

## CATALONIA BACKGROUND INFORMATION [SERIES E / 2014 / 3.2 / EN]

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**Author: Enric Pujol\***

### THE CATALAN EXILE OF 1939

The end of the Spanish Civil War (1936-39) saw a massive exile of supporters of the republican cause leaving Spain and Catalonia between January and February 1939. It was one of the largest exoduses of people during that period in Europe, only comparable to the infamous exile of the European Jews. Its effects were long-lasting with many of those exiled unable to freely return until almost forty years later following the death of Franco in 1975 and Spain's subsequent transition back to democracy.

#### The grand exodus

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The figures available regarding just how many people were involved are, unfortunately, merely approximate ones but recent research indicates that half a million people crossed the Spain-France border through Catalonia at that time. It comes as no surprise then to learn that over 200,000 of these were Catalans – about 40% of the total number. This high percentage is down to the fact that the exile came about with the fall of the Catalan front towards the end of the war.

Soldiers retreating were joined by many citizens who feared the repression that Franco's troops and his Italian fascist and German Nazi allies would carry out. The Catalan government (the *Generalitat*) also went into exile at that time. This body had been established in 1931 and was the legitimate representative body of the Catalans. The Spanish central government and the Basque government had been forced to move to Barcelona during the course of the war as Franco advanced and would also join the exodus. Furthermore, before the final assault on Catalonia and Barcelona, tens of thousands of refugees from Spain, abandoning those areas which had fallen to Franco's Spanish nationalist troops, had gathered in Catalonia and would soon flee *en masse* to France.

This retreat and evacuation was not an easy one as it was carried out in the context of a war – that is, under enemy fire. The fugitives were machine-gunned from German and Italian (Franco's allies) fighter planes and the towns along the route were heavily bombed. There are no exact figures on how many lives were lost during this withdrawal but, for example, in Figueres, which, being nearer the frontier, had become *de facto* the last seat of the Republican government, over 200 people died during the mass aerial bombing. This massacre is comparable to that caused by the bombing of Guernica in the Basque country.

The exodus stirred up a huge international interest, with news appearing in the world's press. Renowned photographers such as Robert Capa and Lone Robinson were on the ground to show the horrific drama of the situation through their work.

## The diaspora

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The difficulties suffered by those in exile, above all in the French Republic where thousands were confined in internment camps, and Franco's policy of persuading exiles to come back – by falsely stating that those who had committed no crimes had nothing to fear – meant that a significant amount of refugees returned before the year was out. Some studies state that virtually half of those who had fled came back that same year. This indicates that the final number of people living in exile during the post-war years was around 250,000 people – 60,000 to 100,000 of whom were Catalans. This is a huge number, even when seen from our current viewpoint.

France took in most refugees, especially in the first weeks and months, though many also made it to Great Britain, Andorra or other free democratic European countries such as Switzerland. However, the outbreak of World War II in September 1939 meant France, and Europe, were no longer a safe place to be. France was split and occupied by the Nazis. Eyes turned to America as a place of hope and countries such as Mexico, the Dominican Republic, Chile, Argentina, Cuba, Venezuela and the USA took in many refugees. Mexico provided a safe haven for most thanks to the affinity between the Mexican government, led by Lázaro Cárdenas, and Spanish republicans. Mexico gave the exiles the category of political refugees and refused to recognize Franco's dictatorship. It is estimated that 21,750 refugees – 20% of which were Catalans – fled to Mexico between 1939 and 1948. Catalans are believed to have made up 36.5% of all those fleeing Spain into exile. Other countries which took in a notable amount of refugees were the USSR and countries in northern Africa such as Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco. However, despite the outbreak of the world war and ensuing European exodus, due to its proximity to Catalonia, France was the country which took in the most exiles. Even today, in regions such as northern Catalonia, Marseille, Toulouse (Languedoc), and the area in and around Paris, there are still significantly high numbers of families whose roots are to be found in this mass exile.

