

# 1938-1956: The tragedy of Karaganda



The story of members of the CNT and other Spanish anti-fascists left stranded in the Soviet Union following the Spanish civil war.

**Abstract:** In March 1939, Republican soldiers who had been training as aviation pilots were stranded in the USSR along with the sailors of several vessels from the Spanish merchant navy. They were prevented from leaving and in 1941 were arrested and sent to Novosibirsk Transit Prison. Also detained were several civilians who had been working with children evacuated from the Civil War. In 1942 the three groups were brought together in an agricultural labour camp in Kazakhstan, where eight Spaniards fathered children with Austrian prisoners. They remained there until 1948 when, partly due to a vigorous solidarity campaign fought by exiled Spanish anarchists on their behalf, they were transferred to a camp near Odessa. 18 prisoners signed documents accepting Soviet citizenship and were released to work in the region around the Black Sea. The rest remained in the Gulag system until 1954 or 1956. Towards the end of their imprisonment they were held with Spanish fascists who had been captured during WWII while fighting in the Blue Division. In addition to those Spanish anti-fascists who went missing or died in the first years of detention, out of 66 anti-fascists known to have been in Kazakhstan on the 1st January 1943, 11 died in Soviet camps. That the majority survived can be attributed in part to the togetherness and solidarity they maintained in captivity, evident in their work stoppages and hunger strikes<sup>1</sup>.

The following abbreviations are used in the text:

**CNT** (Confederación Nacional de Trabajo) – Anarchist influenced revolutionary syndicalist trade union in Spain

**FAI** (Federación Anarquista Ibérica) – Anarchist Federation of Iberia

**FEDIP** (Federación Española de Deportados e Internados Políticos) – a group established in France at the end of WWII, it campaigned on behalf of Spanish political prisoners and refugees.

**IzR** (Izquierda Republicana) – Republican Left, formed 1934

**JCI** (Juventud Comunista Ibérica) – The youth organisation of the POUM (see below)

**JSU** (Juventudes Socialistas Unificadas) – United Socialist and Communist youth movement

**LIC** Information supplied by Dr. Luiza Iordache Cârstea, author of the thesis, 'La historia de los republicanos españoles en los campos de concentración soviéticos,' Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona, June 2007, (486p)

**MLE** (Movimiento Libertario Español) – The Spanish Libertarian Movement combining the CNT, FAI and the Federación Ibérica de Juventudes Libertarias (the anarchist youth)

**MVD** (Ministerstvo Vnutrennikh Del) – Soviet Ministry of Internal Affairs

**NKVD** (Narodnyi Komissariat Unutrennikh Del) – Soviet secret police during the 1930s and 40s.

**OUN** (Organizatsiya Ukrainskikh Natsionalistov) – Ukrainian Nationalists who fought against the Soviet Army during and after WWII.

**PCE** (Partido Comunista Español) – Spanish Communist Party

**PNV** (Partido Nacionalista Vasco) – Basque nationalists

**POUM** (Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista) – Dissident Trotskyist Communists

**PSUC** (Partido Socialista Unificat de Catalunya) – Combined Socialist and Communist Parties of Catalonia

**UGT** (Unión General de Trabajadores) – Reformist socialist Trade Union

## **Part 1 – A Chronological Account in English of the Incarceration of CNT Members and other Spanish Anti-Fascists in the Soviet Union at the end of the Spanish Civil War**

### **1.1 Background**

Few historical episodes have been as extensively discussed as the Spanish Civil War, but there has been a conspicuous silence regarding the fate of those militants who survived Franco's victory. While tens of thousands were murdered in the repression that immediately followed the war, and many more were forced into labour battalions, others evaded capture, continuing guerilla resistance in Spain, escaping to South America, or, in the case of around 2000 Communists, emigrating to the Soviet Union, where many would subsequently suffer the Stalinist justice they had supported in Spain<sup>2</sup>. Most Republicans, however, ended up in France, either crossing the Catalan border or arriving via North African ports. As is well known, the French rewarded some 350,000 Spanish anti-fascists with internment in concentration camps, where sanitation was non-existent, Communist denunciations of anarchists continued, and around 4,700 prisoners died (Thomas, p-922). Some of these internees would later join the French Foreign Legion, distinguishing themselves in units that included the 9th Company of Leclerc's Second Armoured Division, a force comprised almost entirely of CNT/FAI members who manned tanks named 'Durruti' and 'Ascaso', and fought in North Africa, before leading the liberation of Paris and continuing through Strasbourg to eventually capture Berchtesgaden (See Fernandez). Many Spaniards also fought in the French Resistance with 6000 participating in the liberation of Toulouse and 4000 taking part in the Maquis uprising in Paris. Others were captured by the Gestapo, handed over to Franco (as was the fate of Juan Peiró), or interned in concentration camps – more than 5000 died in Mathausen alone. Given this mass displacement of Spanish Republicans and the large numbers missing, killed in conflict or repression, disappeared in concentration camps or lost to their comrades through distant exile, it is easy to understand how a small group stranded in Russia could be forgotten.

Despite the British inspired 'non-intervention pact', Hugh Thomas estimates the value of foreign military aid during the Spanish Civil War to have been between \$1,425,000,000 and \$1,900,000,000 (p-977). While the Nationalists could rely on assistance from Italy and Germany (paid for on credit) and, to a much lesser extent, Portugal and Ireland, Republican forces were largely reliant on sub-standard arms from Mexico and over-priced shipments from the Soviet Union. Stalin's trade came at a heavy price – both in terms of Communist power and Spanish gold. At the start of the war the Spanish gold reserve was the fourth largest in the world, worth an estimated \$788,000,000 (ibid, p-974); had this not been in the hands of the Republican Government, it is obvious the war would have been much shorter. In total \$500,000,000 worth of gold was shipped to Russia (ibid, p-488), most of it carried to the Ukrainian port of Odessa by the Spanish Merchant Navy. The sailors of these boats, like the rest of the Spanish working class, were organised into trade unions, principally the CNT and UGT. What did the Republic receive for the vast sums of gold it exported? The Soviet Union provided T-26 tanks, anti-aircraft guns, machine guns, ammunition, lorries and oil. Of course, these war materials were never unloaded in Barcelona, but in Alicante or Cartagena where they wouldn't fall into the hands of anarchist columns (Peirats, p-206). The Soviets also sold the Republic around 1000 aircraft including I-15 and I-16 fighter planes, and SB-2, Natasha and Rasante bombers (Thomas, pp-980/1). They provided some pilots to fly these crafts, while also offering to train Spaniards at the Kirovabad aviation school in the vicinity of Bakú. The Spaniards who arrived at the camp between January 1937 and March 1939 included members of the PCE, but also members of other groups including the UGT, PSUC and the CNT<sup>3</sup>. Of course, most of the cadets were Russian and it is worth noting that the school admitted many more students than there were planes for them to practice with. For this reason, many of the trainees never flew. The real value of the camp was in providing a steady stream of young recruits to the Communist Party – 'The main objective was not to produce pilots, but Communists, or both at the same time' (MLE-CNT, p-95).

