

Valencian Victims of Nazism

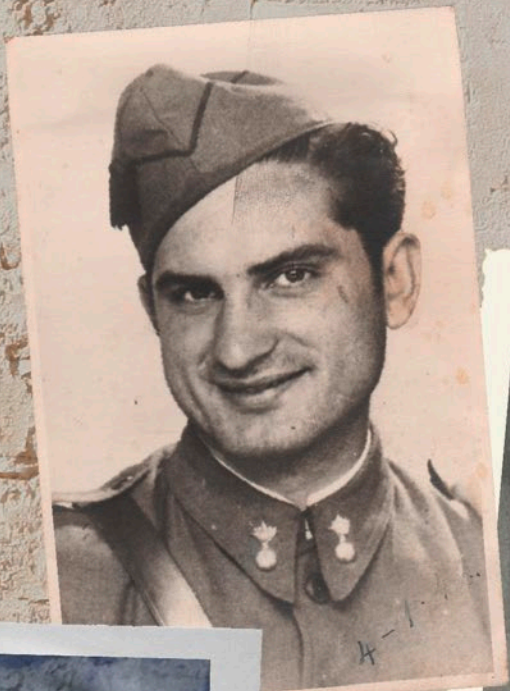


Over eighty years ago, on 1st April 1939, the military leader Franco put an end to the Spanish Civil War after achieving control over the majority of the Spanish territory mainly due to the international support received from Nazi Germany and fascist Italy. It had been months since the democratic Spanish Republic had commenced the organisation of its own exile, which is estimated to have affected over half a million people, who primarily crossed the French border; however, some of them also escaped to African territory through Alicante. They were fleeing the dictatorship's repression that murdered hundreds of thousands.

France was overwhelmed by the massive influx of Spanish immigrants and had to improvise refugee camps that lacked the most basic facilities. Argelès-sur-Mer, Septfonds, Rivesaltes, Vernet de Ariège, Saint-

Cyprien, Barcarès o Gurs hosted hundreds of thousands in sub-human conditions. The responsiveness of the French population drastically contrasted the government's reticence to the arrival of immigrants, as they did not know how to ensure basic rights for them. On 12th April 1939, a law was passed to require foreigners without nationality to join the labour force (around 40,000 people opted for this), Companies of Foreign Workers (55,000 workers) or the Foreign Legion, which, at the onset of World War II, accounted for 6,000 refugees. For instance, the Companies of Foreign Workers took part in the Normandy landings through the Spanish Guerrilla Groups, with only 16 out of 144 soldiers surviving the operation. Thousands more were deployed to the Maginot Line to build defences against the powerful Nazi army.



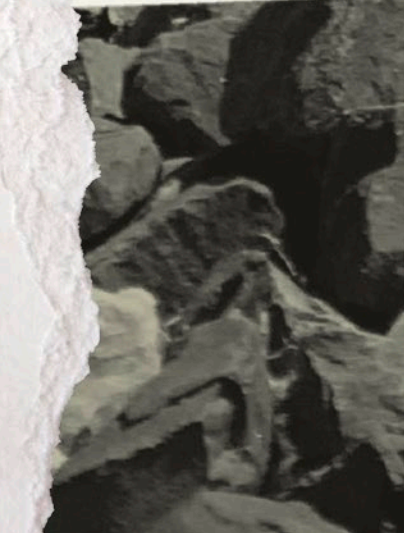


Valencian
deportees

Nevertheless, the advances of the German troops in the North took the Allies by surprise and Hitler reached Paris. Hundreds of Valencian refugees joined the French Resistance to fight the Nazi occupation of France. In the meantime, many more were forced to work in the Todt Organisation for the Army Ministry of Nazi Germany. This organisation was responsible for the Reich Labour Service (RAD) that enslaved over 1.5 million people for the development of its operations, which involved the work of many Spanish refugees.


Hitler's government designed many work camps across its territory. 678 refugees from Valencia were imprisoned in them, of which many died, including women.

Mauthausen, Buchenwald, Dachau o Ravensbrück, known as "Women's Hell", were some of these death camps that witnessed the Valencian Holocaust. 400 of them were exterminated, 59%, 16 are still reported as missing, 2.4%, and no information is held on the other 5, 0.7%. Only 252 of the Hitler's victims from Valencia were released, 37%, and only 5 managed to escape, 0.7%. The deportation to Nazi camps affected all of the Valencian shires, more so to those in the Provinces of Castellon and Valencia over Alicante, mainly due to the exile destination chosen by the refugees, as Alicante had acted as a gateway to Africa. Broken down by shires, Ribera Alta and Ribera Baixa accounted for 39 people, Baix Maestrat for 37, Bajo Segura for 35, Alcoià for 34 and Vinalopó Mitjà for 32, which amounted to the majority of the victims. Most of the victims practiced manual jobs, 20% of them were artisans, 17% were farmers, 14% labourers, 13% builders, 13% retailers and 8% workmen.





Valencian
deportees




Construction of the Mauthausen camp.
Authority: Amical de Mauthausen






Quarry at Mauthausen, where hundreds of Spaniards died. Authority: Amical de Mauthausen





The latest research points at 8,963 Spanish prisoners in Nazi camps, of which 59% were killed. They originated from Catalonia (22%), Andalusia (12%), Aragon (12%), Castile-La Mancha (10%) and Valencia (8%). Two different stages can be clearly differentiated in the extermination process, one with a high mortality between 1940 and 1941 and another one with lower mortality and assassination from 1942 onwards. In 1940, 14,000 prisoners died, of which 3,846 were killed in Mauthausen- this amounted to about 30% of the overall number of the camp's prisoners - which turned it into the most lethal execution centre of the time. The main causes of death were hunger and related illnesses due to the lack of defences caused by the malnourishment. Nevertheless, the SS' violence cannot be ignored since mass executions started to proliferate as an increasingly higher number of convoys arrived at the camps.

