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Exile and Migration (Spain)

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This paper analyzes population movements to and from Spain during World War One, including migrant workers returning from France, Russian refugees, Germans, deserters, conscientious objectors, stateless persons, and others on the move due to labor shortages.

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Introduction

Between 1914 and 1918, population displacements reached unprecedented levels. They marked the inception of one of the most dramatic after-effects of the armed conflicts of the 20th and 21st centuries. [Spain's neutrality](#) did not shield it from [migration](#) movements that transported Spanish workers to and from Europe, drew displaced Germans, [Russian refugees](#), and a significant number of deserters to the Iberian Peninsula, and drove groups of Spanish volunteers to fight for the Allies. This constant movement of people not only posed a dilemma for the Spanish authorities, but also afforded an opportunity for change and social modernization.

The Invisible Emigrants

For [Spain](#), the first perceptible consequence of the Great War was the migratory crisis it triggered. The story was picked up by the [press](#) in the first weeks of August 1914. Coinciding with the German assault on Liège, Spanish peasants, workers, and miners employed in [France](#), [Germany](#), and [Belgium](#) began to cross the borders at Irún and Port Bou, cramming into trains to San Sebastian and Barcelona, respectively, or into boats headed toward the port of Palma de Mallorca. The [photographs](#), the distressing reports, and the testimonies of those queuing at consular posts to board one of the trains that the Spanish authorities had pledged to make available for the evacuation painted, even then, a very ignominious picture of the conflict.

The press estimated that 15,000 emigrants had crossed the Catalan border during the first week of the conflict. Four thousand people employed in German mines returned by way of Irún, while another 650, the majority of whom were coalminers or vineyard workers from Almeria and Alicante, arrived in Palma by sea from Marseille. This crisis highlighted a fact with which much of Spanish public was unfamiliar, given that the importance of the traditional migratory flow to [America](#) had overshadowed its European counterpart. Between 1882 and 1914, it is estimated that more than 3,300,000 emigrants left Spain, 71 percent of them bound for America and more than 20 percent for Algeria.^[1]

Furthermore, in France, the main European destination for Spanish emigrants, the deluge of Italian immigrants and certain negative [stereotypes](#) about the Spanish lowered their profile. Spanish emigration of this period has gone virtually unnoticed in the historiography, eclipsed by the major American migrations and the flight of Spanish Republicans to France, followed by the great migratory wave of the 1960s. The events of the first weeks of the armed conflict highlighted a migratory pattern that was destined to become the most important in 20th century Spain. The outbreak of war in 1914 heralded a shift in migratory tendencies from America to Europe (primarily France). Following the initial confusion, the flow of migrants to France increased significantly, at the expense of America.

The fact is that almost immediately after the first repatriations, the growing demand for labour in France turned the situation around. According to Javier Rubio, as a result of the war, 93,537 Spanish peasants, mainly from Murcia, Castellon, Valencia, and Alicante, emigrated to France to work as farmhands, along with 32,288 industrial workers.^[2] Other authors note that, between 1916 and 1918 alone, 142,629 sought employment in France, followed by another 100,000 between 1919 and 1920, many of whom were recruited in Spain by French agents.^[3] To this must be added illegal emigration, which traditionally involved crossing the Pyrenees by way of Catalonia and the Basque Country. According to the press, and substantiated by the disparity between the figures from Spanish and French sources and the recollections of locals living close to the frontier, the numbers must have been considerable.

	Official	Spanish	Other
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Year	sources	sources
1914	113,079	118,079
1915	86,980	166,280
1916	91,616	188,854
1917	58,660	166,853
1918	31,579	102,662

Table 1: Spanish Emigration^[4]

While the number of Spaniards in France increased, their place of origin and destinations varied. Traditionally, emigrants had been seasonal day-labourers working in the southwestern departments around Bordeaux. They also settled in Marseille, Lyon, and, to a lesser extent, in Paris. At the start of the conflict, many arrived from Extremadura and Castile-La Mancha to work, in miserable conditions, in the iron, steel, and chemical industries in northern France. These new immigrants beefed up the traditional presence of Catalan, Aragonese, and Levantine workers in Languedoc-Roussillon, as well as their Basque and Navarre counterparts in Aquitaine.

The Spanish press circulated a particularly pessimistic view of this migratory flow that “was bleeding Spain dry.” This peculiar perception was not new; it can be detected in all Spanish migratory laws, including that of 1907. During the war, the press determinedly covered the activities of the French agents responsible for recruiting workers on Spanish soil. Old prejudices explain Spain’s reticence to accept a process that could indeed provide a solution to the country’s socio-demographic problems. Nevertheless, the subsistence crisis provoked by the rise in prices and industrial decline continued to drive migration.