While many fled Catalonia and Spain, at the same time Catalonia under Franco was also a land of passage during World War II for thousands of people fleeing the war and Nazi repression. Hundreds of Jews from Central Europe and France tried to reach Portugal, and, from there, America, via Catalonia and Spain. Many were arrested and imprisoned, and some lost their lives. The intellectual, Walter Benjamin, committed suicide when he realised he was about to be captured. His grave is in the Catalan village of Portbou, marked by Dani Karavan's monument to his memory.

## A bitter disappointment

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Another major effect of World War II was the fact that the exiles had to take sides in the conflict. The 1936-39 Spanish Civil War had left the two ideological sides clearly marked. Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany's support for Franco meant that Spanish and Catalan republicans were obviously contrary to the Nazi Axis powers. Most exiles gave support to the Allies in their fight against the Axis powers. Many willingly cooperated with the countries that had taken them in, enlisting in their respective armed forces and, in the French case, taking on roles in organizing the armed resistance to the German occupation. A high number of refugees eventually ended up in Nazi concentration camps – this figure is estimated to be around 9,000 (22% of whom were Catalans). Joaquim Amat-Piniella's novel, *K. L. Reich*, provides a devastating first-hand insight into the concentration camps. Based on his own actual experiences, and published in the 1960s, this book has been placed alongside the works of Primo Levi and Jorge Semprún by literary critics.

After World War II, contrary to what people expected, the Allies did not intervene against Franco. Instead, they eventually decided to support his dictatorship rather than risk a victory of left-wing political groups or other options which did not fit in with the western/eastern-bloc mentality of the Cold War. With this scenario, exiles soon realised that what they had expected to be a short-term displacement would become a long one. Failed attempts at an armed uprising in the Vall d'Aran in the Pyrenees by the "maquis" (armed exiles) did not gain international support either.

Exile became the most common option for those fleeing Spain and Catalonia throughout the dictatorship. Conferences and huge public meetings were held in the host countries. Many groups published material in exile, and offices of political parties and anti-Francoist organizations were also opened in these countries. Little by little the work carried out in exile became the cornerstone for denouncing Franco's dictatorship internationally. Unsurprisingly, as people mobilized against Franco inside Spain (in the 1960s and 70s), going into exile was still an option to escape from the police and political repression.

## A government and a culture in exile

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The *Generalitat* (the Catalan government), under Lluís Companys' presidency, was eventually installed clandestinely (under the name *Laietana Office*) in Paris during 1939. It aimed to help exiled Catalans but could only offer limited aid as it had had to give its funds and Government treasury to the government of the Spanish republic during the Civil War. When World War II broke out and the Nazis occupied France, President Companys refused to flee again and was arrested by the German Gestapo and handed over to Franco. This act was a flagrant breach of international law, showing, if any doubt remained, the close links between Franco's regime and the Nazis. Back in Barcelona, Companys was court-martialled (without proper legal procedures or guarantees of a fair

trial) in a military court and sentenced to death. He was executed by firing-squad at Montjuic Castle (Barcelona) on 15 October 1940.

His death had a huge impact on the Catalan community, and threatened the future of their governing body. However, Josep Irla took on the role of president and kept the *Generalitat* going throughout the difficult circumstances of World War II. He eventually resigned from office in 1954. Josep Tarradellas was then elected as president and this ensured the continuity of this public institution until the restoration of the *Generalitat* in 1977 following Franco's death and the fall of his regime. The newly-elected democratic Spanish government officially recognized the *Generalitat* and Tarradellas as the Catalan President. The current governing body of Catalonia is simply a direct continuation of the long, albeit interrupted, history of the *Generalitat*.

Besides its political relevance, the Catalan exile was hugely important in preserving and developing the Catalan language and culture. It offered a place and the chance to publish freely and openly in Catalan, an activity severely restricted in Catalonia. Franco banned the publishing of anything in Catalan until the 1960s when the regime eventually allowed a limited use, but under a keen censorship. This ideological and political censorship was also a language-based one even up to the very end of the dictatorship as for many years impediments were posed for publishing magazines, and non-fiction or children's books.

