

‘Et toute cette humanité de cauchemar vient se heurter et s’écraser contre la herse que nous avons laissé tomber dès le 28 janvier sur les seuils de notre frontière. Et derrière cette herse, il y a des fusils et des mitrailleuses, qui sont les attributs de notre force et les moyens légitimes de notre sauvegarde [...] Mais, devant les mitrailleuses, entre elles et l’imploration de ces faces de peur et de détresse, il y a le visage calme, doux et grave de la France, de la France de saint Vincent-de-Paul et des Droits de l’homme, qui est la même depuis toujours, à travers les âges comme à travers le monde.’¹

Discuss the validity of this statement, made by Albert Sarraut in March 1939, with reference to the Spanish exodus.

Sarraut’s statement given to the Chamber of Deputies in March 1939 following the Spanish exodus is fundamentally flawed. In attempting to perpetuate the myth of France as *the* country of asylum, Sarraut evokes ideas of a universal benevolent solidarity in an attempt to reassure an increasingly fractured assembly. However, his speech failed to pacify a reluctant right wing, wary of potentially dangerous Spanish republicans, who had become emmeshed in the anti-communist, anti-foreigner mood of the time.² As well as proving ineffective in mollifying right-wing doubts, his statement is simply not representative of the reality of France’s response to the exodus; refugees often underwent violence and alienation, the policies which were put in place were reactionary and France was completely underprepared. France’s piece-meal methods of responding to the needs of the mass influx of refugees often resulted in an exacerbation of their fear and distress to which Sarraut refers, perhaps most strikingly in its use of internment camps and their inhumane conditions. Equally, French authorities’ subsequent pressurised approach to repatriation challenges his depiction of France as the refugees’ benevolent saviour. The instances when refugees were received positively did not stem from any consistent policy on behalf of the government (as Sarraut tries to suggest); such receptions were in fact dependent on personal convictions, whether political or religious, and on geographical location. The positive action taken by groups such as communists, trade unions, left wing parties and certain Catholic organisations are not representative of France as a whole. Their localised and varied nature therefore demonstrates the increasingly divided nature of French society at the time, one which was in a state of flux – and certainly not “la même depuis toujours”. I will begin by scrutinising Sarraut’s statement more closely, before discussing initial reception, use of camps and the role of repatriation, before finally considering examples of positive responses to demonstrate how the flaws in Sarraut’s statement played out in the ambivalent nature of France’s response.

¹ Dreyfus-Armand, Geneviève, *L’exil des républicains espagnols en France: de La Guerre civile à la mort de Franco*, (Paris : Albin Michel, 1999) p. 45 - 46.

² This issue has been dealt with in greater depth by numerous historians including: Julian Jackson, *France, the Dark Years 1940-1944* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) and Mary Drewhouse Lewis, *The Boundaries of the Republic: Migrants’ rights and the Limits of Universalism in France* (Stanford University Press 2007)

In order to understand the flaws in Sarraut's statement concerning the Spanish exodus, it is important to contextualise it before highlighting the key themes and motifs which I seek to contest. Following the main wave of the Spanish exodus between January and February of 1939, which saw as many as 465,000 enter France within the space of two weeks, Sarraut addressed the Assemblée in the Chambre des députés.³ His words fell on a deeply divided audience. As Schor has recognised, whilst the left wing was more willing to help the defenders of the Spanish republic, right wing politicians were suspicious of the revolutionary nature of the Spanish civil war and were concerned about the potential threat to domestic security. They feared the impact of allowing militants and political leaders into France. This attitude of fear and hatred was of marked contrast to the more generous approach favoured by the left.⁴ Thus, when Sarraut asserts that « si nous le voulons, toute cette masse affamée et misérable ne passera pas », and then implies that it would be insulting to imagine that France would prefer that their fate be left to the « mitrailleuses », he was in fact addressing certain groups who would have indeed preferred the republicans' fates to be left to the Francoist military.⁵ Whilst Sarraut does allude to the violence of the Spanish exodus, or La Retirada, in referring to “des fusils et des mitrailleuses”, the implementation of such violence is underplayed. Instead, in claiming that “le visage calme, doux et grave” lay behind France's action, Sarraut evokes France's long history of asylum, whilst his assertion that this response was “*de la France*”, suggests a welcoming response was part of a universal act of providing refuge supported by all. His appeal for France to come together and offer “le sourire qui console et la parole qui reconforte” may have been true in certain testimonies on French dealings with La Retirada, however this was far from consistent, and thus highlights the ambivalent nature of this response, which ranged from outright violence and alienation to genuinely compassionate humanitarian efforts.⁶ In the ensuing sections I will outline this ambivalence regarding initial reception, condition and use of camps and subsequent pressure to repatriate. These inconsistencies will therefore illustrate France's fractured state at the time, one which can no longer be defined as being “de saint Vincent-de-Paul et des Droits de l'homme”.