There was a further Spanish presence in Russia in 1939: a group of children who had been evacuated from Spain by their Communist parents, in a misplaced humanitarian attempt to save them from the effects of war. In March 1939 the Civil War ended and the children, like the adults who had accompanied them, the trainee pilots and some unfortunate sailors, were stranded in the Soviet Union, unable to return to Spain.

### **1.2 1939-1941: Detention and Imprisonment**

With Franco's victory imminent, the Spanish pilots were banned from flying in order to prevent escapes. However, following the end of the Civil War, they were transferred to Moscow and accommodated in a rest home, where they received the same good treatment they had experienced at the aviation school (MLE-CNT, p-100). At the end of the Spanish Civil War there were also around 300 hundred Spanish mariners stranded in the Soviet Union. Approximately 30% of these sailors were repatriated between August 1939 and June 1941, while others joined the Spanish community in exile (LIC). However, a number of unfortunates were placed under arrest either in April 1940, June 27th 1941, or at later dates (LIC). A high percentage of the detainees belonged to the crew of the Cabo San Agustín (henceforth CSA)<sup>4</sup>. The sailors had decided to leave for Mexico but while their ships remained impounded, they waited in Odessa under close surveillance.

In 1941 the USSR entered the Second World War and simultaneously their attitude towards the Spanish anti-fascists became more sinister. The Pilots and mariners were interrogated by the GPU and asked if they wanted to stay in the Soviet Union. Most (if not all) of those who agreed to adopt Soviet citizenship were released to work freely and some fought in the Soviet Army. At least one of this group, Eugenio Porrás Caballero, was allowed to leave for France in 1947, after the intervention of his father (FEDIP 102). The other group (which included the CNT members) were promised safe passage to Mexico; they waited, assured their journey was being arranged, but instead were arrested during 1940 and 1941<sup>5</sup>. Also detained at this time were some civilians who had been working with the evacuated Spanish children. This group included the doctor Juan Bote García, who had been the director of the Santa Isabele Laboratory and the San Carlos Hospital in Spanish Guinea (note dated

9th April 1948, FEDIP 103). He sailed to the USSR from Barcelona, in November 1939 (LIC), accompanying a group of Spanish evacuees, for whom he acted as a teacher until he was imprisoned for refusing to educate the children in a sectarian way. His wish was for 'less Marxism and more maths' (MLE-CNT, p-103). Also imprisoned was the family of Luis Serrano Organero (a crew member of the Innocent Figaredo [LIC]): his wife (who died in November 1942), and their four-year-old daughter. Many of the children, sons and daughters of Spanish Communists who had been evacuated for humanitarian reasons, would also subsequently find their way into the Gulag system, sentenced as 'Socially Dangerous Elements,' or for 'espionage on behalf of America' (Solzhenitsyn, 1974, p-86).

### **1.3 1941-1942: Transit Prison and Labour Camps**

These three groups were brought together in Karaganda at the end of 1942, but by this time they had already suffered extensively. The pilots were arrested on the 22nd of July, 1941, and taken to the Transit Prison at Novosibirsk. Their experiences there are consistent with other accounts of the regime's depravity<sup>6</sup>. They were held in temperatures that reached fifty degrees below zero; they were without winter clothing as all their personal effects had been confiscated, and they were regularly forced to strip for the amusement of the jailers (MLE-CNT, p-101). They recorded their experiences on the prison walls and it was through these markings that the sailors first learned there were other Spanish detainees. After five months the pilots were sent to work at a sawmill in the region of Klasndiark, where they endured perilous working conditions. Many of them suffered serious injuries including Vicente Montejano Moreno, a CNT member then aged 22, who lost several fingers from his right hand <sup>7</sup>.

The sailors were also put to work, constructing a railroad in the inhospitable and remote region of Yakutia, in the North East of Siberia. According to the MLE-CNT, as a consequence of the climate and the work, many prisoners met their deaths there (p-103)<sup>8</sup>. It was not unusual for prisoners to be transferred, often over vast distances, and in extreme conditions, according to no obvious logic, and so it was with the Spanish sailors who were sent back via Novosibirsk to Karaganda, where they met the pilots and the group of civilians that included the doctor and the Serrano family. At the end of 1942 there were 66 proven Spanish anti-fascists in Karaganda and those who survived would remain there until the summer of 1948. It is therefore worth making a few notes about the Karaganda complex.

### **1.4 1942-1948: Karaganda**

The town of Karaganda is the industrial centre of Kazhakstan and in 1939 its population was 156,000 (Shapovalov, p-164 n.4). From 1931 a large network of labour camps (often referred to as 'Karlak') developed in the arid region around the town, and by the first of January 1941 there were 33,747 prisoners in the complex (Khlevniuk, p-359). This group of camps remained operational until 1959, deploying prisoners in mines, factory work and timber logging, but primarily in agricultural labour. Karaganda and the surrounding area was also a common site of exile, where large numbers of Volga Germans and former Gulag inmates (including, briefly, Alexander Solzhenitsyn<sup>9</sup>) were re-settled. Both prisoners and exiles usually lived in huts made of earth.