The SS built 27 major camps and other 100,000 acted as accessory premises, even though the official numbers fluctuate significantly as the older camps were progressively shut down and new ones were built. About 80% of the Valencian refugees that were deported to concentration camps were sent to Mauthausen, in Upper Austria, where they were held in barracks 9,11,12 and 13. Under the aforementioned conditions, the best possible outcome was to receive two meals a day, this only amounted to 60% of the caloric needs for the physical work carried out, which resulted in thousands of deaths a day due to exhaustion, malnourishment and a weak immune system. These conditions intended direct extermination, but also the suppression of the prisoners' capacity to react. During the first few months of 1941, a large proportion of prisoners that were taken to Gusen were veterans of the Spanish War, which led to more repression from the Nazis. In 1941, 60% of the *Rotsparier* died in Mauthausen, most of them in the infamous Stairs of Death.



Mauthausen camp.
Authority: Amical de Mauthausen

Violence was day-to-day routine in the camps and mass assassinations were accompanied by brutal beatings and constant humiliation. Sexual abuse, for instance, was common in SS' practice, mainly against female prisoners, who suffered daily harassment and, even if the guards were banned from any sexual practice with them, they always found an excuse to subdue them, such as searching for hidden objects in their genitals.

Deportation was not balanced across genders, nor were the actions or the reactions. Women, in addition to suffering the same degree of harassment and torture as men, also experienced other torments, as there was female-specific violence, such as prostitution. Whilst women could be forced into sex work, men would be rewarded for good behaviour with a visit to the brothel. Forced abortions, sexual abuse and scientific experiments that led to the absence of menstruation, also marked the difference between men and women. Overall, the biggest difference was motherhood, as many women were deported with their young children. In Ravensbrück camp, all the testimonies from female inmates recall the great suffering of mothers who, accompanied by their children, suffered for their lives. Many of them went mad after losing their young ones.



Construction of Mauthausen facilities and labor exploitation



Rafael Sivera, from Alzira, first on the right.



tation of prisoners. Authority: Amical de Mauthausen



2. — Deux heures après...

Ravensbrück illustration.
Authorship: Violette Rougier Lecoq



Drawing by Manuel Alfonso Ortells
in Mauthausen. Year 1946.
Property: Family Alfonso

M. ALFONSO
1945



Their experience in the Spanish Civil War and political affiliation gave the group of Valencian refugees great organisational discipline, which was admired by the rest of Europeans that they shared camps with. They took care of their compatriots, worked as a team and were respectful of peaceful coexistence. A great example of these features was Commando Cesar. Valencian anarchist Cesar Orquin led a group of external workers that enjoyed significantly better working and living conditions and where mortality was close to none. Orquin saved hundreds of lives and new research positions him as one of the most important figures in European history of concentration camps.

On 5th May 1945, Allied troops freed Mauthausen, the camp that held most Valencian prisoners. 252 were alive, less than 40% of the total. Some, like Bernardo Lairon from Alzira, had survived for over 5 years of imprisonment. He was part of the first convoy that arrived on 6th August 1940.

Franco's dictatorial regime left stateless all Spanish-born refugees that were outside of the national borders when the World War broke out. Those that survived the camps had no country to go back to. Many European prisoners were honoured in their countries of origin and many made it to positions of power after 1945. Those that came from Valencia were forgotten in exile for decades, mainly in France, until the death of many of them.



Spanish Republicans after the liberation of Mauthausen, in May 1945.



Kommando César in the later days to the liberation, in May of 1945. Property: Family Orquín

Valencian survivors were recognised in France for their non-negotiable compromise with European democracy. It was the country where most settled after leaving the camps and some of them received official honours. It was the case of Virtudes Cuevas, for example, who received the National Order of French Legion of Honour. Virtudes Purificación Cuevas Escrivà (Sueca, 1913 – Paris, 2010) studied a teaching degree and then moved to Madrid to start a professional career. During the Second Spanish Republic, she became a member of the Socialist Youth and, with the war, joined the Fifth Regiment. She went into exile in February 1939, when she arrived in a French refugee camp. With the onset of World War II, she joined the French Resistance, under the nickname Madame Carmen. She acted as a link, taking part in the transport of information, arms and the evacuation of people. She was arrested due to an accusation and was incarcerated, tortured and deported to Ravensbrück concentration camp, where she was held in sub-human conditions until the camp was freed in 1945. After the war, she lived in France until her death. Cuevas was a symbol of the fight against fascism. Her last wish was to donate her house to the Council of Sueca to turn it into a museum against fascism and Nazism.



Virtues photographed in 1950. Property: Family Ca



Víctor Gómez, deported to D
of the Legion of Honor. Prop



Decoration of Covenant Virtues with the National Order of the Legion of French Honor.



achau, was also awarded the National Order
erty: Gómez Family



Fermin Román, from Alzira, honored in France.

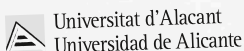
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Collaborate



Commissioners

Amalia Rosado Orquín
and Carles Senso.

Coordinator

Francisco J. Sanchis Moreno

Graphic and exhibition design

Gimeno Gràfic

Production

Materializa

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