With the armistice, many of those workers returned to Spain. According to the figures of the *Instituto de Reformas Sociales* (Institute for Social Reforms), 30,000 did so in 1919. Blanca Sánchez Alonso points out, however, that for Spanish emigration in general, official statistics account for only two out of every three returning emigrants. Significantly, many returned only to leave Spain once more, this time with their families, thus swelling the ranks of the Spanish community in France during the 1920s. The Spanish community in France was still young and unstable, but the Great War laid the foundations for its future consolidation, first with the arrival of the Spanish Republicans, and then with economic migrants in the 1960s.

Exiles, Deserters, Conscientious Objectors, Stateless Persons

France was home not only to migrant workers, but also to exiles, anarchists, Spanish Republicans, socialists, and Catalan nationalists, particularly after the Tragic Week of 1909. This last group, fairly small but very active, was concentrated in specific areas. At the height of the war, the events of the

summer of 1917 reactivated political emigration.

In parallel, Spain's neutrality attracted people from all walks of life. The rule by terror in Barcelona between 1916 and 1918 has always been associated with the arrival of French anarchists and undercover agents who whipped up social unrest. Much less is known, however, about the presence of deserters who crossed the border from Roussillon and the French Basque Country, many on their way to Argentina or the USA. In 1914, even the Buenos Aires press reported the presence of conscientious objectors, deserters, or simply wandering fugitives of different nationalities, waiting to take a boat to some Argentine port.

Stranded in a no-man's-land, the conscientious objectors and deserters were a taboo subject in official histories. Testimonies of these shameful episodes are referred to in [Pío Baroja's \(1872-1956\) *The Solitary Hours*](#). The Basque writer tells the story of how deserters of all nationalities reached the Basque frontier on a daily basis, the largest contingent from the French Basque Country, seeking refuge behind what had never been more than an administrative boundary.

In October 1915, soldiers garrisoned in the border areas of the Pyrenees were prohibited from going on paid or convalescence leave for fear that they would not return. Throughout that year, border defences were strengthened, locals were excluded from guard duty, border guards who were meticulous in the performance of their duty were rewarded, and, in 1919, private border passes were abolished. As the prefect of Bayonne remarked that year, it was all to no avail. If desertion was a particularly [urban](#) phenomenon, conscientious objection was a [rural](#) one. In 1872, with the advent of obligatory military service in France, the recruitment office in Bayonne recorded the highest number of conscientious objectors in the country. On 29 July 1914, the sub-prefect of Maule warned of the exodus of a large number of young men to Spain, driven by the fear of a general mobilization.

Although it is not a simple matter to provide specific figures, Miquel Ruquet confirms that 18,619 French conscientious objectors and 2,392 deserters were accounted for.^[5] The highest figures were for the department of the Lower Pyrenees, with 14,355 conscientious objectors and 948 deserters, followed by that of the High Pyrenees, with 1,890 and 303, respectively, and that of the Eastern Pyrenees, with 1,232 conscientious objectors and no less than 777 deserters. The departments of Ariège and the High Garonne recorded 550 and 602 conscientious objectors and 242 and 122 deserters, respectively. What is striking, however, is that, bearing in mind the number of troops mobilized, the figures for this area are far higher than those in the rest of France. In the country as a whole, conscientious objectors and deserters represented 1.5 and 0.75 percent of the overall population. In the Pyrenees, by contrast, 9.1 percent of those mobilized refused to perform military service on the grounds of freedom of thought, conscience, or religion, or eventually deserted. Desertion and conscientious objection were unquestionably a border phenomenon.

Not only German Refugees

In that human sea sweeping its way over neutral Spain, there were also [refugees](#) from different

countries and walks of life, from students and tourists caught abroad or on enemy soil by the war who were forced to flee from France for fear of being interned, to seamen trapped in the ships retained in Spanish ports during the conflict. Among them one should note a group of more than 500 German soldiers who had fled from France to seek refuge in the Basque Country. The 5,000 foreigners recorded in the census of 1900 had reached 124,000 by 1920. The problem was so pressing that, in March 1917, the Spanish government was obliged to legalize their status in the country, requiring of them, in addition to governmental authorization, a passport and a visa, neither of which was easy to obtain in wartime.

A group of Russians students, tourists, and political refugees found themselves in this situation. This group, residing in Barcelona, was of particular concern to the authorities, since its members were suspected of political proselytism and causing public disorder. No wonder the government's desire to rid the country of these "communist agents," without making any distinction between tsarists and revolutionaries.