The Spanish anti-fascists were held in a camp situated between the towns of Karaganda and Spassk, known to the Soviet authorities by its number and postcode area – '99/22 Spassk'. They were held with about 900 other detainees in an area 300 metres long by 200 metres wide, surrounded by three lines of barbed wire, armed guards and ferocious dogs (MLE-CNT, p-105). There was no heating or electricity (ibid) and during the war daily rations could be as little as 100 grams of bread and one bowl of 'soup'. After the war this increased to 600g of bread, 10g of margarine, 17g of sugar, and two bowls of rancid vegetable soup (usually a watery gruel made from rotten cabbage and carrot) (ibid, p-104). The prisoners were deployed as agricultural labourers; the work day was long and relentless<sup>10</sup>, there were no concessions made on grounds of health, and any rebellion was punished with solitary confinement and denial of food for two days out of every three (ibid). Given these conditions it is not surprising that the prisoners' health suffered severely, with many afflicted by tuberculosis – for

example, Jurado Manuel Vasquez was described as totally debilitated by this illness<sup>11</sup>. Between 1942 and 1948 eight of the group died, including at least one member of the CNT<sup>12</sup>.

At the time of the Spaniards' arrival, Karaganda was a mixed camp, holding men, women and juveniles. The juveniles included children of adult prisoners, some of whom, as we shall see, were born in the camp. There may also have been children sentenced independently<sup>13</sup>. Between 1946 and 1948, men and women were separated throughout the Gulag system, but before 1946 it was not unusual for them to be held together. While some accounts of mixed camps describe endemic rape, others emphasise romances, enduring relationships and marriages. Indeed, one account describes how women in the Spaniards' camp declared a hunger strike after they were separated from their husbands. Several days later they were reunited (BEIPI, p-7).

Interned with the Spanish anti-fascists were detainees of many nationalities but the majority were Austrian Jews (MLE-CNT, p-105). These were presumably refugees who had left Austria as anti-Semitism escalated before and after the 1938 Anschluss. There may also have been Austrian Social Democrats – 'Schutzbündlers' – who had fled to the Soviet Union in 1934 after defeat in the February Uprising. A number of Spanish anti-fascists had serious relationships with Austrian women in Karaganda and eight children were born within the camp. To my knowledge, all eight mothers were able to leave the camp with their children in good health (at least five settled in Vienna). It is to be hoped that today these children are still alive and thriving<sup>14</sup>.

### 1.5 The Solidarity Campaign

Throughout these long years, the Spaniards were isolated, their fates unknown beyond the camps. Many of their political comrades were either fighting fascism or themselves interned – in Spain, North Africa, France or Germany. Although the prisoners were officially allowed to write letters, it appears these were rarely delivered (whether because of Soviet censorship or the effects of war). Certainly they never received any replies and so very few wrote letters home, convinced it was a waste of time (MLE-CNT, p-105). Their plight only became known in 1947 after other detainees were released. Firstly there was the testimony of Fransisque Bornet, a sixty-year-old French national who had been repatriated in 1946 after spending five years in Karaganda (ibid, p-120). Bornet recalled meeting Spanish Republicans in his book *Je Reviens de Russie*, and this was confirmed by a desperate message from an unnamed Republican pilot<sup>15</sup>, hidden inside the shirt of an Austrian woman released from Karaganda. The case was investigated by the MLE in exile through their prisoner support group FEDIP. They verified the reports and established that the detainees were indeed Republican fighters, most of them members of the CNT or UGT. In 1948 they published a list of 59 surviving Spanish anti-fascist detainees – 25 trainee pilots, 34 sailors and the doctor, Juan Bote García<sup>16</sup>. One of the sailors, Secondino Rodríguez de la Fuente (CNT), had died by the time the list was published. There were at least two additional detainees not mentioned in this list – Agustín Llona Menchaca (a member of the Basque Nationalist PNV), and Pedro Llompert Bennassar (a machinist on the Ciudad de Ibiza [LIC] and a member of the Republican Left IzR).

Figure 1. Spanish anti-fascists in Karaganda, January 1st 1948, by occupation:

Pilots: 25  
Sailors: 34  
Civilians: 1  
Total: 60

Figure 2. Spanish anti-fascists in Karaganda, January 1st 1948, by political/ union affiliation:<sup>17</sup>

CNT: 28  
UGT: 9  
PSUC: 1  
PNV: 1  
IzR: 1  
JSU: 1

PCE: 1

JCI: 1

Unknown: 17

Total: 60

The solidarity work of FEDIP (in general and particularly with regard to those interned in Karaganda) was exhaustive, whole-hearted, free of political dogmatism, and an example to be followed by anyone attempting a prisoner support campaign. They published details of the Spaniards' imprisonment in the libertarian press, including *Le Libertaire*, *Solidaridad Obrera*, and *Freedom*, as well as in liberal publications such as *L'Espagne Républicaine*, and *Le Populaire* (CNT-MLE, p-121). They printed numerous appeals, held a press conference and a public meeting in Paris, at which Federica Montseny and others spoke (FEDIP 93). They printed postcards with pre-detention photographs of the prisoners around the edges. They wrote to anybody who may have been able to help – the United Nations, the Red Cross, the Workers Defence League in New York, the World Jewish Congress, the British Soviet Society, the French, British and American Governments, as well as numerous ignored letters to Moscow – and they contacted a huge array of celebrities to try and raise the profile of their campaigns. One address book includes contact details for Eleanor Roosevelt, Pablo Picasso and Charlie Chaplin, and many potentially sympathetic writers, artists and intellectuals were invited to join a 'Comité d'Honneur et de Patronage' whose illustrious membership included Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre, François Mauriac, René Char, Ignacio Silone, Carlo Levi, and André Breton – and this list is taken from a letter from José Domenech to André Gide! (Ester Borrás 15)<sup>18</sup>. Sartre's inclusion in this list is especially noteworthy given how some recent writers (Amis 2002, Applebaum p-6) have 'scandalised' Sartre's Communist stance during part of the Gulag era, comparing it with Heidegger's Nazi affiliation. Sartre's politics were bizarre and indefensible but we can note that he was a member of this committee during the high profile campaign to release Gulag prisoners, and that a letter to him from José Domenech on behalf of FEDIP, acknowledges receipt of a 30,000 Franc donation (Ester Borrás 15, letter dated 12th January 1951).

