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British Quaker Aid to Spanish Republican Exiles in Concentration Camps in the South of France (1939–1940)

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Abstract: When a failed military coup provoked civil war in Spain in July 1936, British Quakers were among the first to respond to the tremendous need for humanitarian aid among the civilian population. They distributed food and clothing, set up canteens and hospitals, provided schooling and workshops, and organized the evacuation of children from war zones. Then, in January 1939, when the Spanish Republic finally succumbed to the might of the rebel forces, the Quakers accompanied thousands of refugees in their flight towards the French border. This became known as ‘la retirada’ (the Retreat). Once in French territory, the refugees were herded into improvised internment camps. These were simply vast open spaces on the beaches encircled by barbed wire, with no shelter, no latrines and barely any food. Quakers were the first to obtain permits to access the camps in order to alleviate the suffering and deprivation found there. They distributed not only the most basic aid such as food and clothing, but also pencils and notebooks, as well as tools and materials of all kinds to work with. Thus, in characteristic fashion, they provided people with the means by which they could help themselves.

Keywords: Spanish Civil War; British Quakers; humanitarian aid; refugees; French concentration camps



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1. Introduction

There now exists an immense historiography concerning the wide and complex range of issues involved in the Spanish Civil War, from the social and political circumstances leading up to the conflict, to the Francoist repression of the post-war years and beyond. In more recent years, a steady widening of focus has seen a move beyond the military oriented perspective of the conflict towards studies that contemplate the intense and prolonged trauma and suffering of a civilian population affected by political repression, relentless military bombardment, deprivation and disease. Likewise, focus has also shifted to encompass a range of attempts made to provide humanitarian assistance to such victims during and after the conflict, both in Spain and, later on, in the internment camps in southern France.

The catalyst for this tremendous demonstration of transnational solidarity is generally considered to be the decision of many Western democracies, including Britain, to sign a pact of non-intervention, prohibiting all international military aid to either of the belligerent parties in order to avoid a global escalation of hostilities. Nazi Germany and fascist Italy openly flouted the non-intervention agreement by supplying the rebel forces with vast amounts of armaments and troops. This eventually led the USSR to come to the aid of the Republic, playing a vital role in the formation of the International Brigades. The fighting force was comprised of anti-fascist volunteers from more than 50 countries.

This diplomatic situation prompted the proliferation of humanitarian initiatives, many of them ideologically oriented. Partisan groups such as the British organisation, the Spanish Medical Aid Committee (SMAC) and the North American Medical Bureau to Aid Spanish Democracy (AMB) launched initiatives in support of the Republic. However, there were also those organisations that were motivated by very different instincts and operated strictly

according to the principle of neutrality. These included the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the International Save the Children Union (SCIU), and, crucially, the British Quakers of the Friends Service Committee (FSC) and their North American counterparts of the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC). In Spain, as in the First World War, the British and North American Quakers joined forces with the aim of maximizing the effectiveness of the aid provided.

The origins of the Religious Society of Friends (or Quakers) can be traced to 17th century Britain. Precursors of the abolitionism of slavery, the Quakers are renowned for their pacifist beliefs and their commitment to humanitarian aid. Since its origins, the Society of Friends has been defined by its commitment to peace. The Society's founder, George Fox, declared: "All bloody principles and practices we do utterly deny, with all outward wars, and strife, and fightings with outward weapons, for any end, or under any pretence whatsoever, and this is our testimony to the whole world".¹ Devotion to the peace testimony would later be reinforced as a central tenet of Quaker faith. A document entitled "Our Testimony for Peace", approved by London Yearly Meeting in 1912, underlined the rejection of war and violence as the Society's founding principle, and it would become the cornerstone for twentieth-century Quaker resistance to war. In May 1915, following the outbreak of war in Europe, the Yearly Meeting created the Friends' Service Committee (FSC) "to strengthen the Peace testimony among Friends of military age (Kennedy 2016). The rejection of war and violence was consolidated, once more, as central to the Christian beliefs of Quakers, as was their commitment to alleviating the suffering of civilian victims of such conflicts.

Regardless of their pacifist principles, Friends (Quakers) have a long history of intervening in war situations, not as combatants but as first-responders, volunteers dedicated, above all, to helping civilian populations trapped in conflict zones, as they did during the Crimean War, the South African and Balkan Wars, and, most notably, during and after the Franco–Prussian War. During and after the First World War, the Quakers carried out humanitarian aid programs in seven different countries, through some 1800 volunteers, providing aid worth 22 million francs (Mendlesohn 2002; Pretus 2013).

With the same determination, Quakers responded to the outbreak of war in Spain in 1936. British Quakers collaborated with other charities, such as the National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief (NJCSR), in the distribution of clothing and food, and in the creation of workshops, schools and in hospitals and other health facilities in the republican-held areas of Spanish territory. This activity was initiated by the British–American Quaker couple Alfred and Norma Jacob. The Jacobs travelled to Spain in the summer of 1936, shortly after the outbreak of the Civil War, with the intention of establishing a Quaker mission, thus taking advantage of the new climate of religious tolerance that had developed after the election (in February 1936) of a left-wing coalition government, the Popular Front. The Jacobs opened a Quaker mission in Barcelona, which at the time was in Republican territory and still far from the front lines. Soon, however, the city would be inundated with refugees fleeing regions occupied by Nationalist rebels, and the Quaker mission became a feeding station for children. Funded by the Friends' Service Council (FSC), this would become the central axis of Quaker aid in Spain.