To that end, a sea voyage was planned for the end of 1918, on which 800 Russians – a sweeping designation that included 200 Bulgarians and Turks, in addition to a group of Roma from Montenegro – were to embark. While the voyage was being prepared, many of the group's members were unlawfully kept in jail. After months of delay, during which many of the expellees took the opportunity to abscond or pay to have their names removed from the passenger list, the *Manuel Calvo* finally sailed from Barcelona on 21 March 1919 with a number of passengers that was considerably lower than initially expected: fifty-seven Russians; fifty-seven Turks; sixty-three Bosnians; twenty-one Bulgarians; one Pole; two Frenchwomen; and one Spanish woman. The ship was involved in an accident when entering the Dardanelles, resulting in the disappearance of a number of those on board.^[6]

This attempt to get rid of "unwelcome refugees" ended in failure. Many of these refugees remained in Spain in semi-hiding, having been refused a residence permit. Only rarely did some of them manage to legalize their status, but never without the support of influential Spanish friends. The situation of a group of Turkish Jews, who had reached France after the Young Turk Revolution in 1908, was much more comfortable. When the French authorities forced them to leave the country, they fled to Spain.^[7] In Madrid and Barcelona, there were 2,000 Jewish refugees in all. With good contacts in financial, political, and academic circles, they laid the foundations for an Israelite community, which by 1917 had managed to open the first synagogue in Spain since the 15th century.

The most noteworthy group of refugees was that of the German colony of Cameroon. If stereotypes had put the Russians at a disadvantage, they benefitted the Germans. On 4 February 1916, over 45,000 people reached the border post of Rio Campo in Spanish Guinea. This sizeable host included the colonial administration of Cameroon, nearly 1,000 German civilians and servicemen, and thousands of native soldiers (*Askaris*), servants, and families who had fled in retreat before the advancing Franco-British forces. Governor [Ángel Barrera \(1863-1927\)](#) decided to repatriate half of them, against their will, and allow the Germans to remain in the region of Rio Muni. With the approval

of [Great Britain](#), they were then sent to Fernando Pó (Bioko) as a sort of halfway house before evacuating them to the Peninsula.

While the Cameroonians remained in Spanish Guinea with a group of German servicemen, the rest disembarked in Cadiz in the spring of 1916. Between 835 and 875 Germans, accompanied by their servants, were transferred to Seville and then distributed among Alcala de Henares, Pamplona, and Saragossa. The authorities wanted to prevent large numbers of them settling in Barcelona, Madrid, those places with pre-existing German colonies, or in port cities because of the danger that they might be employed in intelligence work. The government had to disarm, identify, and intern the Germans until they could return home after the armistice. Despite this, they were treated as welcome guests. The colony's administration, led by Governor [Karl Ebermaier \(1862-1943\)](#), even ended up moving to Madrid, where it managed to perform the functions of a pseudo-government of Cameroon from premises belonging to the German Embassy, with the acquiescence of the Spanish authorities.

Moreover, these refugees were given a tremendous reception in Spain. Encouraged by the Germanophile press, the people welcomed the Germans and their exotic servants with hope and admiration, in the knowledge that they were "law-abiding people" who were invaluable for the development of the cities in which they settled. And this was true, despite clashes between a societies as traditional as those of Navarre or Aragon and the mores and customs of the newcomers. Nevertheless, German refugees had the benefit of the financial aid of their government, a number of very positive clichés, such as the proverbial industriousness of the German people, a chiefly Germanophile population in the provinces where they settled, and a bourgeoisie well-inclined toward them in view of the profits to be made.

Between 152 and 200 Germans settled in Alcala de Henares, between 217 and 247 in Pamplona, and between 347 and 380 in Saragossa.^[8] With higher qualifications than the locals and an enterprising spirit, they opened businesses and founded companies that would become, over time, symbols of those cities in which they resided: *El tinte de los alemanes*, the first chain of dry cleaners in Saragossa; sausage factories and breweries; the first concession to operate a bathing area on the banks of the River Arga in Pamplona, where the "eccentric" Germans would indulge in the "scandalous custom" of bathing nude in ice-cold water, leaving on the river what is still called the *Pasarela de los alemanes* to the collective memory of the city.

For Spain or for Catalonia: Volunteers in the Great War

At the height of [Francisco Franco's \(1892-1975\)](#) dictatorship, to mark the fiftieth anniversary of Armistice Day, the conservative and monarchical daily *ABC* paid homage to the Spanish soldiers who had fought in the Great War, acknowledging that these had mainly been Catalans. We now know that the number of volunteers was much lower than the estimates published in the newspaper: 12,000 Spaniards and 10,000 Catalans. However, this view has never been questioned. What is

indeed being reconsidered is whether the majority of the Catalan volunteers were secessionists or whether political Catalanism used them to forge a myth.

Although research casts doubt on the number of Catalan nationalists among those volunteers, the fact is that they were idealized very early on, becoming the backbone of Catalan secessionist international policy, insofar as Eskerra and Unió understood the war as an opportunity to find a national solution to the Catalan problem. By the time of the autonomist campaigns of 1918-1919, they had already assumed mythical dimensions, while Catalan town councils paid homage to their heroes and even claimed the right of representation of their volunteers at the peace conferences. There were not only Catalan volunteers, but also Aragonese, Cantabrians, and Basques. According to the nationalists, several hundred Basque volunteers served in the First Marching Regiment of the Foreign Legion.

In 1924, a report that Baron Lyons de Feuchan read before the deputies of the French National Assembly estimated the number of Spanish volunteers fighting for France at 1,328. The surveys conducted by the Foreign Legion accounted for 642 Spanish legionnaires and 432 casualties. Martínez Fiol offers a higher figure: 2,118 Spaniards of whom 954 were Catalan, and thirty of these, secessionists. All of them responded to the call of the French government and to the campaign organized by *Amitiés Françaises*. As Fiol notes, Spanish intervention was a factor of political mobilization on two fronts: republican and Catalan secessionist radicalism.^[9]

The first recruitment drives were the initiatives of Lerrouxist Republicanism. In the aftermath of the Tragic Week, many Spanish Republicans exiled in France believed that collaboration with the Allies would offer them the opportunity to seek their support for the republican and democratic reform or break that had to follow a war that would change the world. However, this was not a great success, partly because arrangements with the French authorities to organize the recruitment and transfer of volunteers raised the suspicions of a diplomatic corps that distrusted the populist, radical, and anarchist image of the followers of [Alejandro Lerroux \(1864-1949\)](#). In any case, France always took a cautious approach, reviewing and stalling those solidarity initiatives of Spanish political groups that might jeopardize its understanding with [Alfonso XIII, King of Spain \(1886-1941\)](#). Relations between the Catalan secessionists and the French authorities were no easier. The latter identified Barcelona and Catalonia with revolutionary radicalism and did not hide their fear of contagion. Nonetheless, the interventionist initiative of the Catalan nationalists was more successful than that of the radicals.

[Joan Solé i Pla \(1874-1950\)](#) and the Unió Catalanista, which the former chaired in 1917, were behind the Catalan secessionist intervention in favour of the Allies: they mobilized the press, the *Nació* and the pro-Allied magazine *Iberia* in support of the recruitment of volunteers. They also socialized the issue by creating a corps of “war godmothers” who engaged the Catalans. They shaped the *Germanor els voluntaris catalans* committee in 1916, which was responsible for handling the recruitment of volunteers and their welfare in France, involving to this end the Catalan immigrant communities living there. And they acted as intermediaries with the French authorities, with the aim of converting the committee into a credible mediator between Catalanism and the French state,

without the involvement of Spain.

However, the committee was only relatively successful. One of its aspirations, that of creating a Catalan legion, independent from the Spaniards, within the Foreign Legion, along the lines of the Garibaldians, was not achieved. Secondly, although the Catalan secessionist organizations wanted the committee to supervise the recruitment process, they did not want it to play a leading role in Catalan mobilization. Moreover, the Spanish state reacted, playing down the role of the committee. In 1918, on the initiative of the magazine *España*, in response to reports of discriminatory treatment between Spanish and Catalan volunteers, the *Patronato de Voluntarios Españoles* was established, with the same objectives and functions as the committee: to aid Spanish volunteers, but without excluding the Catalans.

Chaired by the [Duke of Alba \(1878-1953\)](#), the *Patronato* soon managed to reach out and engage public interest, doubtless because it benefitted from the collaboration of intellectuals such as [Manuel Azaña \(1880-1940\)](#), [Américo Castro \(1885-1972\)](#), a member of the *Patronato*, and [Rafael Altamira \(1866-1951\)](#), its vice-chairman. Moreover, it secured the support of the Madrid aristocracy, the capital's French colony, and the chamber of commerce, among others. To a certain extent, the *Patronato* gradually sidelined the Catalan committee. The international campaign of political Catalanism had floundered.

Conclusion

Clearly, the unrelenting stream of people coming and going, though a matter of concern for the authorities, was also an opportunity. [Postwar Spanish society](#) would never be the same again. The war offered emigrants a new destination: Europe. The armed conflict had afforded Catalan volunteers the opportunity, real or imagined, of national liberation. The arrival of German refugees in cities such as Pamplona or Saragossa changed the urban landscape and the civilian population. Even for a neutral country like Spain, nothing would be as it was before.

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Notes

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