The campaign to publicise the detainees' predicament led to debates in the French parliament and the Spanish Parliament in Exile (see FEDIP 127/8). Needless to say, the PCE were furious that the barbaric nature of the regime they supported was being brought to popular attention. Felix Villanueva Flores, brother of the JSU affiliated pilot Julio, and himself a member of the PCE, sought to raise the matter with the party leadership at their congress in Paris. He spoke to none other than Enrique Lister, who we know as the Moscow-backed commander who oversaw the invasion of the Aragon collectives and the summary detention and execution of anarchist militants in 1937. Lister told Villanueva, 'It doesn't matter whose brother he is, they are traitors and they have to pay'<sup>19</sup>, and this attitude was typical of PCE leaders who claimed that all the detainees were Falangist spies who should be grateful they weren't shot – a response that 'broke all records of brazenness!' (CNT-MLE, p-122).

### **1.6 The Soviet Response**

Despite the PCE reaction, the ripples of the solidarity campaign reached Moscow, forcing them to respond to the adverse publicity. Firstly, in June 1948, they moved the 59 survivors (the UGT sailor José Pollán Ozaento had died earlier that year) to a camp on the outskirts of Odessa, which they were told represented the beginning of their repatriation to Spain. They also granted some improvements to the prisoners' conditions, for example, they were allowed to send mail via the Red Cross. However, they also sent a special commission from Moscow, who told the prisoners that they would be released if they signed letters saying they wanted to adopt Soviet citizenship (FEDIP Report, 30/10/50, p-1, FEDIP 104). This was a propaganda exercise designed to prove that the Spaniards were in the USSR voluntarily and that the stories of imprisonment represented another Trotskyite-Bukharinite-Fascist plot. Needless to say, the prisoners were given considerable encouragement to sign and those who refused lost the right to write to their families (ibid, p-3). The signatures were published in the Soviet newspaper Trud on the 19th August 1948. In total there were

49 signatures including 18 from the group that had been held in Karaganda<sup>20</sup>. Those who signed were released as free workers and most of them were settled in Kolkoses, in the region of the Black Sea. I am unsure how many of them ever returned from the USSR. The others stayed in camp 7159 near Odessa, 'persisting in their dignified and courageous attitude' (ibid, p-2). The stance of those who refused to sign certainly was courageous, but we shouldn't doubt the courage and fortitude of those who accepted Soviet citizenship – they had been in the Soviet Union for a decade and had spent almost all that time in a series of forced labour camps. Many of them had compelling personal reasons to leave the Gulag immediately – Manuel Jurado was debilitated by tuberculosis, Luis Serrano had lost his wife and was separated from his daughter, while Tomás Rodríguez Tenedor had recently become a father; his son, who lived in Vienna, would soon turn three.

### **1.7 1949-1953**

Predictably, the temporary amelioration of conditions was soon reversed for those who had rejected Soviet citizenship. Firstly, in March 1949, three prisoners – the doctor Juan Bote García, the Basque sailor Agustín Llona Menchaca, and the CNT pilot Francisco Llopis Crespo – were re-arrested and sentenced to an additional 25 years forced labour (FEDIP 104). Why certain prisoners were selected for this sentence is not clear, but it meant that they remained imprisoned after their compatriots were released. Had Dr. Bote served his full sentence, he would have remained in the Gulag until he was 78.

Then, in April 1949, the Karaganda anti-fascists were transferred to a camp in the wastelands near Cherepovetz, due north of Moscow in the region of Vologda (FEDIP Report, 30/10/50, p-2, FEDIP 104). Also interned in this camp were perhaps 230 Spanish prisoners of war. These were fascist volunteers from General Muñoz Grandes' Blue Division, who in 1942 had gone to fight with the Nazis on the Russian front.

The climate in this region is far more extreme. There are many snowstorms in winter and temperatures can reach 50 degrees below zero. In spring the snow is washed away by torrential rain and summer starts in May as the days become uncomfortably hot and humid and the air is filled with mosquitos. The prisoners worked either in construction or logging and were paid a wage supposedly equivalent to what free workers received. However, despite the atrocious living conditions, they were forced to pay 465 roubles a month for their food and accommodation. A worker who met all his targets might be left with 10 to 20 roubles – one kilo of butter cost 70 roubles (ibid).

In principle, the daily rations were as follows: 670g black bread, 17g of sugar, 17g of fat, 3 bowls of watery soup (cabbage, beetroot and carrot), and one 'kacha' of millet. This diet would supply around 1800 calories, but in reality the rations were never distributed in their entirety (ibid, p-3).

After five months of this regime, on the 12th September 1949, a group of prisoners that included the CNT pilot Hermógenes Rodríguez Rodríguez and three other Spaniards from the Karaganda camp, were transferred to a camp in the region of Smolensk, west of Moscow, towards the Russian border with Belarus. These prisoners were put to work producing aluminium and this move probably represented an improvement in their conditions.

Then, in December 1949, the camp near Cherepovetz was dissolved and all its prisoners were transferred, following the route of the Volga, about 150 kilometres south-east to a camp near the town of Kostroma, 200 kilometres north-west of Moscow. We can therefore account for the 60 Spanish anti-fascists held in Karaganda on the 1st January 1948 as follows:

Figure 3. Location of Spanish anti-fascists, January 1st 1950:

Settled as free workers in the region of the Black Sea: 18

In labour camp 200k north-west of Moscow: 35

Working at the aluminium plant in Smolensk: 4

Deceased: 3

Total: 60

The three who died in these two years were José Pollán Ozaento (UGT, died 1948, aged 43), José Diaz Ribaz (UGT, died Odessa 1949, aged 45), and Ricardo Perez Fernandez (CNT, died 1949, aged 56). All three were members of the unfortunate crew of the ill-fated Cabo San Agustín. Amongst this group of detainees I am aware of one further death in the camps: the pilot Eusebio Pons López died on the 15th September 1953 – his 38th birthday.

## **1.8 Release**

In January 1954 the Spanish prisoners, fascist and anti-fascist, were concentrated at Krasnopol, in what today is Belarus. Their sudden release was universally unexpected as negotiations appeared to have gone sterile. However, on the 27th March 1954, Radio Moscow confirmed that the previous day 291 Spanish prisoners had been sent to Odessa with representatives of the French Red Cross. In Odessa they boarded a Greek boat, the Semiramis, and sailed for Istanbul (letter from Julio Just to Daniel Mayer, Paris 29/03/54, FEDIP 107). The majority of this group had been fighting with the Blue Division but many anti-fascists also boarded the Semiramis. Others, including the three prisoners sentenced to an additional 25 years in 1949, continued to be detained. The last survivors of the group emerged from Soviet detention in 1956.