British Quakers collaborated with the Save the Children International Union (SCIU), which had already established several soup kitchens and children's hospitals in republican areas of Spain after the outbreak of the war. In 1936, the SCIU sent Miette Pictet, a Swiss child health expert, to Spain to coordinate relief work. While Barcelona was the domain of the British FSC and smaller Quaker organizations in Denmark and Norway, the core of American Quaker relief work in Spain would be established in early 1937 in the city of Murcia in southwestern Spain. Thousands of refugees had fled there after rebel forces advanced through Andalusia. With the help of the Quakers, the British baronet Sir George Young established a number of feeding stations and children's hospitals in the region. When declining funds threatened its continued existence, the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) took over its finances and operations (Palfreeman 2014). Murcia would

remain the capital of the AFSC Spanish Child Feeding Mission until the end of the war, although this Quaker relief section also supported some of the work in Barcelona. In 1938, several governments (mainly European) collaborated to establish the International Commission for the Assistance of Refugee Children in Spain (CI). British Quaker Edith Pye had much to do with the creation of this organisation (Holmes 2019, p. 78).

Subsequently, both the AFSC and the FSC took on the task of distributing grain and other aid in Spain for the International Commission. From mid-1938 onwards, the Commission also financed the FSC center in Barcelona, thus giving it official status both nationally and internationally. Shortly before the end of the war, Quaker Howard Kershner, a New York businessman, took over the coordination of all AFSC relief work, while also serving as Director of Relief for the International Commission in Spain. Friends were not in Spain to support a political cause and therefore, unlike other relief agencies, they did not leave when the cause collapsed. After the final demise of the Republic and the fall of Barcelona on 26 January 1939, the Quakers, under the leadership of Kershner, devoted their efforts to helping the thousands of Spanish refugees in concentration camps in France. The move to France changed the nature of relief work. British and American workers joined forces with the International Committee to provide aid. With eight workers, two cars and two small trucks, the FSC distributed nearly one and a half million francs worth of aid to women and children in camps scattered across France (Mendlesohn 2002, p. 225). Kanty Cooper, Barbara Wood and Lucy Palser worked with the displaced women and children in various French departments while Francesca Wilson, Audrey Russell, Frida Stewart, Dorothy Morris and Mary Elmes worked to improve conditions in the men's camp.

2. Methodology

The historiography on the humanitarian aid administered by the Religious Society of Friends (British Quakers) during the Spanish Civil War has increased notably in recent years. To the seminal works of Jim Fyrth, Farah Mendlesohn, and Howard Kershner, we must add more recent works focused on various aspects of the aid provided (Fyrth 1986; Kershner 1950; Mendlesohn 2002). Quaker aid figures prominently in the work of Gabriel Pretus and in Mark Derby's monograph on New Zealander Dorothy Morris (Pretus 2013; Derby 2015). Publications in the Spanish and Catalan languages are more numerous. They include the work of Serra Sala, which deals in detail with Quaker assistance in Catalonia, and that of Howard Kershner which traces Quaker collaboration with other humanitarian organizations in Spain (Serra Sala 2018; Kershner 2011). Further contributions include, most notably, the works of Gemma Caballer Albareda, Alicia Alted, Luiza Iordache, and Xavier García Ferrandis and Àlvar Martínez-Vidal (Alted Vigil 2019; Alted Vigil and Fernández Martínez 2014; Alted 2005; Caballer Albareda 2018).

While this article shares the same approach of some of the studies already mentioned on the administration of Quaker aid at the end of the Spanish conflict, it also reflects the first-hand experiences of the individual Quakers involved in that help. Through their direct testimonies of the narrated events, as well as the systematic use of ego documents (private letters, personal memoirs, etc.), we explore some of the forces that drove their aid work, as well as revealing their own hopes and frustrations in the struggle to provide for the welfare of the unfortunate people they were striving to help. Compared and contrasted with official versions of events, they provide greater insight to the exact nature of the Quakers' undertakings among the thousands of Spanish refugees in the concentration camps located in the south of France and other places of internment throughout French territory. The texts in question form part of a disperse body of documentation housed in private collections as well as in archives such as the Friends' House Library, London, and those of the American Friends Service Committee, Philadelphia. Together with information gleaned from sources in Spanish, Catalan and French, the intention, here, is to provide as full a picture as possible of the events in question and of the measures implemented by the British Quakers to deal with this humanitarian crisis.

3. The Humanitarian Work of the Quakers during the Retreat and the Exodus to France

When it came it seemed impossible, incredible, and unthinkable. Though we had all dreaded it secretly for the past six months, though it had over and over again been averted by the marvel of Spanish tenacity and courage, till endurance seemed no longer humanly possible—when it came, we simply could not take it in: the disaster of the Republican defeat (Stewart 1940, p. 174).

When in January 1939 the end of the Republic became tragically inevitable, thousands of individuals, both civilian and military, fled north to France in what would become known as *la Retirada*, ‘the Retreat’. Together with Republican soldiers there were women and children, the elderly and infirm, who fled “driven by physical or psychological fear of the last moments of a lost war” (Alted 2005, pp. 42–43). It is impossible to calculate with any certainty the number of refugees that crossed the French border. Tuban (2018) indicates that the most reliable (though conservative) figure is found in a report by the Préfet of the Eastern Pyrenees, which places the number at about 480,000 (Tuban 2018, p. 33). They were joined by members of the various humanitarian aid agencies that had been working in Barcelona, including, most notably, the Quakers. Initially, the latter were divided into two distinct units. One stayed close to the city in case a last-ditch Republican attempt at resistance might succeed. However, when it was seen that all was lost, this section joined the other, near the French border, and all focused their efforts on helping refugees on their way into exile, providing hot food and medical care in improvised facilities along the roadside. Convoys of trucks distributed food and milk on both the Spanish and French sides of the border (Friends’ Service Council (FSC) 1940; American Friends’ Service Committee (AFSC) 1940).

