



A February 1939 photo of Spanish Republican soldiers fleeing Spain and arriving in France after General Franco's victory in the Spanish Civil War | AFP (archives)

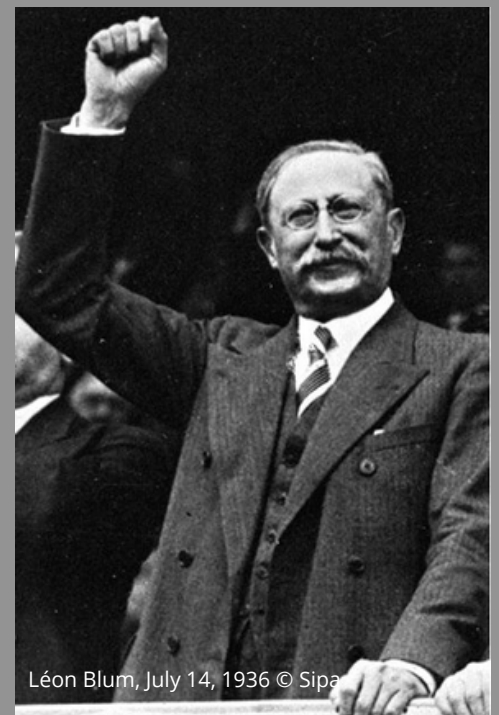
22 May 2025

## French management of the Spanish Retirada

The Spanish Civil War, unleashed in 1936 by Franco's far-right military insurgents against the legally established government of the Second Republic, had numerous consequences for migration. Faced with their defeat over the years (from 1936 to 1939), the Republicans, the camp opposed to Franco, fled their country en masse, to escape Franco's repression and sometimes with the hope of reorganizing abroad to fight back later. France was the main destination for these refugees, both for practical reasons – geographical proximity – and for political reasons, as the Front Populaire had been in power since 1936 and Léon Blum supported the Republicans “wholeheartedly”.

Between 1936 and 1938, some 40,000<sup>[1]</sup> people emigrated to France. However, it was from the end of 1938, seeing their imminent defeat following the Battle of the Ebro, that the Republicans left Spain in a great wave of emigration known as the Spanish Retirada (“retreat”). Indeed, in 1939, France saw the arrival of over 465,000 Spanish refugees, the vast majority of them Republicans, catching the French authorities unawares as they had not anticipated such a massive influx of refugees.

The French government therefore took measures which, as we shall see, are highly questionable. It's worth comparing and contrasting this historic event, the French government's handling of the Retirada, with France's current migration policies.



Léon Blum, July 14, 1936 © Sipa

**How did the French government manage this migratory crisis, and what lessons and similarities can be drawn today?**

---

[1] Jordi Rubió Coromina, *L'èxode català de 1936 a través dels Pirineus*, Maçanet de la Selva, Gregal, 2015, p388

## The French response to the Spanish Retirada

### **Internment of Spanish refugees**

France's refusal to intervene in Spain to help the Republicans was justified by a policy of "welcoming" Spanish refugees. Nevertheless, France "controlled" and "managed" the refugees far more than it welcomed them. This can be seen as early as November 12, 1938, when the Daladier government, which succeeded Léon Blum's and took a turn to the right, declared that "these undesirable foreigners must be put into specialized camps".

There were several reasons for this. Firstly, as the French authorities had underestimated the exodus, surprised by General Franco's decision not to close the Pyrenean border and by the impressive number of refugees, the government had to find emergency solutions. The decision was therefore made to intern the refugees in what were initially called "concentration camps", before being renamed "internment camps". These open-air prisons were built directly on the beaches of towns close to the border.



Construction of barracks at the Argelès-sur-Mer camp in 1939 | Photograph by Enrique Tapia Gimenez.

Most of the camps were built by the refugees themselves, and housed tens of thousands of people. There were 43,000 Republicans in Argelès-sur-Mer, 70,000 in Barcarès and 20,000 in Bram. This massive concentration led to extreme living conditions for the internees, who were exposed to hunger, cold and disease. Over 40% of them suffered from dysentery, causing deaths every day.