From Istanbul, the prisoners carried on the Semiramis would sail direct to Barcelona (where they arrive on April 2nd [LIC]), a plan which understandably alarmed many of the anti-fascists. The French government had offered the anti-fascists asylum and there was some confusion over whether the boat would make a stop in Marseille en route. In the end it sailed directly – the anti-fascists had been trapped in the Soviet Union for 15 years, but at least they had escaped the bloodiest waves of Francoist reprisal.

As the Semiramis arrived in Istanbul the Falangists gathered on the deck shouting 'Long live Spain! Long Live Franco!' They had volunteered to fight on the side of Hitler and lost. But they had spent less time in the Gulag than their anti-fascist counterparts and now they were returning in triumph to their fascist fatherland. They must have struggled to believe their luck.

## **Part 2 – Discussion of Matters Arising from the Above Chronology**

### **2.1 The Mortality Rate**

Perhaps, given the length of time that the Spaniards spent in Stalinist camps, it is surprising that so many survived. The first point to note here is that however unproductive they may actually have been, the motivation behind the development of Soviet labour camps was primarily economic – most prisoners were not specifically intended to die. Although the Spaniards endured the harshest (in terms of death rates) years of the Gulag's existence, they largely escaped the periods when large numbers of arrested persons were shot. There were mass shootings in the forties, especially in areas close to the German advance, but mass executions were not as numerous as they had been during the purges of the late thirties, or at the time of the Russian Civil War. In the 1940s the major killers were hunger, exhaustion and disease.

I do not have accurate figures for how many of the Spanish anti-fascists died in 1941 and 1942 (the year which had the highest prisoner mortality rate in the whole history of the Gulag), but during the next decade 10 out of 66 prisoners died. We can compare this death rate with the Gulag average, as calculated in the year-by-year death statistics compiled by Aleksandr Kokurin from NKVD reports (cited in Applebaum, p-519). We should bear in mind that these figures are incomplete, do not include those prisoners who died in transit between camps, and are likely to reflect camp commanders' obvious interest in falsifying the death rate amongst their detainees. However, even compared with these figures, the death rate amongst the Spanish anti-fascists is noticeably low. Had their death rate matched the average then we would have expected 15 (22.4%) to die in 1943 alone. Though average death rates declined sharply as the war turned in Soviet favour, we would have expected 25 out of 66

detainees to have died by the time some were released in 1948 – in fact only seven died during this period.

There are a number of factors that may explain this group's better than average survival. Firstly, they were relatively new to the Gulag in the war years when a general shortage of food combined with typhus and dysentery epidemics meant an especially high death rate. In other words, they were likely to be physically stronger at the start of 1942 than prisoners who had been in the Gulag system since the thirties. Indeed, given their age range – in 1942 the youngest turned 23 and the oldest turned 49 – and the fact that they had been deemed fit for their respective duties, we can conclude they started as a healthier than average section of the Gulag population<sup>21</sup>. Additionally, the presence of a doctor amidst their ranks may have partially compensated for the lack of adequate medical provision in the camps. On the other hand, although the only woman mentioned, Peto Serrano, died in 1942, despite the lack of available statistics it seems to be generally accepted that women were better able to survive on inadequate rations and less likely to suffer from diseases of starvation. Being an exclusively male group may therefore have been a survival disadvantage.

Perhaps the biggest factor in their favour was that through the worst years of food shortages they were detained in an agricultural camp. Many Gulag memoirs agree that there was always slightly more food at agricultural camps and, despite the rigorous searches, it was sometimes possible for prisoners to conceal small quantities of food. However, while an agricultural camp was no doubt preferable to the Kolyma gold mines or other camps in the extreme north, it is not clear that they offered better than average chances of survival. A report from the Gulag sanitary department (reproduced in Khlevniuk, pp-209-212) records that in 1938, 7.17% of prisoners in agricultural camps died, slightly more than the average death rate of 6.69%, and that in 1939 the death rate in agricultural camps was 2.76%, just under the average of 2.91%<sup>22</sup>.

We should therefore also consider the importance of solidarity between prisoners in the group, demonstrated in their ability to take collective action. Not only did they share a language and nationality but as union comrades they entered the camps with a pre-existing support network and bonds of solidarity already established through a history of revolutionary collective struggle. In other words, the Spanish anti-fascists were better prepared to collectively resist and endure the totalitarian system than their Russian counterparts who had grown up with Bolshevik propaganda – even a prisoner as famous as Alexander Solzhenitsyn began his term as an obedient Communist, and acted as an informer before developing a more principled stance. It would be interesting to learn more about how the Spaniards organised themselves inside the camps, particularly how they coped towards the end of their detention when they were outnumbered by Spanish fascists. I shall summarise what I know about their acts of resistance below.

Finally, it seems likely that the FEDIP solidarity campaign was highly significant, beginning as it did at a time when many of the detainees were seriously ill through prolonged malnutrition and tuberculosis. The knowledge that a sustained and high profile solidarity campaign was concerned with the Spanish detainees may well have influenced their treatment – José Ester Borrás and the others involved in the campaign might not have been able to effect the prisoners' release but their comradely and tireless work may have helped to reduce the death toll.

## **2.2 Resistance**

The Spaniards' collective resistance is particularly interesting as it began during a period when few Gulag rebellions were recorded. It was obviously hard for resistance organisations to be initiated within the Gulag, as the prisoners were divided by networks of informers, the system of trustees, the need to compete over scarce resources and the policy of divide and rule where guards allowed the 'thieves' to terrorise the 'politicals.' So while the early political detainees – the Mensheviks, Social Revolutionaries and anarchists – had struggled to maintain Tsarist conditions in Bolshevik jails, and later, along with the Trotskyists, participated in the mass hunger strikes of the mid-thirties, including the 132 day strike at Vorkuta in October 1936, with notable exceptions such as the 1942 Ust-Usa

uprising and some rebellions by the comparatively privileged criminal inmates, relatively few acts of collective resistance are recorded in the 1940s. The common explanation for this is that the organised political prisoners who had resisted in the first two decades after the October revolution had largely been liquidated by the mass executions of the 1930s, while the effect of a new influx of organised prisoners – nationalists and other anti-Soviets from the Baltic States, Poland and (especially) the Ukraine – wasn't fully felt until the early fifties. Their agitation, of course, catalysed by Stalin's death and the suppressed strikes in East Germany, led to the wave of rebellions that swept through Karaganda, Vorkuta, Norilsk and Kengir, and helped reverse the expansion of the forced labour system.