It is estimated that some 200,000 hot rations were issued (Mendlesohn 2002, p. 11). The French authorities, totally unprepared in the face of such a human deluge, closed their border posts, leaving thousands of people out in the open for several weeks, often in torrential rain and freezing temperatures. Quaker, Edith Pye writes from Perpignan:

It is a really terrible tragedy here—till today the Pass leading to Spain has been one solid block of refugees, of all ages, wounded soldiers, etc., and I understand they spent the night standing, as one stands in the Tube in rush hours. They were prevented from coming into France by Senegalese soldiers. (They said, “Moors behind us and now Moors in front!” and the crowd simply got wedged tighter and tighter). Some of our people set up a canteen on the French side, giving a piece of bread and a drink of hot milk to all the women and children and old people. Miss Vulliamy, with National Joint Committee money, set up another for wounded and worn-out men [...] These poor people have absolutely no shelter—it poured in buckets all last night and thou can imagine what it was like. (Pye 1939)

The French border was opened to women, children and the elderly on 28 January 1939. The flood of refugees was now thirty miles long, stretching from La Junquera on the Spanish side to La Boulou and Argelés on the French side. The *Daily Telegraph* (France Opens Frontier to Civilian Refugees 1939) reports: “There are at least 15,000 refugees waiting near Bourg-Madame and another 15,000 are in the vicinity of Le Perthus”. Day and night, the strange procession of people, animals, and carts inched toward French soil. By February 2, more than 100,000 had entered the country. On 5 February, the border was finally opened to soldiers of the defeated republican army, and more than 250,000 of them crossed into France. The Spanish–French border was closed on 15 February 1939, with the arrival of Franco’s troops.

Although it had had time to plan for the eventuality, there was no way the French government could have foreseen the sheer number of refugees it would have to manage. Provisions were made for approximately 15,000 men, while no contingency had been made for women, children, or the elderly. Although the French villagers offered food and comfort to the most affected of the new arrivals, there were no medical services or rest centers available for those exhausted by the journey. Guerra (2003) provides data on the

few French health facilities located at border posts. For example, in Cerbère, there were “2 hygienists, 3 military doctors, 5 civilian doctors and 3 nurses who attended the sick and wounded. Some 5000 wounded were received there, as well as 11,116 civilians and some 20,000 soldiers” (Guerra 2003, p. 196)

The men were herded into internment camps which were nothing more than vast open spaces along the coast, surrounded by barbed wire. There, on the beaches of Roussillon, they were left to fend for themselves, as aid agencies were initially denied entry to the camps. Women and children fared somewhat better. About 170,000 of them were transferred to the interior of the country and were distributed to hundreds of different locations. The kind of welcome they received varied greatly, depending on the hospitality of the neighbors rather than on the existing resources, and, above all, on the ideological affinity of the authorities. The Quakers found 2000 such centers scattered throughout France, housing anywhere from half a dozen refugees to two or three thousand (Kershner 1950, p. 30; Mirón-González 2019). Those refugees housed in the better organized colonies were given nutritious meals, and the children were able to attend school and learn French. Unfortunately, however, this was far from the general rule. In other destinations conditions were little better than they were for the men, with poor accommodation, insufficient food, and inadequate medical care. The women were even more distressed at being brutally separated from their menfolk, although Dr. Audrey Russell excuses the guards’ actions to some extent:

Their apparent inhumanity is often nothing more than a lack of imagination. The gardes mobiles tore away wives and children from their men because they were told to send them to places where they would have roofs over their heads. They should have explained this through the loudspeakers. Refugees are not cattle. Plans should be explained to them—they will co-operate if asked to do so. (Wilson 1944, p. 223)

4. The Creation of Concentration Camps: Subhuman Sanitary Conditions

After this first urgent stage, with the creation of the reception camps, more permanent camps were established along the beaches of Argelès-sur-Mer, St. Cyprien and Barcarès. However, these offered little more than their predecessors in terms of facilities, again being stretches of sand enclosed by the usual barbed wire. Fierce winds and extreme temperatures further exacerbated the primitive conditions. After the scorching heat of the day, the night temperature dropped dramatically as strong winds from the sea whipped up the sand, and as very few refugees had the luxury of a shelter, it was not unusual, in the mornings, for the men to find that several of their comrades had frozen to death

The first camp, which opened on 5 February 1939, was Argelès-sur-Mer. In addition to the general shortage of shelter, there were no kitchen or toilet facilities. The latter mattered little, since for the first ten days the only food the internees received was bread and water. Being the first, it was the least prepared of all the camps. David Scott of the *News Chronicle* stated: “It’s a pretty cruel mockery to call it a camp. The word ‘camp’ implies shelter, and only a small minority of the 100,000 refugees in Argelès have any kind of roof over their head.” (Holloway 2017). A serious problem was the lack of latrines, which meant that the men were forced to use the beach for all their bodily needs, thus adding unbearable filth to the cold, hunger, and thirst they had to endure. The water was not fit for consumption, as it was pumped from underground wells a few meters below the sand and near areas used as latrines and garbage dumps. Those who drank it fell prey to diarrhea and dysentery and it was not long before the first case of typhus was recorded. The only medical facility for the thousands of inmates at Argelès was a field infirmary with a sand floor and no bench to sit on, and there was such a lack of medical provision that the dressings had to be repeatedly reused. Teresa Gracia was a young child when she was imprisoned with her mother in the Argelès concentration camps:

The toilets were small huts and the excrement went out into the sea through a tube. Then we drank that water and the diarrhea would come, especially in the

children. There was no medical care. There was a woman with diabetes who had a treasure: a pair of scissors with which she used to open the children's scabies sores. Scabies starts with some exterior pimples and then the mites get under the skin and form blisters and those blisters were opened with scissors and all the liquid was emptied and then cleaned with sea water. In addition, that was the cure I had for a year. (Alted 1997)

Humanitarian workers informed the French authorities about those centers where urgent medical assistance was required. Meanwhile, epidemics of scabies, whooping cough, measles, pneumonia, influenza, and typhoid fever were rampant. Faced with these cases, explains Mirón-González, the departmental hygiene inspectors alleged that they were diseases brought from Spain or caused by the poor conditions in which the refugees arrived, without mentioning the overcrowding and lack of hygiene in the places where they were now forced to live (Mirón-González 2019, p. 190). With regard to the health of the new arrivals in the camps, the French reports indicate that 100 percent of the exiles interned in the concentration camps had pediculosis, both lice and crabs. Between 30 and 40 percent of those taken to the Hôpital de Saint-Jean in Perpignan from concentration camps had scabies. Skin infections such as furunculosis were common, but venereal diseases were rare and long-standing (Guerra 2003, p. 198).

The conditions in the camps favored the rapid evolution of epidemics, mainly dysentery and pneumonia. Guerra (2003) points out that there were 78 deaths from dysentery up to 8 April 1939 (Guerra 2003, p. 197). Typhoid fever, tuberculosis, scabies, scurvy, leprosy and, due to the wind and sand, conjunctivitis also spread rapidly (Mínguez Anaya 2012, p. 92). As well as physical illnesses, there was evidence of depressive nervous disorders associated with the particular condition of internees. Alted (2005) notes that "there was a word that summed up the psychosis of confinement and the wind that impregnated everything with sand: 'arenitis'" (Alted 2005, pp. 66–67).²

Argelès was filled to overflowing almost immediately, and further camps were established on the beaches of St Cyprien, two days later, and then Barcarès to the north. As in Argelès, in St. Cyprien there were no sheds for several months, although some men were able to build rudimentary shelters using reeds that were growing along the shore, as well as pieces of wood and the bodywork of abandoned vehicles that were found in the vicinity of the camp. For several weeks, the camp was also without latrines and hygiene was unspeakably poor. Plagued with lice and weakened by diarrhea and malnutrition, many succumbed to diseases such as typhoid fever which infected more than a thousand refugees and caused more than 190 deaths (Guerra 2003, p. 197). British aristocrat, writer and social activist Nancy Cunard describes what she saw on a visit to the St. Cyprien camp:

The scene there is more or less the same as in Argelès. One walks into a jumble of broken down cars and trucks. There are office files, tools, aircraft parts, machinery and the like everywhere [...] [T]here are dead donkeys everywhere; tonight the luckiest will eat them in the field. I saw how a stew was being made. (Cunard 1939)

Thanks to the imposition of strict (if not brutal) military discipline, the internees viewed the camps not as a refuge but as a prison, a perception reinforced by the attitude of the French authorities. For example, Albert Sarraut, the French Minister of the Interior, underlined the need to balance the humanitarian duty towards exiles with the maintenance of public order and the protection of the French. He declared that 'the Argelès-sur-Mer camp will not be a penitentiary, but a concentration camp. Asylum seekers who settle there will hardly stay there longer than necessary to prepare their emigration or, at their choice, their free passage back to Spain' (Sarraul 1939). Thus, the French authorities encouraged the refugees to return to Spain where, they were assured, they would have nothing to fear from the new regime. Then, in some cases, forced returns would take place (Alted 1997, p. 223).

The Quaker-led relief commission had been working in Catalonia since December 1937, providing a daily meal to refugee children. The following year (June 1938), the organization became the International Commission for the Assistance of Child Refugees in Spain (IC), largely the initiative of the indefatigable Edith Pye of the British Quakers and Paul Sturge, General Secretary of the Friends Service Council, in hopes of attracting large sums for relief from international governments. (After the outbreak of World War II, its name would be changed again, to the International Commission for the Assistance of Child Refugees, indicating that the organisation extended its assistance to children of other nationalities.) The IC was joined by the American Friends Service Committee (which up to this point had worked independently of the British), the International Civil Service (from Bern) and the Save the Children International Union (from Geneva). They also collaborated with the *Comité National Catholique de Secours aux Réfugiés d'Espagne*, a humanitarian agency created in February 1939 and directed by the Catalan, Josep Maria Trias Peitx (Caballer Albareda 2018, p. 50).

With the backing of the British Government, the IC extended its relief work to all refugees in concentration camps, with the exception of men of military age. The IC workers (mostly, but not exclusively, Quakers) fulfilled a double task: they provided help in the form of food, clothing, etc., and (as we shall see) they also supported the various self-help projects initiated by the refugees themselves. Furthermore, they remediated abuses and helped French officials overcome the fear and loathing that had been their first reaction to this invading wave of displaced people.

5. The Quakers Gain Entry to the Camps

The Quakers were the first, among all the humanitarian agencies present, to obtain the necessary permits to access the camps. Dr Audrey Russell wrote: "I wanted to cover my eyes, it was a sight that offended human dignity [...] men penned into cages like wild animals, or like cattle in the marketplace." (Wilson 1944, p. 223). Entering the camps was only the first obstacle. Russell complained that she wasted at least two days a week trying to convince officials that she was "a permit worthy person" (Russell 1939).

