

Mitigating the Effects of War on Vulnerable Populations: Quaker Aid to Spanish Refugee Women in France in the Aftermath of the Spanish Civil War

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Abstract

This paper deals with the humanitarian relief programs carried out in France by the *American Friends Service Committee*, generally known as *American Quaker Friends*, which focused on refugee women, mostly from Spain. This work is part of a broader research project on the aid provided by American organizations to Spanish civilians during and after the Spanish Civil War. Chronologically, it covers the period between early 1939 to November 1942, when the Germans invaded the remaining French free territory and the relief actions were transferred to the French Quakers or *Secours Quaker*. My research is mostly based on primary sources; archive materials in the central headquarters of the organization in Philadelphia, U.S.A.

Keywords: Learning the lessons of history, refugee camps, The Quakers, Post-conflict assistance.

Introduction

The Spanish Civil War ended in 1939 when the loyalist government was defeated by the insurgent army. Almost half a million people fled the country then, away from the repression by the new leader General Francisco Franco. Even though part of the refugees returned to Spain soon after Franco's victory, those who were politically committed did not return; there is no official data on the exact numbers, but according to researcher Alicia Alted (2012), there were 278,500 displaced to various countries.

France, as a neighbouring country, was one of the ways out from Spain and had been receiving refugees ever since the war began in 1936. However, most crossed the borders on foot between January and March 1939 –one of the harshest winters of the 20th century. Others crossed the sea to Northern Africa, to the territories under French dominion in Algeria and Tunisia. None of these countries were prepared to receive the crowds that arrived in search of aid and refuge, and most of them were secluded in camps; in the case of Northern Africa, these camps were right in the desert, whereas in France they were mainly on the Southern beachfront. In both cases, they were set up in vast sandy extensions of barren land, with no sanitation and the lack of minimal shelter from the cold or the rain, miserable conditions in wire-fenced enclosures controlled by Senegalese police on horseback serving the French government.

The international community was not alien to the drama of the Spanish refugees and various international organizations provided relief at the camps. Among them, British and American Quakers (*Friends Service Committee* and *American Friends Service Committee, AFSC*) carried out active work that has not been sufficiently recognized to date. Both began their relief work in Spain in 1936 and when the war ended they followed the crowd of refugees crossing the borders, providing aid along the way.

Once on French territory, they set up offices in various locations across the country in order to achieve maximum effectiveness; these were opened or moved as needed. By the end of 1940, Quakers had delegations in Marseilles, Toulouse, Montauban, Montpellier, Lyon and Perpignan. Around that same time, the Bordeaux delegation, on the occupied territory, was transferred to Biarritz (AFSC, 1940, July 3). The Paris office, which did not stop working, transferred its operations to Marseilles in the summer of 1940, becoming the central Quaker headquarters in France (AFSC, 1940, December 21).

Relief work was varied and in order to implement their projects they worked jointly with other local and foreign organizations. They set up and funded children's

colonies; they distributed food, clothing, and shoes; they set up training workshops, language schools, and occupational workshops. Quaker offices also provided social services, as well as medical and dental care; medicines –including life-saving medicines such as insulin- were also provided (In 1941 Denmark sent one hundred thousand insulin units as a donation to the Quakers) (AFSC, 1941). A good part of the work focused on child care, providing clothes, food, vitamins and extra rations at the soup kitchens. Despite the fact that aid to children was the initial goal, relief was extended to other population groups based on certain internal reports such as one dated in 1940 which talked of 2,800 wounded war veterans among the estimated 100,000-140,000 Spanish refugees.

Relief Action for Child and Female Refugees

Child health and welfare was one of the Quakers' primary objectives. According to an internal memo on the relief to be provided to mothers in the Toulouse area, the number of pregnant Spanish refugees in September 1940 was estimated at one hundred (AFSC, 1940, October 7). Soon the need to take care of them before and after giving birth was highlighted. For this reason, they were given bigger food rations. But still, many women in the camps suffered from severe malnutrition. This meant that their babies were not as healthy, and they suffered from post-delivery complications often producing less maternal milk. Due to the increase in numbers of debilitated mothers, one of the main projects was to distribute milk for babies, toddlers, and breastfeeding mothers. According to the reports, the number of premature infants and child mortality rates peaked in 1941.

Quakers managed the donations from various American organizations and individuals. With the American funding, they purchased milk and other milk derivatives from Switzerland and the U.S.A., which was then distributed to day-care centers, soup kitchens, nurseries, and schools. As a report of June 1940, Marseilles had fifty delivery points that were stocked every two weeks. By the end of this same year ten thousand infants whose mothers were not able to breastfeed received one pint (the equivalent of two cups) of milk per day (AFSC, 1940). The following year five thousand babies benefitted too. Delivery took place in small official stations, where there was a nursery in which child care classes were given, and advice was provided on how to better look after the child in each case. Children's health and weight was monitored. The reports show the success of the project with an increase in the children's weight curves.

Elna's Maternity, founded at the end of 1939, is the best example of a relief center for pregnant mothers. Here, they could give birth outside the camps in optimal sanitary

and health conditions, also benefiting from better nutrition. It was managed by the Swiss with the financial support of the International Commission for the Assistance of Child Refugees from the fall of 1940 until 1942 when the International Red Cross took over.

Another relief center was the *Centre Roseraie*, directed by a Spanish physician, Dr. De Aranguren. In the maternity section of this center, there were fifty-one births in 1938 and fifty-two in the following year (AFSC, 1939). It was set up in an old hotel by the sea and, apart from a hospital, a maternity ward and a children's hospital, it served as a home for wounded veterans and some of their widows who did not have a place to live.