### **The political reasons for internment**

In addition to this internment, justified by the surprise of the rapid exodus of many refugees, the French government chose this solution for more political reasons. Firstly, the authorities chose to take in a majority of children, as France was trying to fill its demographic void, but also because they were more generally apolitical. Indeed, the right-wing government was extremely suspicious of Spanish Republicans, who were considered "reds", i.e. communists or even anarchists. Faced with these individuals, the primary objective was repatriation to Spain, which is why Albert Sarraut, then Minister of the Interior, declared that: "All Spanish civilians who cannot demonstrate that their families are rendering a service to France [...] will be repatriated". This quote shows another aspect of the government's interest in interning these refugees. They were seen as a potential labor force, and so the authorities were going to exploit them, by setting up the Compagnie des travailleurs étrangers (CTE), obliging all those who benefited from the right of reception and were old enough to be mobilized to take part in the common effort. In addition, 6,000 Spanish volunteers joined the French army.



Miramas camp (1943) - 212th Group of foreigners workers | Photograph by Albert Veissid

Finally, with the arrival of the Vichy government, which took an even worse view of these Republican internees, following the ideas of the Reich, the refugees became "asilés" and lost all their status and rights, having only a pass to go to work. The reason for this was that Republicans were categorized as potential opponents of the fascist regimes in Spain, France and Germany, and the police thought they were Moscow's tool for destabilizing the French regime. The authorities therefore carried out mass arrests of anarchist, Trotskyist and communist[1] leaders in

[1] Antonio Tellez Zola, *Le réseau d'évasion du groupe Ponzan. Anarchistes dans la guerre secrète contre le franquisme et le nazisme (1936-1944)*, Toulouse, Edition du Coquelicot, 2008



the internment camps. The Groupements de travailleurs étrangers replaced the CTE, and Spaniards were stripped of their wages. From 1942 onwards, they were sent to support the Service du travail obligatoire (compulsory labor service) set up by Nazi Germany. Finally, the remaining internees in the camps, mostly women and children, were subjected to the ideologies of the Vichy regime, just like the rest of the French population.

## **Echoes of the Past: Comparing the Retirada and Contemporary Migration Policies**

### **The catastrophic management of internment and its abuses**

The Spanish Retirada, often forgotten by history, particularly in French education, illustrates one of the many excesses and failures of the French government in its management of migration. Firstly, as mentioned above, the Spanish refugees lived in inhumane conditions for several years. They had no decent accommodation, generally sleeping on the floor and exposed to extreme cold in winter. The camps were also characterized by an increasing lack of drinking water and food, as well as catastrophic hygiene management. This led to the development of numerous epidemics, raising mortality rates to alarming levels.

The policy of confinement was also accompanied by a policy of dispersal. Specialized camps were set up, separating individuals into different categories. For example, the Bram camp was reserved for the elderly, Agde and Rivesaltes for Catalans, Septfonds and Le Vernet for specialized workers, and Gurs for Basques. The inhuman exploitation of Spanish workers was accompanied by political and social rejection of the refugees, under the pretext of the “red menace”. Most migrants were thus considered undesirables, rather than victims to be protected.

The transition to the Vichy government made its policies less surprising, as one could not expect much from the reactions of a fascist regime to interned Republicans. Over 100,000 Republicans were handed over to Franco, and those considered Jewish, homosexual or Communist were quickly deported to Nazi extermination camps.



Spanish refugees, February 1939  
Photograph by Gaston Paris

### **A legacy of exclusion**

This historical event becomes interesting when compared with France's management of migration today. The majority of illegal immigrants arriving in France are interned in administrative detention centers (CRA), awaiting deportation to their country of origin or a third country. Living conditions in these “centers” are extremely strict, and resemble those in prisons in every respect. Many associations denounce the dehumanization and severity of conditions, but these centers are only the tip of the iceberg. Numerous informal camps are springing up, with no help from the state other than their destruction, making life even more difficult for migrants. The Calais “Jungle” is surely the most striking example, with several thousand migrants living in shantytowns, with no drinking water, little food and a proliferation of disease, reminiscent in every way of the Spanish Republican internment camps. The French government's only response is a policy of daily harassment, attempting to dismantle these camps once and for all, with brutal repression of human beings devoid of solutions.



Aerial view of the Calais Jungle taken in November | AFP

In conclusion, it seems clear that the Spanish Retirada illustrates the paradoxes that France is still trying to erase today, presenting itself as a land of asylum when actual practices illustrate the historical rejection of refugees. The example of the Spanish Republicans is all the more striking as these refugees had a strong ideological and cultural proximity to France, defending republican values and having a similar identity. If this failed, despite this proximity, it seems hard to imagine any hope for better treatment of refugees, who today are portrayed as identity threats due to their cultural distance.



### **Rasse Gaspard**

Bachelor student in Political Sciences and International Relations in Galatasaray University and Sciences po Rennes

# miGoSur

Jean Monnet Chair of Migration Governance for Sustainability and Resilience