A report in the French magazine *L'Écho des amis* acknowledges the help given by the Quakers who, under the direction of Edith Pye, "provided stretchers, beds, medicines, condensed milk, etc." (Caballer Albareda 2019). According to Mínguez Anaya (2012), the French Red Cross never entered any of the refugee camps to help the Spanish Republicans. "After spending several weeks living with what they had managed to get across the border and what the French authorities provided, the only humanitarian material aid they received [...] from an international organization was that of the Quakers" (Mínguez Anaya 2012, p. 123). In addition to distributing material aid in the form of food, clothing, and blankets, the Quakers worked to facilitate relations between inmates and guards.

The National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief (NJC) was part of the *Comité International de Coordination et d'Information Pour l'Aide a L'Espagne Républicaine*. This organization worked throughout the war and now it focused its efforts on helping the Spanish refugees, providing food, milk and medical supplies. In May 1939 it issued a special memorandum, which was circulated internationally, informing people how they could provide aid to internees in French concentration camps. A donation of 40 francs, for example, could provide a refugee with:

one shirt, one pair of drawers, two pairs of socks, two handkerchiefs, one toothbrush, one tub of toothpaste, one razor and five blades, one piece of toilette soap, one piece of Marseilles soap, 40 g of tobacco, a booklet of cigarette paper, 10 sheets of writing paper, 10 envelopes, one pencil, one box of condensed milk, a sewing outfit. (*Comité International de Coordination et d'Information Pour l'Aide a L'Espagne Républicaine* 1939)

The memorandum further stated that a donation of 140 francs would buy one refugee a complete suit and a pair of shoes. Donations were also sought for women and children, the elderly, and the sick in the civilian camps, to buy goods such as food and vitamins, clothes

and shoes, bedding, sheets, and personal hygiene products, as well as medical supplies. Aid workers wasted no time in denouncing conditions in the camps. The Honourable Peter Rodd writes:

A little imagination will provide enough to show the results of confining 90,000 demoralised and exhausted men in a barbed wire cage some 600 yards by 300 for fifteen days without sanitary arrangements, without tents or any other adequate shelter, except the holes they can dig in the ground to escape the bitter night wind, without medical resources or supplies, without adequate nourishment or drinking water, and guarded by an alien race of West Africans with whom they are quite unable to communicate. (Rodd 1939)

But not everyone was so critical of the French authorities. In her memoir *Margins of Chaos*, British volunteer Francesca Wilson tried to understand the dimensions and consequences of the refugee flood in these terms:

It was easy for the world, who were not faced by the same problem, to criticise the way in which the French dealt with it. [...] The French Government was saddled with a burden which was an enormous strain on its housing capacity as well as its budget. The half a million refugees cost them at least £40,000 a day, but they would not accept money from our government (except through the Red Cross for clothing) because they did not want interference. Their intention was to send the Spaniards back as fast as possible; but many refused to go. (Wilson 1944, p. 220)

Nevertheless, this remains a dark chapter in France's past with which it is only recently coming to terms. French historian Geneviève Dreyfus-Armand explains:

It's a chapter in history that had a major impact on France. Yet we have a poor collective memory of it. Spanish Republicans didn't expect to be welcomed in three-star hotels, but they also didn't think that they would be humiliated and treated as poorly as they were, because they deeply admired France. [...] They had the misfortune of arriving in France at a time when it no longer offered asylum. We soon forgot the tragedy because of World War II, but it has re-emerged in our collective conscience over the last 15 years or so. (Trouillard 2019)

6. Quaker Aid in the Concentration Camps

Under the direction of Edith Pye, and with a small fleet of two cars and two small trucks at their disposal, British and American Quakers began receiving and distributing the first supplies of clothing and bedding. This service was extended when, thanks to the collaboration of the Spanish Medical Aid Committee (SMAC), the Engineering Union and the National Joint Committee, a convoy of five trucks loaded with food, blankets and medical supplies was sent. When supplies ran out, Audrey Russell converted empty trucks into mobile dispensaries, administering medical care, and mobile soup kitchens, supplying milk, bread, and chocolate across the camps. A declaration published anonymously by Catalan exiles in Perpignan refers to the importance of the help provided by the Quakers:

The aid work has been carried out above all in the concentration camps and hospitals, where a plate of rice with beans or chickpeas has been, in many circumstances, the most beneficial assistance that the internees have perceived and that has made it possible to withstand food crises. The contribution in medicines and medical supplies, as well as the organization and equipment of laboratories, maternity hospitals, etc., have enabled hospitals and infirmaries to provide more efficient care. (X.Y.Z. 1945, p. 20)

Once the NJC had established a headquarters in Perpignan, Frida Stewart tells how she "moved heaven and earth—in other words, the heads of our Committee—to be sent to France as a volunteer" (Stewart 1940, p. 176). Stewart had been involved in fundraising in

England, but she was eager to provide help among the needy in the French camps. She records her first impressions upon arriving in France:

spread out along the Cote de Vermail were those plague spots, Bacares, Argeles, Saint-Cyprien, each harbouring twenty to thirty thousand refugees in conditions of the utmost destitution and misery. [...] Nobody expected the Spaniards to be fed on the fat of the land when they arrived in their thousands at two days' notice and surged across the border uninvited. But one did expect a certain sympathy and respect to be shown to these heroic people; one could not find it but shocking that they were treated as dirt by the authorities, herded into waste tracts of sand on the arid, windy coast, with no covering at all, and given a solitary meal of chickpeas, day after day. (Stewart 1940, p. 179)