Of course, the Spaniards were a tiny group compared to the Ukrainians, but it's easy to see how their resistance emerged according to the same logic and why it should have slightly preceded the larger-scale rebellions. Like the Ukrainians, the Spaniards belonged to organisations that had already suffered from and struggled against Stalinism, but they were interned considerably earlier, having been in detention for five years when the majority of the Ukrainians arrived. The records of their incarceration mention numerous short work stoppages, as well as hunger strikes that lasted five days at a time. I have been able to find few details about these actions and would be keen to learn more. Mentions of particular acts of resistance are brief and leave many questions. For example, in 1949 there was a hunger strike by Ramón Sánchez Gómez and José Romero Carreira. The strike lasted 12 days and was broken when, due to their weakness, the camp commander injected them with glucose (FEDIP Report, 30/10/50, p-2, FEDIP 104), but what provoked the strike, and why it was maintained by those two prisoners in particular, is unclear. This was the second hunger strike by Carreira that year – the first started after he was placed in the camp prison (for receiving a letter from abroad), lasted ten days and succeeded in seeing him reintegrated with the rest of the group (ibid, p-1)<sup>23</sup>. In 1947 the whole group participated in a strike that the jailers attempted to break with force. The strikers were beaten and encouraged to cheer outside their workplace. Despite the violence, none of them obeyed. The strike was a sufficient worry to the camp authorities that they summoned the most senior official in the region. When it was announced to the rebels that the authorities were prepared to suppress the strike with arms, a discussion ensued amongst the strikers. After prolonged deliberation, and on the advice of elder prisoners, the rebels agreed to abandon the strike. On the day they capitulated, though the temperature was well below zero<sup>24</sup>, they were made to stand outside in stress positions for three hours and left without food all day (MLE-CNT, p-106).

### **2.3 The Karaganda Revolts of 1952**

A number of reports indicate the involvement of CNT members in the 1952 Karaganda Revolts, even though they were moved away from the region in 1948. Someone may be able to clarify this confusion but I can only offer a few possible explanations. Firstly, as I know nothing of the prisoners' movements between 1950 and 1954, it's possible that some of them were returned to Karaganda before the revolts. Alternatively, it may be that their resistance in earlier years became part of camp lore, referred to by rebellious prisoners in the early fifties. This is possible as the regular movement of prisoners meant that tales of resistance, like tales of repression, spread quickly through the camp network. Perhaps strikes such as the one in 1947 helped to test the possibilities of resistance and became part of the collective memory, helping facilitate subsequent revolts.

Alternatively, the members of the CNT may have been confused with other Spanish prisoners since, in addition to the fascist POWs, there were by that time a number of ex-Communists and former evacuees held in Soviet camps. Equally, they may have been confused with other anarchists who were involved in the revolts. The most prominent national group in the rebellions were Ukrainians, most of whom were members of the nationalist OUN, but some of whom may have belonged to the Makhnovist influenced militias.

### **2.4 The Norilsk Rebellion of 1953**

This last explanation appears the most likely source for the suggestion that CNT members participated in the 1953 rebellion at the Norlag complex in Siberia. After the Karaganda rebellions around 1200 prisoners considered ring-leaders were transferred to Norilsk. Most of these were Ukrainians and MVD records describe them as having begun to organise a 'revolutionary committee' even while in transit (Applebaum, pp-437/8). The Norilsk Rebellion was the most obviously anarchist-influenced of the Gulag revolts, with the strikers flying Makhnovist black flags bearing the Civil War era slogan: 'Liberty or Death' (Latkovskis, 2005a, 2005b). The strike involved more than 16,000 prisoners and after the camp guards abandoned the complex the prisoners arranged the distribution of food, attempts to rally support amongst free workers in the region, and the trial and execution of informers<sup>25</sup>. The rebellion was eventually suppressed with executions though in some areas strikers attempted to resist with rocks and picks, and made hopeless attempts to seize the soldiers' weapons. This revolt has become slightly better known in recent years, due to a number of writings, including a somewhat bizarre fictional version by Martin Amis (2007; see esp. p-99). However, an examination of anarchist influence in the Norlag Rebellion belongs to another study.

## 2.5 Conclusion

Out of those Spaniards who, at the end of the Civil War, were stranded in the Soviet Union as a result of performing their duties in the anti-fascist war effort or the evacuation project, at least 13 died or disappeared. Some survived against improbable odds, including the CNT pilot Vicente Monteján Moreno, who emerged from 13 years of Soviet detention despite having lost several fingers at the beginning. But all the detainees were deprived of their health and a large section of their adult lives. Writing to José Ester Borrás in 1956, Félix Villanueva, the brother of a detained pilot, who confronted Enrique Lister and subsequently left the PCE in disgust, describes his brother as suffering from fatigue, struggling to find work, and unable to forget what he had seen: 'Of my brother Julio I can tell you nothing but the memories he possesses' (Ester Borrás 15).

The tragedy of Karaganda represents a small drop in the sea of violence inflicted upon the Spanish working class in the years that followed the Fascist uprising; it is an even smaller drop in the ocean of violence unleashed by the Bolshevik counter revolution. But it is a drop that splashes and stings. Let us remember the sacrifice and courage of those who were detained.

By the time the last prisoners were released in 1956, the revolutionary movement in Spain had been crushed, strangled by Communist, fascist and liberal violence that was directed, not just from Salamanca or Burgos or Madrid, but from Rome and Berlin, Moscow and Paris. The revolution was defeated, but it had taken 20 years of terror and the indifference or active will of every government in Europe.

Wayne Foster, June 2008

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- 1. This chapter is a work in progress and I welcome additions and corrections. My time with archive material in Amsterdam was cut short by ill-health and there are many relevant documents that I haven't seen or have looked at too hurriedly. I'm not a historian and have no expertise in Soviet or Spanish history and ask forgiveness for mistakes I've made while attempting to recount this story. Additionally, much of what I've written relies on the FEDIP archives and a 1948 publication: *Karaganda! La Tragedia Del Antifascismo Español*. These sources were compiled by activists, working with scraps of information that escaped from the camps. They understandably feature a few contradictions and there is uncertainty about the spelling of some names – Arturo or Agustín Puig? Ricardo Gallego or Ricardo Allego? While Manuel Dávila's maternal surname is given variously as Arias, Eivaz and Eiras. However, despite knowing the many mistakes I would make in producing an English account, I thought it was worthwhile to try, if only so others can correct me.

To this end I am very grateful to Dr. Luiza lordache Cârstea, who corrected a number of my mistakes in the original version of this article, and whose comments have provided additional information (marked in the text 'LIC'). In particular I am grateful to her for clarifying the fates of the eight pilots arrested on January 28th 1940, who the FEDIP believed had been executed. I hope I have not distorted her information in translation. Luiza's research produced a 486 page thesis, 'La historia de los republicanos españoles en los campos de concentración soviéticos,'

presented at the Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona in June 2007. Her research involved a far wider range of sources than are referenced here and those seeking an authoritative account of these events may benefit from her scholarship.

Finally, I am especially keen to record my grateful thanks to Harriet Newton for her invaluable help with research and translation. Needless to say, all mistakes are mine.

- **2.** The most remarkable story concerns 'El Campesino' (Valentín González) who escaped to France in 1949 having, so the story goes, taken advantage of the Ashkhabad earthquake to lead a group of prisoners across the mountains into Iran (see Solzhenitsyn, 1975, p-186 n.4)
- **3.** The names I have for CNT pilots are: José Calvo Muedra (Valencia), Vicente Montejano Moreno (Madrid), Tomás Rodríguez Tenedor (Jaén), Hermógenes Rodríguez Rodríguez (Madrid), Francisco Llopis Crespo and Miguel Velasco Pérez (Casa-Rubias del Monte) (FEDIP 103; locales from MLE-CNT, p-134).
- **4.** The other vessels in the USSR at the end of the Spanish Civil War were the Isla de Gran Canaria, Ciudad de Ibiza, Ciudad de Tarragona, Juan Sebastián Elcano, Mar Blanco, Inocencio Figaredo, Marzo, Cabo Quilates. Sebastian Elcano and the Ciudad de Ibiza (LIC).
- **5.** A number of detainees disappeared in the early years of detention, either meeting their deaths in Soviet detention or being held separately from the main group of prisoners. Since the comrades who might have looked out for the detainees were in no position to help (Ester Borrás, for example, was himself confined in Mathausen), the FEDIP records of the early years of detention are understandably incomplete. The files contain a partially illegible list of pilots 'disappeared, presumed shot' (FEDIP 103), but Luiza Iordache Cârstea has clarified the fate of eight "executed" pilots as follows: Vicente Monclús Guallar (freed in 1956), Juan Sala Pala (died in the Gulag in 1943), José Goixart Llovera (freed and repatriated to Spain in May 1957), Francisco Pac Morata (freed and settled in the USSR), José Gironés Llop (freed and repatriated to Spain on the 22nd January 1957), Luís Milla Pastor (freed and died in the Crimea between 1948-1949), Juan Navarro Seco y Francisco Tarés Carreras (both died in the Gulag during the first half of the 1940s).

The list of deceased Spaniards (FEDIP 101) names four sailors believed to have been executed. Three of them – José Fernandez Serrano, a doctor's assistant (practicante) on the CSA., Salvador Guimenez of the Sebastian Elcano, and Domingo Garcia – disappeared from Odessa in 1939. The fourth, Jacinto Gonzalez Guilera, the captain of the Ciudad de Ibiza, was last heard of in 1941. I would be grateful to anyone who can illuminate me regarding the fates of these men. There may have been other disappearances before imprisonment while some of those presumed dead may have subsequently surfaced. Similarly, despite several references to Spanish deaths in Siberia during the first months of incarceration, I have no definite numbers or names of victims. I would be keen to hear from anyone who has clearer information.

- **6.** For example, the former Chekist agent P.A. Yegorov describes the regime at Novosibirsk four years before the Spaniards arrival:  
the third UNKVD department, headed by Junior Lieutenant of State Security Ivanov, used big, thick, old albums with heavy bindings, steel rulers, etc. All these objects were categorized as "first degree," second degree," [sic] and "third degree." They used these objects as a brutal means of beating those arrested. They widely utilized the technique of positioning the arrested on their feet for several days, often tying them to safes and doors to keep them from falling down, until they signed the protocols (...) (Statement reproduced in Khlevniuk, pp-153-157, quote from p-156)  
Solzhenitsyn (1974, p-293) relates the following story from Novosibirsk:  
in 1945 they greeted the prisoners with a roll call based on cases. "So and so! Article 58-1a, twenty-five years." The chief of the convoy guard was curious: "What did you get it for?" "For nothing at all." "You're lying. The sentence for nothing at all is ten years."
- **7.** I am very grateful to Luis Montejano, the son of Vicente, for clarifying the details of his father's injury. Vicente lost two phalanges from his right index finger, while his third, fourth and fifth

fingers were severed completely. I am happy to report that not only did Vicente survive the gulag, but he remains in good health today.

- 8. They name the Captain of the CSA as having died at this time (p-103), when in fact he died in 1953, in the region of Odessa (LIC).
- 9. See Solzhenitsyn (1978, pp-372/3)
- 10. I don't have specific details for this camp but from other accounts we might expect a norm of about thirteen hours a day, not including the walk to and from the work site.
- 11. This information is supplied by José Bravo Basan (FEDIP 104). Here Jurado is described as being a member of the CNT, probably a mistake as elsewhere he is identified as belonging to the UGT.
- 12. I have the following details for those who died in Karaganda during this time: Petro Serrano (the wife of Luis Serrano Organero) died in November 1942; three sailors from the CSA – Francisco Gonzalez, a steward (Mayordomo), Manuel Dopico, a stoker, and a sailor named only as 'Rafael' – died in the winter of 1945; José Segura, a trainee pilot, died in August 1946; and Antonio Echaurren, another stoker, died two months later in October 1946. I have no further details for any of the above. Secundino Rodriguez de la Fuente was the Comisario Politico on board the CSA, and a member of the CNT. He died in May 1947. Added to this list in handwriting is the name of José Pollán Ozaento, a sailor on the CSA and a member of the UGT. In 1948 he died in Karaganda at the age of 42 (FEDIP 101).