## And yet, despite everything, a productive exile

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Obviously, when studying the years of exile, the negative aspects are the most significant ones. During the early years – coinciding with World War II – the refugees suffered dramatically. This suffering continued afterwards, especially as the situation dragged on and they realised they would not see their country free once more from the shackles of Franco's relentless military dictatorship. Having said that, though, this period offered a few positive aspects too.

The enforced displacement from Catalonia sparked off the creativity of the artists who incorporated the exile as a theme in their work, generating a body of work which would become a reference point for later generations. The list of authors includes Carles Riba (author of the poem *Elegies de Bierville*), Joan Oliver-Pere Quart (author of the poem "Corrandes d'exili"), Xavier Benguerel (author of *Els vençuts*) and Ferran Soldevila (author of *Dieteris de l'exili i del retorn*).

There were also many cases of Catalans who gained a professional or personal success thanks to their experiences of living in different societies. The greater political freedom and openness to new post-war ideas of these societies was often a source of personal enrichment for the refugees. Discovering cultures and societies hugely different from theirs opened their eyes and gave them a knowledge of the world unavailable to those who had remained behind, trapped under Franco's oppressive regime. Intellectuals, artists, and those with political interests (the immense majority of refugees) were especially sensitive to this

awakening. Writers such as Pere Calders, Ferran de Pol, Agustí Bartra, Josep Carner and Avel·lí Artís Gener were dramatically affected by the reality of living in Mexico and this can be seen through their work. The same can be said of those who resided in more developed democratic countries in Europe - examples include the case of Mercè Rodoreda (in exile in Geneva) or artists like Antoni Clavé and Apel·les Fenosa, who both lived in Paris.

The contribution that the exiled Catalans made to their new countries of residence was also significant. Many elite professional specialists, intellectuals, doctors, university professors, artists and so on were among those exiled and they often provided decisive contributions in their respective fields. Among the many examples, we can find cases like that of the doctor Josep Trueta (who, in Great Britain, developed his own personal method for healing war wounds which would later make him famous), Pere Bosch Gimpera (a decisive figure in renewing the Mexican school of archaeology), the philosopher Josep Ferrater Mora (author of the well-known *Diccionario de filosofía*) or the geographers Pau and Marc Aureli Vila (father and son) who made decisive contributions to the study of the geography of Columbia and Venezuela.

Some of the more well-known exiles denounced Franco's dictatorship internationally and let the world know about the national reality of Catalonia. One of the most renowned public figures was the musician Pau Casals. Upon receiving the UN Peace Medal in 1971, he gave an emotional speech to world leaders present, explaining that the democratic aspirations of Catalonia had their roots in mediaeval times. The artist Pablo Picasso, who always insisted he was a Catalan by adoption, stated "I am a Catalan who was born in Malaga and lives in Paris." His work often showed his feelings towards Catalonia; for example in the series of sketches he made of the traditional Catalan dance, the "sardana".

Finally, we must also draw attention to two great defenders of the Catalan language who, from exile, worked relentlessly for the continuity and renewal of a language which strived to survive as the language of everyday use in Catalonia and to be considered, in an act of normality, as just one more internationally-recognized language. Philologist Pompeu Fabra was responsible for conserving and renewing Catalan at the start of the 20th century, and Joan Coromines carried on where Fabra had left off.

The exiled Catalans, thus, left a great legacy behind them touching on many fields and aspects of professional, commercial, artistic and political life. Unfortunately, this legacy is little known in Catalonia itself and virtually unknown in the rest of the world with only the most renowned cases receiving a certain level of recognition in their host countries. Famous figures such as Picasso or Pau Casals did manage to internationalize their situations but these were the exception rather than the norm. However, despite this, it is undeniable that the experiences of the exile of 1939 linked the modern history of Catalonia with that of the rest of Europe at an especially traumatic period – marked by World War II and the Cold War. It made a decisive contribution to the history of the 20th century, a century marked by the phenomenon of mass exiles due to the

numerous armed conflicts which broke out. Never before had this phenomenon taken on such an important role – in fact, such mass exiles can be considered to be one of the defining factors of contemporary history.

**Enric Pujol.** Doctor in History. Professor at the Autonomous University of Barcelona (Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona)