

THE WOUND COVERED IN SAND

Thousands of Spanish Republicans exiled from Alicante to Algeria at the end of the Civil War were confined in concentration camps

Alicante, 27 March (EFE).- Eighty years ago, in the last days of March 1939, the Second Spanish Republic was approaching death in two ports, those of Alicante and Oran. On the quaysides of Alicante at least 15,000 people piled up, almost all of them men, desperate to leave the last soil that remained of Republican Spain. The government in exile had chartered British and French cargo ships, but the rebels' navy was lying in wait and there were hardly any captains willing to risk it for the vanquished. At around 11 pm on 28 March the *Stanbrook*, a British collier, set sail. The captain, Archibald Dickson, had authorised some 3,000 passengers to board, many more than his old ship – 70 metres long by 10 metres wide – could carry without risk. A few minutes past midnight the *Maritime*, the last boat out of Alicante, departed with just 30 or so Republican officials. After that, no more evacuation ships entered the port, besieged by Italian and Falangist vessels.

On the quaysides, everyone feared the revenge of the victors. As of the morning that the *Stanbrook* began to load, they knew that Madrid had surrendered, the war was definitively lost and the passing of the hours accentuated the drama in that rattrap. Dozens committed suicide from despair and thousands hoped against hope for miraculous ships, "sitting in front of the horizontal wall of the sea," as Max Aub described it in *Campo de los almendros (The Almond Grove)*. "What are they thinking tonight, the refugees in the port of Alicante, the last remnant – not stronghold – of the Spanish Republic, the last extreme of the Great Civil War that once again has confronted half of Spain with the other half?" wondered Aub about the last hours of freedom of the vanquished.

The title of that novel, published in 1968, which closes the hexalogy *The Magic Labyrinth*, alludes to the almond trees of the land surrounding the city in which the Republicans in the port were provisionally confined, once the "red army was captured and disarmed." What awaited them was jails, concentration camps, and in many cases summary trials and firing squads. The men left stranded in Alicante could never have imagined that thousands of the lucky ones who took the last boats southwards would suffer a similar fate.

"Trading in human lives"

When on the afternoon of 29 March the *Stanbrook* arrived in Oran, the closest and most Spanish of the ports of Algeria, a country which had formed part of France since 1830, the exiles did not find a friendly refuge there. The freighter *African Trader*, which had left Alicante two weeks earlier with a thousand or so Republicans, was at anchor with its occupants still on board, as were the *Lezardrieux*, which had come from Valencia, and the *Campillo*, from Cartagena. On the quaysides, the colonial authorities had installed tents, enclosed within barbed wire fences and guarded by soldiers, with hundreds of others who had fled from the Spanish War as of February, many of them in small boats hired in fishing ports such as Torrevieja, Denia and Santa Pola. In and around the city, thousands more awaited a destination in improvised internment centres, as did hundreds of women and children who had been taken to the old prison of Oran. Those pariahs were a problem for the French government, which already recognised the victorious Franco as the legitimate head of state and had also

confined, in mainland France, almost half a million exiles who crossed the Pyrenees after the fall of Barcelona on 26 January. Many of the 12,000 to 20,000 last exiles to reach Algeria knew straight away that they were not welcome in the Republic of liberty, equality and fraternity, which would lock up thousands of men in concentration camps or in the more cruel work camps for nearly four years.

“Thousands of people, fleeing in awful disarray, afraid, cold to the bone, gnawed by hunger, didn’t know where they were going, and when they got to where they thought they would be safe, they found themselves in camps and internment centres,” summed up Eliane Ortega Bernabeu, an indefatigable activist for the salvaging of the memory of the Spanish Republican exiles in North Africa, granddaughter of an anarchist exiled on the *Ronwyn*, another of the cargo ships used in the evacuation organised by the socialists of Alicante. The *Ronwyn* was diverted east of Oran to Ténès, where 700 Republicans disembarked and ended up in internment centres in that grim episode of March and April 1939 which she calls “the fatal improvisation of Algeria.” She assured EFE that the ships were used “as prisons” until the internment and concentration camps were ready. “They all arrived in dire conditions, with lice, scabies, fever, tuberculosis, and that was a mortality factor too,” she told us.

Eliane is not formally a historian, but she has collected hundreds of stories. “You get the truth from the people who went through all that, not from archives; archives are just paper and ink,” this daughter of Spanish Oran stated categorically. The accumulated knowledge enables her to question what she considers to be myths created to give a coat of honourable and heroic varnish to the last-minute naval evacuation. The case of the *Stanbrook* is special because, according to witnesses, her captain even forsook valuable cases of saffron to make room for more refugees, but others made money out of that exodus. “People paid for their passage. My grandfather was charged for his place on the boat, it was a business. They took old, half-abandoned boats and reused them. They created a fleet of British ships to do a trade in goods and a trade in human goods,” she maintained. “Just like they’re doing now with the makeshift boats for illegal immigrants, trading in human lives,” she added.

While the ships remained in port with the refugees on board, in appalling sanitary and food conditions, some members of the numerous Spanish community in Oran, the “economic exiles” of the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th, made up for the abandonment their fellows were dealt by the French colonial administrators. In the first days after their arrival in the port, dozens of boats belonging to Spaniards and Oran organisations such as leftist parties and trade unions went out to the *Stanbrook* to provision her with food. As the days passed, once minimum official provisions had been established, parasites and the impossibility of maintaining even the most basic hygiene became the exiles’ nightmare. Gradually, when political pressure and the absence of any alternative convinced the authorities that they had to cope with that human tide, first women and children and then men were allowed to disembark, the last of them on 1 May, after 34 days aboard, a typhus outbreak, and payment by the exiled Negrín government for the “expenses” incurred.

A suitcase full of books

It was not freedom that began for the Spanish exiles that spring of 1939, except for those who had a passport with a visa enabling them to travel to Mexico, the dream destination of most of them. What lay before them, particularly the men who had suffered almost three years of war and hardships, was internment centres and concentration and work camps, which in

the memory of the Spanish exiles represented an untreated wound, a scar covered in the sand of time.

According to Eliane Ortega, some 70 detention centres of various categories have been counted in Algeria alone, and if we add those in the other Maghreb countries where the Spanish Republicans sought refuge, the figure reaches 110. The largest of the Algerian camps was the one in which her grandfather was held, Camp Morand, approximately 150 kilometres south of Algiers, where 5,000 Spaniards lived and worked in confinement without the most basic conditions to withstand the extreme temperatures of the desert climate, with 50 degrees in the daytime and up to 10 degrees below zero on winter nights, with insufficient food and water, guarded and punished as if they were enemies.

The same treatment was given to the characters of a particular chapter of the exile: the sailors of the Republican fleet who had fled Cartagena on 5 March, reached Tunisia, a French protectorate, and then refused to return to Spain. The eight destroyers, three cruisers, one submarine and the 3,500 seamen who trusted Franco's promise returned on 30 March, but the Republican admiral Miguel Buiza and some 1,500 men who remained loyal to the Republic chose to stay. Among them was the radio officer Alfonso Vázquez. His daughter, Alicia, told EFE that her father stayed on because "he didn't trust them" and he hoped to reach Mexico. "Later we found out that those who went back were put in concentration camps in Spain and some of them were shot." Alfonso was interned in the Tunisian camp at Meheri-Zebbeus together with Paco Díaz, who was his "kindred spirit" and wrote in his memoirs about how the two of them escaped from the camp. They escaped at the second attempt. "The first time they got out of the camp with two suitcases, one of clothes and the other full of books. They make an escape from a concentration camp with a suitcase full of books! It's mind-blowing," said Alicia, focusing on this detail to underline that, "for me, the Republic is synonymous with culture, a will to improve things; that's the side that I knew." The two fugitives crossed over into Algeria and reached Oran, where they settled and sought a livelihood among the Spanish community, but Vázquez was then overwhelmed by the wave that accentuated the woes of Spanish exiles in the French departments of Algeria: in June 1940 Hitler's Germany took control of France.