The document cited above also records the death of two prisoners in Aktiubinsk Camp. Also in Kazakhstan, Aktiubinsk was a relatively small camp (8,079 prisoners at the start of 1941), from which several escape attempts had been made in 1941 (see Khlevniuk, pp-258; 358). The primary activities were construction and mining. The Spaniards both died in 1942 and are identified only as a man named Pablo and a man named Mateo. Any additional information would be welcome.

- 13. A 1934 'Report to the head and deputy head of the GULAG of the NKVD USSR on juveniles in the camp' (reproduced in Khlevniuk, pp-123-125) reveals there were 585 juveniles in the Karlag complex at this time. According to the report, 'In the Karlag, juvenile prisoners terrorize the camp, they kick up rows, and sexual perversion is not uncommon' (p-124). We would expect their numbers to have increased by 1942, as the NKVD became increasingly concerned with homeless and criminal children – a problem exasperated by the mass starvation, imprisonment or execution of the adult population. In 1936 the police apprehended 156,000 unattended juveniles, of whom 15,031 were sentenced (Khlevniuk, p-127).
- 14. For reasons of their privacy I will therefore not publish their names. However, the child-bearing couples were as follows: Sonia Sagalowitzsch and Pedro Armesto Saco (UGT, CSA) had a son; Helga Blumenfeld and Eusebio Pons López (a pilot who sadly died, shortly before the Spaniards were released, on 15th September 1953) had a daughter; Almer Picker and José Garcia Santamaria (CNT, CSA) had a daughter; Vera Lövy and Ramón Sánchez Gómez (UGT, CSA) had a son; Emma Löff and Maximo Ramos Arribas (pilot) had a son; Tania Losch and Arturo Fernandez Prieto (pilot) had a daughter; Ita Rathsprecher and Tomás Rodríguez Tenedor (CNT, pilot) had a son; Frieda Schneider and Juan Conesa Castillo (CNT, CSA) had a daughter. Most of the children were born in 1945 or 1946.
- 15. From the biographical details provided it was almost certainly José Romero Carreira.
- 16. In the FEDIP list Francisco Llopis Crespo is recorded as a crew member from the CSA; he was, in fact, a trainee pilot (LIC). However, Vicente Márques Castell who is recorded as a pilot, appears to have actually been a sailor (LIC), and so I have left the figures as they were. The MLE-CNT publication mentions the detention of ten civilians (p-103). We know that Serrano's wife died in 1942 and it's possible that their child may have been moved to a juvenile colony or an orphanage. Perhaps the others were detained but released before 1942, or detained elsewhere and lost track of, or not included in the FEDIP solidarity list for some other reason.

- [17](#). Quintín Lopez Moreno is noted as belonging to 'J.C.' in a list of signatories to a letter in Trud (see below) (FEDIP 100). I am assuming this refers to the Juventud Comunista Ibérica. In the 1948 list (MLE-CNT, pp-134-136), José García Gómez is listed as belonging to the UGT, but in subsequent documents he is identified as a CNT member, in this table I have included him as belonging to the CNT. I have counted Manuel Jurado Vasquez in the UGT column.
- [18](#). Albert Einstein respectfully declined to join (against the wishes of his heart), explaining that he had learned from experience not to lend his name to committees over which he had no control (Personal letter, Ester Borrás 15).
- [19](#). This is recalled in a letter from Felix Villanueva to FEDIP, reproduced by MLE-CNT (pp-123-125). Lister was one of those who emigrated to the Soviet Union after the Civil War and who was apparently sufficiently unscrupulous that he remained ingratiated with Stalin. He subsequently appeared in Cuba as a military adviser to Castro (Peirats, p-368). It should be obvious that his reports of 'fascists,' 'traitors' and 'crimes against the people,' have no more credibility than any of the other Stalinist fabrications that justified the enormous suffering of the Gulag years. However, his memoirs contain fierce criticisms of the 'inhuman tyranny' of the anarchist revolution in Aragon, including (slightly too familiar) tales of how a casual denunciation could see a whole family liquidated. This, of course, is an incongruous account, totally unsupported and at odds with the many documents demonstrating the coexistence of collective and individualist production in Aragon. It is written by a man who acted as an enforcer for a regime that killed millions, and who was personally responsible for numerous disappearances in the Aragon area. There is no reason to accord his denunciations of anarchists any more historical credibility than a Moscow show trial. It is therefore interesting that a usually careful (albeit conservative) historian such as Hugh Thomas should, while 'making all allowance for his exaggeration and bias', be significantly influenced by Lister in his appraisal of the Aragon collectives (see pp-553-565).
- [20](#). I am not clear who the other signatories were – perhaps they were Spanish Communists who moved there after the war or civilians connected with the evacuated children. Of the Karaganda anti-fascists the 18 signatories were: Salvador Almor Chirivella, Jaime Beltrán Talon, Arturo Fernández Prieto, Obdulio Miralles Pons, Augustín Puig Delgado (all pilots of no known affiliation); Quintín López Moreno (pilot, JCI), Felipe Pedreny Vidal (pilot, PSUC), Tomás Rodríguez Tenedor (pilot, CNT), Emilio Salut Payá (pilot, UGT); Francisco Alonso Martín, Manuel Rodríguez Teijeiro, Víctor Rodríguez Rango, José Troche Cotelo, Joaquín Trigo Sayans, José López González (all sailors of the CSA and members of the CNT); Manuel Jurado Vásquez (CSA, UGT); Vicente Márques Castell and Luis Serrano Organero (PCE)
- [21](#). The exceptions to this demographic were the wife and daughter of Luis Serrano.
- [22](#). The reports figures are only loosely consistent with those compiled by Aleksandr Kokurin, who records average death rates of 5.35% in 1938, and 3.1% in 1939 (cited in Applebaum, p-519).
- [23](#). It is interesting to speculate whether his solitary confinement had anything to do with the message he smuggled out of Karaganda (see 1.5). Did his 'letter from abroad' arrive from Austria?
- [24](#). The MLE-CNT publication suggests the temperature was -60, but it's not clear how the prisoners could have measured this (and unlikely they would have survived for three hours, immobile in such temperatures). In Kazakhstan it is unlikely that the temperature would be colder than -45 Celsius. In Karaganda the average temperature in January 2008 was -20 and the coldest temperature recorded that month was -34.
- [25](#). The most thorough account I have seen in English is the one provided by Latkovskis.