In Perpignan, material help of all kinds was received from different countries including Great Britain, America and Switzerland, as well as from other regions in France. Distributing the aid, however, proved problematic. French officials insisted that the items be delivered in packages (the famous *colis de guerre*) addressed to specific individuals (Farré 2014). This meant that lists of the names of internees had to be obtained first (Hill 1982, pp. 186–87). Nevertheless, the perseverance of the volunteers was rewarded by the joy it produced in the recipients of the packages. Internee Eulalio Ferrer notes in his diary:

Of all my letters sent in request of help, I have had a generous answer today. It consists of a package containing: a towel, a bar of soap, a tube of aspirin, a scabies ointment, a bottle of liquid, a packet of bicarbonate and a box of potassium chlorate tablets. Sender: Quaker Miss Ada F. Crossey. (Mínguez Anaya 2012, p. 114)

Frida Stewart wrote that “it was small consolation, in view of the enormous scale of misery and desolation, to be able to carry a few things for the camps [...] they accepted the small offerings with enthusiasm, and our trucks were received as if they were providing unlimited luxuries for the whole camp” (Stewart 1940, p. 180).

The Quakers were particularly aware that prison conditions and lack of dignified employment would generate despondency and lead to despair among the refugees. They supported initiatives by some internees to combat inertia and pessimism. Frida Stewart wrote to her mother that although people lived in poor conditions in makeshift shelters, they were incredibly stoic (Stewart 1939a). Some individuals organized various activities: lectures, choirs, artistic and theatrical groups, and sporting events. Classes were held on hygiene, health, and sex education, as well as on a wide variety of other subjects, from history and geography to agriculture and mechanics. The English and French classes were among the most popular. Magazines and wall newspapers were created, advertising the activities available in the camp, and reporting on the various competitions organized.

During the spring of 1939, ‘culture barracks’ were established. One was reserved for the performing arts where singers, musicians, and others performed. In another, works of painting and sculpture were exhibited, many crafted by renowned artists interned there, including Antonio Rodríguez Luna, Nicomedes Gómez, Josep Bartoli and Josep Franch Clapers. Their works are testimonies of life in the camps: they show hunger, fear, boredom, and hope. The cultural and sports activities notably improved the lives of many in the camps, but, as Frida Stewart points out, materials were lacking.

A similar enterprising spirit is to be found in all the camps in spite of all the difficulties. [...] All the letters received from students most urgently demand books, pencils, blackboards, chalk, as well as sport supplies. The students are determined not only to carry on their studies, but also to educate the illiterate and to bring their fellow-refugees courage and hope. (Stewart 1940, p. 180)

Here, the help of the Friends was crucial. They provided books, notebooks, paper, pencils, brushes, and other instruments for reading, writing, and painting. Another material requested by the internees was soap, not only to wash, but to make sculptures. For many

years, Stewart treasured two small soap sculptures: one a figure of a refugee fighting the wind, the other a crucifix made for her by a Republican soldier.

Mary Elmes and Dorothy Morris spearheaded the efforts of the Quakers in Perpignan. They organized schools and libraries with thousands of books in Spanish, many of them donated and others that they managed to buy in second-hand bookstores in Paris. Morris wrote to her family:

I have started 6 carpenters at work building cupboards for a school, *taller* [workshop], etc. and the *taller* of 6 girls sewing, and directing the small girls' activities who have already made themselves 100 odd *batas* (gowns) and are now outfitting themselves with underwear. The school is now equipped with stationary and blackboard, etc. and there is a milk service going for children". (Derby 2015)

A bulletin entitled *Ayuda* (Help) that circulated in the Saint Cyprien camp, attests to the help given:

As the most outstanding news, we want to communicate to our colleagues, and to our readers, our proof of immense and sincere gratitude towards our Quaker friends. This institution from its delegation in Perpignan has been providing support to our educational work of extraordinary importance. Some figures will confirm it:

20,000 notebooks, 12,000 pencils, 10,000 sheets of paper, 10,000 pens, 7000 toothpicks, 1500 erasers, 1000 inkwells, 50 plaster boxes, 100 French methods, 50 English methods, 25 French and English dictionaries.

Your donations in science books, letters, art, literature ... have allowed to form a large library. (Mínguez Anaya 2012, p. 114)

In July 1939 a collective of British artists in London donated a quantity of art supplies. On behalf of the Quakers, Dorothy Morris agreed to receive and distribute it to interned refugees. A few weeks later Morris let the British artists know that the donated utensils had already been used to make several works of art, some of which—"small salable pieces with not too gloomy themes"—would be sent to London for sale, thus raising funds for its creators (Derby 2015, p. 104).

The Quakers paid special attention to the health needs of women and children who suffered hardships in the camps. Dorothy Morris persuaded the Argelés camp commissioner to allow her to set up a maternity clinic that would offer expectant mothers some comfort and extra food for a month before and after delivery. Morris also worked with a Swiss aid agency to open the famous Elna Maternity Hospital where mothers and babies could receive specialist care (Derby 2015, p. 113). A special service was established for the care of men with permanent disabilities, and workshops were organized for the production of orthopedic devices and footwear, where some of the disabled themselves collaborated to provide other unfortunate colleagues with the apparatus they needed.