With the Nazification of the colonies, the Spanish Republicans confined in the camps became potential enemies, their segregation by political affiliation was accelerated, and those who were considered to be the greatest threat were interned in penitentiary work camps in the Sahara. Alfonso was arrested again and sent to Colom-Béchar, one of the camps located on the Trans-Saharan Railway, also known as the Mediterranean-Niger line, a chimerical project on which the French had already used enemy prisoners in the First World War and which was resumed by the Vichy puppet regime using forced labour. Eliane Ortega holds that "there were Hitlerian officers in the camps," but "they were well hidden and there were very few of them."

Another Algerian punishment camp that was famed for its cruelty was Hadjerat M'Guil, to which were sent some of the Spanish prisoners who were most unsubmitting to the discipline of other camps, and several of them were tortured to death. Months after the conquest of North Africa by the Allied troops at the end of 1942, the commandant of that camp, Lieutenant Santucci, and three of his officers, were tried and sentenced to death. "Nobody will get out of here alive," Santucci used to say to new arrivals.

The rigours of the Algerian desert were also suffered by the great chronicler of the final exodus from Alicante, Max Aub. This Valencian writer, who had been confined for most of his time in France after his exile in January 1939, was transferred in November 1941, together with

other Spanish Republicans, to the camp at Djelfa, some 300 kilometres south of Algiers, from which he was liberated after half a year of humiliation and hardships. In 1944, shortly after settling into his definitive Mexican home in exile, Aub published *Diario de Djelfa (Djelfa Diary)*, a sour collection of poems in which, among bitter evocations of the lost Spain, he described the torment. “In the *marabú* (the tent in which they lived) huddled / three once men in a heap. / Hardship on hardship, / no shelter, no mattress. / Rags over their bones. / What was had or stolen / sold for a little bread. / Sons of scabies and prison, / spawn of French pus, / skeletons of pain, / abrasions and lice, / mantle of fierce cold,” runs one of the poems.

Captives in the desert, liberators of Paris

The nightmare of the Algerian camps ended with Operation Torch, the landing of US and British troops in North Africa that began in November 1942. The great majority of the Spanish prisoners opted to integrate into civilian life, mainly in Oran, where some were awaited by their families. Many others, once they had secured the means to eke out a living, albeit precariously, were joined by their wives and children who had remained in Spain.

Eliane and Alicia spent their childhood in Oran, and they both remember it as a happy time, surrounded by adults who missed their homeland and cherished the hope that the World War would end not only with the defeat of Hitler, but that of Franco too.

That was also the wish of the exiled soldiers who decided to fight fascism again by signing up for the Free French Army. The 9th Company of the 2nd Armoured Division, known by the surname of its general, Philippe Leclerc, was made up of 160 Spaniards. In the whole division there were about 500 Spaniards, who had enlisted after the liberation of the Maghreb or had belonged to the Foreign Legion before that as an alternative to the camps. Several of those who later on formed the “Spanish” company, the 9th, had already fought against the Axis forces in North Africa, capturing Bizerte, the port where the Republican navy had surrendered after fleeing from Cartagena. Once their mission in Africa was over, the division joined the final campaign in Europe which had begun with the Normandy landings. Its hardened men displayed their republicanism throughout the campaign, naming their vehicles after Civil War battles or Spanish characters. The 9th earned fame for their part in the liberation of Paris on the night of 24 August 1944. The *Madrid*, the *Guadalajara*, the *Belchite* and the *Don Quijote* formed part of the column that reached Paris town hall and declared the city liberated. The unit was headed by Amado Granell, former commander of the 49th Mixed Brigade of the People’s Republican Army, passenger number 2,073 on the *Stanbrook* and former prisoner in the Algerian camps.

When the heroic adventures of the 9th ended, culminating in August 1945 when they took the Eagle’s Nest, Hitler’s symbolic Alpine chalet, World War was coming to a close. By then the Republicans who had fought alongside the Allies against Franco’s associates, the exiles in European and African France and the exiles in Latin America knew that, just like in the Civil War, the Western powers were not going to combat the Spanish dictator, because for them the threat was no longer fascism, but communism. No resurrection was possible for the vanquished Spanish Republic. A long new chapter of the history of Spain was beginning outside Spain.

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