of non-refoulement guarantees and internment in camps contributed to the concentration camp increasingly becoming the reality of the refugee experience. For both the masses of refugees and the minority who went into long-term exile, the central cause of the situation in which they found themselves and of their decisions was essentially the same: violence, terror, and the totalisation of the war.⁵⁷

While the Franco regime did not go to the extreme of stripping them of citizenship (that is to say, they were not treated as stateless persons), they were subject to a system that questioned their belonging to the national community, investigated them, and made them pay for their “responsibilities” on the Republican side. Civilians who became refugees and, in many cases, later exiles had their lives and future prospects as individuals and families upended, even as they lost their right to refuge and protection. This did not happen in Spanish territory, where the overall situation was chaotic, due to both the characteristics of mass flight and the scarcity of resources in receiving communities, not to mention the principal cause of flight in the first place: the violence carried out by the enemy by land, air, and sea. In Madrid, Valencia, and Catalonia refugees barely got by and went hungry, but their rights as citizens remained intact. In addition, they may have had access to aid provided by international humanitarian agencies, refuge, and shelter, as in the case of children. It was on the other side of the border that this situation changed. The French Government’s xenophobic policies in 1938 and response to the Spanish *Retirada* in 1939 added another kind of forced migration to the historical experience of forced displacement and refuge/non-refuge: forced return to the country of departure, with

55 C. Dávila, “El tratamiento jurídico-administrativo a los refugiados de la guerra civil española en Francia y México: un estudio comparativo”, *Secuencia*, 69, 2007, 115–136.

56 Most of the texts included in the catalogue of the major exhibit 1939. *Exilio republicano español* (Madrid: Ministerio de Justicia, 2019) focus on literary, artistic, and scientific figures. Conversely, *Exilio* (Madrid: Fundación Pablo Iglesias, 2002), provides a strongly political interpretation of the phenomenon of exile.

57 M. Alonso, “Civil War, Total War, Fascist War: Rebel Violence and Occupation Policies in the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939)”, in M. Alonso, A. Kramer & J. Rodrigo (eds.), *Fascist Warfare, 1922-1945: Aggression, Occupation, Annihilation* (London: Palgrave, 2019), 75-79. J. Marco, “Rethinking the postwar period in Spain: Violence and irregular civil war, 1939-1952”, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 55(3), 2020, 492-513.

all the consequences this entailed.⁵⁸ These circumstances helped shape a relative but important conceptual nuance that must be taken into account when describing the experience being discussed here: forced migration was mostly temporary, rather than permanent.

It should therefore be noted that these displaced persons came up against a scarcely binding international legislative framework.⁵⁹ The Convention relating to the International Status of Refugees of 1933 (followed by the 1936 and 1938 Conventions) recognised the right to stay in another country and the principle of non-refoulement for people forced to leave their home countries due to war or ethnic conflict, but the League of Nations failed to give this recognition much practical impact, leaving the application of these provisions up to each individual country. Those who left Spain fleeing the violence of war and the effects of the regime of political persecution, punishment, and re-education imposed by the insurgents did not benefit from any protection from international agencies as refugees, nor did any institution other than the Government of the Spanish Republic recognise them as such. Refugee status under the Convention of 1933 would not be extended to Spanish exiles until 1945, and they would subsequently be included in the 1946 “Agreement relating to the issue of a travel document to refugees who are the concern of the intergovernmental committee on refugees”, along with Germans and Austrians.⁶⁰

However, none of this was exceptional. In Europe alone, it is calculated that the number of displaced persons and refugees reached 60 million at the end of the Second World War. This figure was to grow and quickly become associated with places outside Europe. Before the creation of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration in 1943, the International Refugee Organization in 1946, and the UNHCR in 1950, it is impossible to speak of a supranational agency in charge of decisions on the issue of refugees. The war in Spain was not considered a precedent for the adoption of the measures included in the 1951 Convention. In our view, this is paradoxical. Since 1945, civil wars (in most cases also involving international intervention), rather than international wars or negotiated population exchanges, have been the primary context in which situations of mass flight and

58 A. Martínez, “Pour quelles raisons avez vous quitté l’Espagne? De represaliadas a refugiadas políticas en la Francia de los años 40 y 50”, *Historia Contemporánea*, 59, 2019, 269–305.

59 On interwar legislation, the Nansen Passport and other measures to protect refugees (which had limited success) G. Coudry, “Notes sur le passeport Nansen”, *Matériaux pour l’histoire de notre temps*, 44, 1996, 19–21; O. Hieronymi, “The Nansen Passport: A Tool of Freedom of Movement and of Protection”, *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, 22(1), 2003, 36–47. For a contemporary analysis, L. W. Holborn, “The Legal Status of Political Refugees, 1920-1938”, *American Journal of International Law*, 4, 1938, 680–703; Holborn, “The League of Nation and the Refugee Problem”, *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 1, 1939, 124–135. See also P. Ther, *The Outsiders*, 109; W. I. Brustein & R. D. King, “Anti-Semitism in Europe Before the Holocaust”, *International Political Science Review*, 25(1), 2004, 35–36; S. Heim, “International Refugee Policy and Jewish Immigration under the Shadow of National Socialism”, in Frank Caestecker and Bob Moore (eds.), *Refugees from Nazi Germany and the Liberal European States*, New York & Oxford, Berghahn, 2010, 17–47; W. Laqueur, *Generation Exodus: The Fate of Young Jewish Refugees from Nazi Germany*, Hanover, NH, Brandeis University Press, 2001.

60 Final Act of the Intergovernmental Conference on the adoption of a travel document for Refugees and Agreement relating to the issue of a travel document to refugees who are the concern of the Intergovernmental Committee on Refugees, 11 UNTS 150 (15 Oct. 1946).

refugee populations have emerged.⁶¹ While the Spanish Civil War did not lead to the adoption of any concrete legal measures, it was – *de facto*, albeit not *de jure* – a major historical experience that included all the factors that continue to set off humanitarian crises today: gradual flight (from one place to the next over a more or less lengthy period of time), mass flight, exile, internment, border problems, return, and forced return.

Spain was one of the first cases of forced mixed migration of the 20th century, and possibly the most important of those that occurred in Europe due to a civil war.⁶² Nevertheless, the Spanish conflict's place within the study of refugees in Europe has been marginal, almost inexistent. This is the great paradox of the Spanish case, particularly considering how the “refugee question” has unfolded since. As in other civil wars, the refugee phenomenon was one of the most complex processes to manage. Possibly more so than in an international war. In fact, civil wars in countries such as Russia and Spain, and also Greece and the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, have led to the highest rates of refugees and exiles in Europe. But this tendency is not limited to Europe: in Korea, Rwanda, and Colombia, civil wars have generated massive numbers of refugees. The conflict of the 1990s in Yugoslavia alone caused an estimated 4 million people to become refugees. In recent years, fighting in Upper Karabakh, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia and (starting in 2014) the Ukrainian war have left thousands – perhaps 50,000 – dead and caused more than one and a half million people to become refugees, according to figures from the UN. It is estimated that the current civil war in Syria has already generated around five million refugees, most of whom are living in Turkish territory, with significant numbers found in Jordan, Iraq, and Lebanon, as well as in Europe. According to the UN Refugee Agency, half a million refugees are living in camps that lack minimally adequate living conditions. Since the era of major international conflicts ended in the middle of the last century, civil wars have been the most recurrent type of armed confrontation in the world. Given that civil wars have caused more than 20 million deaths and generated 65 million refugees since 1945, it is difficult to dispute their primacy. The Spanish Civil War was one of the experiences that marked a milestone along this path of terror.

As Tony Kushner has pointed out, historians have shown some “resistance” towards refugee studies, often seeing them as limited by policy-determined queries and labels that tend to standardise different cases and strip them of their peculiarities. For their part, non-historians have overlooked the importance of looking to past to

61 J. Rodrigo & David Alegre, *Comunidades rotas. Una historia global de las guerras civiles, 1917-2017*, Barcelona, Galaxia Gutenberg, 2019, but also the forthcoming *Civil Wars: A Global History*, Cambridge, Polity, 2023.

62 During the Second World War, part of the Belgian population, around two million people, fled in May 1940 in the face of the advance of German troops. Joining them in flight were a large number of French civilians, as many as 12 million people. N. Dombrowski Riser, *France Under Fire: German Invasion, Civilian Flight, and Family Survival during World War II*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2012. Millions of people fled from Eastern Europe and the Balkans in terror before the advance of the Red Army. G. D. Cohen, *In War's Wake: Europe's Displaced Persons in the Postwar Order*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011. The pioneering work of L. W. Holborn is essential reading: *The International Refugee Organisation: A Specialized Agency of the United Nations. Its History and Work*, London, Oxford University Press, 1956; and L. Holborn et al., *Refugees: a problem of our time. The work of the United Nation High Commissioner for Refugees. 1951-1972. Vol. 1-2*, Metuchen, NJ, Scarecrow Press, 1975.

better comprehend the contemporary refugee phenomenon, as they have proven unable to “see history and refugees as linked or relevant”.⁶³ This does not imply that historians are not interested in forcibly displaced people. Numerous historical studies on this topic do exist, but they have long been associated with research on interwar Europe, genocide, and the Cold War, as well as with transnational and global history, rather than with refugee studies specifically.