The third and final stage in the provision for refugees saw the construction of permanent settlements such as the specialized camps of Agde, Bram, Gurs and Septfonds. The Agde camp was designated for the Catalans; Gurs would welcome Basques, aviators and members of the International Brigades; Bram was reserved for the elderly and intellectuals, as was the Montolieu camp, and Septfonds would receive specialized technicians and workers who could be useful to the French state (Iordache Cârstea 2019, p. 28)

The specialized camps were better in almost every way than the previous ones. They were smaller sites with purpose-built barracks, located inland rather than on the beach, but conditions were still poor. Designed to house between 15,000 and 18,000, respectively, both exceeded 20,000 internees. Francesca Wilson described the Gurs camp as an "indescribably sad" city of shacks. "In winter it was a sea of mud, in summer it was arid and dry" (Wilson 1944, p. 230)

7. Reduction in the Number of Internees in Concentration Camps

Even before the massive arrival of Spanish republicans, various legislative measures were taken in France to control, monitor and repress “undesirable foreigners”. On 14 April 1938, Albert Sarraut, Minister of the Interior, had called for “methodical, energetic and prompt action to rid our country of undesirable and too numerous elements that circulate there” (Iordache Cârstea 2019, p. 30). This policy led to a considerable reduction in the number of internees in concentration camps from about 275,000 interned in February 1939, to 30,000 in April 1940 (Molinero et al. 2003, pp. 85–87). The Spanish who enjoyed asylum had to contribute to the national defence effort. Some 40,000 Spaniards were employed in industry and agriculture, while another 55,000 joined the Foreign Workers Companies to work in public works, the maintenance of roads and railways, the construction of fortifications and trenches, etc. Some 6000 enlisted in the Foreign Volunteer Marching Regiments (RMVE), military units comprised of foreigners and affiliated with the Foreign Legion, and up to 1000 in the latter. Additional factors in lowering the number of internees in the French camps were the repatriations to Spain and the emigration of almost 18,000 Spaniards to Latin American and European countries (Iordache Cârstea 2019, p. 28).

For many Spanish refugees, accepting a job represented an opportunity to escape internment, and for the French authorities it meant a cheap workforce. Cooper (1979) explains:

As early as April 1939, the French had begun to consider the use of refugees as workers. In certain departments work permits were issued and wages were controlled. Later, the outbreak of war would increase the demand and we began to hope that a solution would be in sight for much of the refugee problem. (Cooper 1979, p. 53)

For those individuals and families who were able to start a life (albeit a precarious one) outside the concentration camps, thanks to a job, the Quakers also provided invaluable moral and material support. They provided milk for babies and children, food, clothing and medicines as well as financial aid.

What the refugees feared, above all, was being sent back to Spain, especially after hearing stories of repression and persecution from friends and relatives who had remained there. Every day there were queues of people at aid posts, begging humanitarian agencies to help them avoid repatriation. Frida Stewart was haunted by the plight of refugees and the painfully slow process of helping them. She expressed her frustration in letters to her mother.

It’s desperately depressing that we can only get out the tiniest fraction of them and I feel very ineffective fiddling around with our list of 5000, and our card indexes. The Home Office is being unbelievably slow in giving permission for even our 60 names [...] It makes me wriggle with anger and shame to have all this dangling; and always having to say “mañana” when one’s asked “When shall we go?” (Stewart 1939a)

For many, the desired alternative was to be sent to a Spanish-speaking country sympathetic to the Republic, such as Mexico, Chile, or the Dominican Republic. The various official aid organizations had to pay for their trip and contribute financially to their installation in the recipient country. In general, these evacuations were carried out by the Spanish Republican Emigration Service (SERE) and the Spanish Republican Aid Board (JARE), organizations created by the Republican government in exile. Both organizations enjoyed the selfless collaboration of hundreds of international aid committees (Mateos 2009).

The most successful evacuation of refugees from the camps was carried out by the ship *Sinaia* which, on 24 May 1939, carried 2000 refugees to a new life in Mexico. This was an initiative of the NJC in collaboration with the Quakers, and was financed from the United Kingdom, mainly by the unions. An emotionally exhausted Frida Stewart wrote to her father:

At last we saw the fruit of our labours, the beginning of daylight for two thousand suffering people with the fears and horrors of war and imprisonment behind

them [...] And there were not a few surreptitious tears—not for the two thousand who were departing, but for the thousands who were left behind, and most of all for Spain herself, plunged in the darkness and desolation of fascist dictatorship and defeat. (Stewart 1939b)

The Argelès camp was closed in August 1939 and its occupants were transferred to Saint Cyprien, where, thanks to the efforts of Edith Pye, there were barracks for married men, where they could live with their wives and children. Food was adequate, if not plentiful, and each camp had roofed shelters. However, Spanish refugees continued to arrive, with harrowing stories of the vicious reprisals being carried out by the Nationalist victors, even though, with the political climate becoming increasingly tense, their safety was by no means assured in France.

8. World War II Breaks Out: Repercussions for Refugees

Early September 1939 saw the outbreak of World War II. Much of the funding from humanitarian agencies, including that from the International Commission and the American Friends' Service Committee (AFSC), was now going to alleviate the effects of what would soon be recognized as the deadliest conflict in history. Many thousands of people were fleeing German-invaded territories, their plight inevitably diverting attention, and aid, from the Spanish refugees. In Paris, it was decreed that all Spanish refugees who did not have a stable job in France would be repatriated to Spain regardless of their wishes. This policy was largely driven by the arrival of increasing numbers of refugees from other European countries. The International Commission, although formed to finance aid to Spanish refugees, revised its mandate to deal with refugees from all countries involved in the war, and, at the end of 1939, the word 'Spain' would be dropped from its title. It became the International Commission for the Assistance of Refugee Children. Sculptor Kanty Cooper, a volunteer with the Quakers, recounts:

We barely heard about the coming of World War II. We were working too hard to pay close attention to newspaper headlines or to listen to the radio. The French we met seemed so calm, so sure that war was unlikely. Even after the Germans invaded Poland on 1 September 1939, they thought some last-minute solution would be found. (Cooper 1979, p. 54)

On 3 September, Great Britain declared war on Germany. The French followed suit and all hell broke loose in Paris. Along with many thousands more, humanitarian agencies had to leave the city, disrupting the organization of aid. The attitude of many of the French towards the Spanish refugees hardened, with some, including Marshal Pétain, the French minister of war, calling for immediate repatriation. Cooper continues with her account:

When I returned to central France I discovered that the prefects who used to the war tolerated the refugees now they were determined to repatriate them. The French had new and overwhelming problems of their own. In one department they had received 60,000 evacuees from the north of the country, in another, 145,000 were expected. They needed the accommodation of the Spanish [...] It was easy to understand the French dilemma, but it was tragic to see the absolute terror in the Spaniards, mute in a foreign land without being able to say anything about their own destiny. (Cooper 1979, p. 56)

Repatriations were then carried out by force. At first, those who were to return to Spain were selected by categories: war widows and their children, single women, and children up to seventeen years of age. Many of these single women and older children were known to be on Franco's blacklist. Nevertheless, the last camps created were ruthlessly evicted, and the women whose husbands were working in France were forcibly taken with the others. In response to protests, the Home Office maintained that repatriation was not its policy. They now viewed Spaniards, both women and men, as a potential labor force needed for the war effort.

Between April and December 1939, return to Spain was encouraged among the refugees. Vilar points out that some 268,000 people, both Republican soldiers and civilians not involved in political causes, returned to Franco's Spain. Some 20,000 more would return during World War II, leaving a total of some 182,000 exiled compatriots on French soil (in Mateos 2009). There are differing opinions regarding the nature of these returns to Spain. While Rubio (1977) alleges that the majority returned to Spain of their own free will, (Rubio 1977, pp. 126–27), others argue that many were forced repatriations (Soo 2007, p. 102; Guixé i Corominas 2011). Dorothy Morris wrote to her colleagues, back in London, that most of the Spaniards in her area (in Perpignan) had been placed in jobs, recruited into the French forces, or repatriated. However, a considerable number of them still needed help. They were overcrowded in the camps as they had to make room for the new refugees (Morris 1939).

When Paris fell to the Nazis, on 14 July 1940, the British embassy ordered the evacuation of all its citizens, and British Quakers were obliged to leave the country. From then on, they worked under the auspices of the International Commission. When the International Commission withdrew from France in July 1940, the AFSC took up the work again and moved its headquarters to Marseilles, although its staff continued to operate, with permission from the German authorities, both in occupied and unoccupied France.³

9. Conclusions

During 1939–1940, the Quakers had distributed clothing and food to some 73,000 people interned in camps and hostels. They also sent tons of wool and thousands of meters of cloth to the various camps. In this way, the confined women could occupy their time in making clothes for themselves and others, with the possibility of earning a little money in return. The Quakers established and equipped 15 schools and adult education centers, in addition to collaborating in the creation of colonies for children, outside the camps. These included, most notably, Les Pastourelles, near Tolosa, and the Cadaujac in the French town of Aquitaine. Thanks to the efficient functioning of these colonies, they were granted economic subsidies by the French Ministry of the Interior (Caballer Albareda 2019).

The ultimate goal of the Quakers was not just to relieve the immediate needs of internees in the camps, but to remove as many of them as possible and relocate them to where they could support themselves. When this was achieved, it was the cause of the greatest joy for all. However, due to an incredibly slow, erratic and complicated bureaucracy, this occurrence was quite rare.

In short, Quaker assistance provided a lifeline to many of the people who were confined in the camps. The exiles themselves publicly praised “men and women who are sufficiently self-sacrificing to carry out good works in silence, without ostentation or pomp” (X.Y.Z. 1945, p. 21). Relief worker Kanty Cooper had joined the Quaker relief team in Barcelona in January 1938. She reflects upon her time there:

The Quakers were experienced in relief work and extremely business-like. In years of working with other organisations, I had never had such reliable backing. They taught me many things which proved invaluable later: the importance of making the staff feel like they were working with you, not for you, and that we were all part of a joint effort; the delegation of responsibility, everyone being fully employed and no one indispensable. I discovered, too, how necessary it was to remain flexible, improvisation being as important as organisation in a situation which could change overnight. I soon realised how fortunate I was to be serving my apprenticeship under such capable leadership. (Cooper 1979, p. 17)

Javier Rubio, Franco's historian and ambassador, summarizes the extraordinary humanitarian contribution of the International Commission, a Quaker enterprise, in favour of the Spanish refugees in the French concentration camps:

because of the dynamism of the leadership of this small organization (the International Commission for Aid to Child Refugees), and because it was the channel

through which not only private associations, but also governments, sent their contributions to Spanish refugees, the work of this International Commission was probably the most effective and praiseworthy of all the private initiatives of the time. (Rubio 1977, p. 151)

The successful humanitarian intervention of the Quakers after the Spanish Civil War, as in other previous conflicts, was due to their flexibility, their capacity for dialogue and their business efficiency, but above all to their compassion and their conviction that the way forward was to teach people to help themselves.

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Notes

- ¹ Extract from a declaration to King Charles II of England in 1660 Quaker Organisation 1661. The full text of the original declaration is available at <http://quaker.org/legacy/minnfm/peace/A%20Declaration%20to%20Charles%20II%201660.htm> (accessed on 22 February 2020).
- ² The term comes from *arena*, the Spanish word for ‘sand’.
- ³ The entire British Quaker staff of thirty was evacuated on 17 June 1940. With their going, the American Friends Service Committee assumed full administrative and financial responsibility for the care of those in need. With only a skeleton staff remaining, Quaker workers went on feeding and clothing refugees and meeting new calls for help. With the permission of the German authorities, Quaker workers were soon crossing between the lines to maintain a humanitarian service.

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