At the occupational workshop, wounded or sick men made metal or wooden items that were sold at the markets (including shoes, drawing pencils, and baskets). They were re-educated to go back to civilian life and managed to be self-sufficient through their own work.

La Crèche, in the refugee camp of Argelès –considered to be one of the worst- was created in the need to care for post-delivery mothers that had to return to the camp after giving birth. These recent mothers had to protect their newly-born babies under the tough weather and poor living conditions in the camps. In January 1940 the Quakers asked the French authorities for permission to use two barracks at the camp with the support from the *International Commission for the Assistance of Refugee Children*. This organization was respected by the French, the Spanish, and other refugees. It provided furnishings, medical and sanitary equipment; it made the necessary reforms in the premises and provided all the necessary things, including food. The *International Commission for the Assistance of Refugee Children* was also funding *Elna's Maternity* at this time (AFSC, 1941).

La Crèche was fully operative in February 1940. It included a kitchen; one barrack for mothers and babies, and another for expectant mothers that could not be accommodated at *Elna's Maternity*. Both barracks were managed by a Swiss nurse and a Spanish doctor under the direction of the French government.

The Quaker office in Marseilles was the main location from which all Spanish child refugee colonies in France were managed. Apart from the administration offices, the building had a soup kitchen that served between 4,000 and 5,000 meals a month for the general public. There was also an employment office that procured an average of seventy jobs in 1942, as well as providing clothing for those hired; clothes came from American donors and from the Red Cross (AFSC, 1942).

That same building hosted a unique, pioneering project: a *Cooperative Club* held and maintained by the Quakers with funding from American organizations. It was funded in Marseilles at the end of 1940 for woman refugees in the last part of their pregnancy or mothers with very young babies with no other place to live. They were usually alone and had no resources or shelter. The women would come to the Club in a poor condition of health after tough stays at the refugee camps. But it was not only a hospital where health care, food, and vitamins were provided so that women could gather the physical and spiritual strength needed to go on. According to the report dated on 28 February 1941, there were 41 women and ten infants in the home. There are also documents dated at the end of 1943 that demonstrate that there was an average of fifty women of various nationalities and of all ages that stayed at the Club between January 1941 and November 1943. Here, women worked and lived in a mutually cooperative way to keep the Club. They lived in the community, sharing cooking, cleaning and other household duties. Work was assigned to them based on their health condition. The Club was such a success that the Quaker offices in Perpignan and Toulouse requested that they implement a similar project, but their initiative did not materialize. Thus, the Cooperative Club remained the only one of its kind. When all functions and projects were transferred to the Secours Quaker *The Cooperative Club* continued under the name of *Foyer Féminin*.

Self-help Projects

Self-help projects were aimed at women's empowerment. They received training, fostering their self-esteem and keeping them away from depression. These actions were highly valued and were considered a success. Every Quaker site organized workshops in order to promote women's social integration and help them regain dignity through work. Such workshops were not a new idea, but they were very effective in helping beneficiaries feel useful and empowered. The first sewing workshop outside a refugee camp opened in January 1941 and was located at the Catalan Refugee Centre of Perpignan. Two women sewed at this workshop, with two sewing machines. The great success led to the opening of more workshops where they not only made new items of clothing, but also mended and transformed old clothes. These clothes were distributed to hospitals, orphanages, child colonies, schools, refugee camps and other needy people. Thanks to the clothes made at the workshops plus donations from America, pregnant women were offered all the necessary clothing for their babies. However, for their smooth operation materials such as needles, cotton, and other basic items were needed. These were difficult to obtain in France so they were shipped from the United States.

The biggest workshops (Toulouse and Marseilles) were extended in 1943 to cover three sections, given their enormous workload: knitting, underwear and the sewing of clothes (AFSC, 1944). They employed an average of 25 women, of various ages and nationalities. Smaller workshops employed between eight and fifteen women, depending on the period. The social benefit of those workshops was unquestionable, and they meant a lot more than just a workplace for the women involved. Workers enjoyed warm food and certain social benefits, such as a fully paid maternity leave of six weeks (AFSC, 1944, January 18). Smaller workshops only offered work in exchange for room and board like the one in Toulouse where eight women worked by the end of 1941. In such cases, the workshop was not only a workplace but a place where you could live and eat (AFSC, 1942, January 26).

The End of Relief Work

During the German occupation of France the new Nazi authorities disliked the Quakers – let us remember they were Americans and despite their non-profit, charitable nature it was peopled by aliens from enemy countries in wartime. Despite their respected status, the situation eventually became unsustainable. They had to face numerous problems that the French government was unable to solve: endless bureaucracy, constant restrictions, fuel and food blockades, and difficult transportation and distribution. On 3 May 1941, with the permission of the French government, the American Quakers began the gradual transfer of their activities to French Quakers, the *Secours Quaker*. Thus, the *American Friends Service Committee* was officially disbanded in France on 11 November 1942. By the end of the Second World War this organization unified Quakers from various nationalities in a group of three hundred workers in eight delegations across France, who carried out the relief projects of eight delegations in France. For many years after the end of the Second World War, these relief workers carried out their projects with the same degree of commitment and determination as did their American predecessors.

Conclusion

The Knowledge of past experiences and the historical solutions concerning the placement of women and children refugees on foreign soil and how the crises was handled, may help the current decision-making process for better policies and actions within the framework of the European Union. In this paper we demonstrate the role of the American Quakers as one of the few international relief organization authorized to serve in French refugee camps was crucial to protecting the displaced population and saving many lives. The flight of the refugees after the Spanish civil war, their reception and resettlement in France, clearly unprepared and unable to take care and shelter the newcomers, serves as an historical scenario for confronting the reception of displaced people in Europe today.

References

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