A multidisciplinary approach has proved fundamental for research on the refugee phenomenon. However, the main limitation of existing works lies in their use of a predominantly top-down perspective, which tends to flatten and homogenise the varied realities of flight. Analysing the phenomena of flight and refuge in their complexities and contingencies, as we have done for the Spanish case, serves to redress State-centric perspectives and reorient research towards the study of individual agency. Furthermore, it allows an examination of how the concepts and categories that we use in the present have been reformulated over time, thus demonstrating that their mutability and historical evolution. Future research on the past and present of forced migrations can only advance by addressing the human experience of uprooting and emphasising the heterogeneity and agency of forcibly displaced persons using a bottom-up analytical approach. In most cases, displaced people continue to be portrayed as passive subjects and helpless victims of state violence. Their active role in influencing the choice of protective measures and political decisions at the state and global levels is often overlooked, which is why more careful reflection on the agency of involuntary migrants is needed.

As Gatrell suggests, social history research proves crucial to this task. By adopting an emic perspective, it can shed light on the reasons behind and the experience of flight through the analysis of refugees’ accounts, and in doing so complement sociological and anthropological research.⁶⁴ In this regard, however, a methodological problem linked to the scarcity of sources emerges. As shown by the Spanish case, State archives are of little use as they provide governmental information suited only to a top-down approach which neglects a bottom-up perspective. Diaries and autobiographies do exist. Nonetheless, as Kleist points out, they usually fail to include necessary accounts by the most vulnerable groups – such as women and children – and by illiterate displaced people, thus covering just a fraction of the broad spectrum of experiences of flight.⁶⁵ In order to overcome this problem, bolstering oral history research is crucial, as it helps uncover and dignify what Elie calls the “life histories” of refugee and to stimulate a “forced migration history from below”.⁶⁶ In the Spanish case, the major task at hand is the need for intergenerational analysis on the effects

63 T. Kushner, *Remembering Refugees: Then and Now*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2006, 40; P. Gatrell, “Population Displacement in the Baltic Region in the Twentieth Century: From ‘Refugee Studies’ to Refugee History”, *Journal of Baltic Studies*, 1, 2007, 43–60.

64 P. Gatrell, “Refugees. What’s Wrong with History?”, *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 2, 2017, 171. Cf. K. Jacobsen and L.B. Landau, “The Dual Imperative in Refugee Research: Some Methodological and Ethical Considerations in Social Science Research on Forced Migration”, *Disasters*, 3, 2003, 185–206.

65 J.O. Kleist, “The History of Refugee Protection: Conceptual and Methodological Challenges”, *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 2, 2017, 166.

66 J. Elie, “Histories of Refugees and Forced Migration Studies”, p. 30. An example of the use of oral history applied to refugee studies is U. Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 2000.

of experiences of flight and refuge, but the same can be said today of the major exiles and forced migrations of the 20th century. Perhaps the same will be said of those of the 21st century in a few decades.

Although much remains to be investigated, in recent years the academic debate has become increasingly aware of the extent to which contemporary refugee movements are related to those of the past. Herein lies the importance of history, which looks at the evolution of forced displacements across space and time. How institutional actors dealt with refugees during previous migration crises, the actions taken by policymakers to address prior humanitarian emergencies, how refugees helped shape host countries, and how the debate on displaced people in individual countries and in supranational institutions affected asylum policies in earlier periods can tell us much about forced migration today. History does matter in refugee studies. A long-term approach is essential to understanding current crises because it helps to contextualise what Gatrell has defined as “refugeedom”, a “matrix involving administrative practices, legal norms, social relations, and refugees’ experiences, and how these have been represented in cultural terms”.⁶⁷ Moreover, history is central because it “moulds” refugees. Given that the memory of past migrations often influences the behaviour of forcibly displaced people today, historical research is essential to better understanding the choices of these individuals in the present, thereby helping to shift the attention of scholars and policymakers from the *refugee problem* towards an effective and comprehensive *refugee solution*.

67 P. Gatrell, “Refugees. What’s Wrong with History?”, 170. Cf. P. Gatrell, *The Making of the Modern Refugee*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, pp. 7–41.