Sarraut's description deals with the images of Spanish immigrants' immediate arrival at the border, and it is at this point that I will begin to demonstrate how France's lack of preparation and obsession over security compromised the image of the hospitable welcome portrayed by Sarraut. Firstly, the very fact that upon being warned of the impending exodus, France chose to react by implementing the legal framework to legitimise mass internment is highly telling of a country whose preoccupations lay far

³ Scott Soo, *The Routes to Exile: France and the Spanish Civil War refugees, 1939-2009*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013) p. 38.

⁴ Ralph Schor, *L'Opinion française et les étrangers, 1919-39*, (Paris : Publications de la Sorbonne, 1985) p. 698.

⁵ Geneviève Dreyfus-Armand, p. 45.

⁶ Geneviève Dreyfus-Armand, p. 46.

outside the assurance of a compassionate welcome.⁷ When it was evident that Barcelona would fall, France remained reticent. Sarraut's closure of the border from the 26th to the 27th of January was quite simply inhumane and marked the beginnings of a humanitarian crisis as the rapid advancements of refugees were blocked from entering France. When the border was opened on the 28th of January, France stubbornly refused to accept any Spanish militants, or any male of arms bearing age, instead initially only permitting women, children, and the elderly onto their soil, until the 5th of February when all non-armed combatants were allowed entry.⁸ As Gemie recognises, this decision led to the devastating separation of families, as well as the disintegration of groups which had formed during their long and arduous march.⁹ The first contact the Spanish refugees had with French authority came in the form of the border guards. Whilst positive testimonies of the welcome given by the guards at the border do exist, Antoine Miro recalls being met with "l'enthousiasme général", generally the refugees' accounts of their treatment by the guards are marked by hostility and, in some cases, violence.¹⁰ Dreyfus-Armand emphasises the "allez-allez" attitude adopted by guards, whilst Soo acknowledges the "tactless" use of colonial soldiers considering Franco's usage of Moroccan troops in the conflict in Spain.¹¹ Whilst during the initial swathes of entry into France refugees were greeted with relative hospitality and provisions, such as hot drinks and meals, France's utter lack of preparation for the sheer number of refugees assured that proceedings descended into chaos; as Dreyfus-Armand notes, "l'improvisation regne" and accounts testify their "caractère apocalyptique".¹² The majority of refugee memoirs and recollections present us with a reception which is a far cry from the calm, collected account provided by Sarraut and are indicative of a cruelty which would only be further accentuated in the subsequent dispatching to internment camps.

The use of internment camps, their shocking conditions and the ensuing negative effects upon the Spanish refugees who were forced to live in them is the most pertinent example of how France betrayed its claimed status as the country of "les Droits de l'homme". Whilst some were taken in at reception centres and by locals, as many as 250,000 were interned in camps across the south of France, with the first camps being set up at Argelès, Saint-Cyprien and Barcarès.¹³ In his memoir of his time spent in Argelès, Francisco Pons recounts the hostile nature of the Senegalese guards, the utter lack of any type of provisions and the difficulties of living and sleeping in the open air, without protection from the sand and

⁷ Scott Soo, p. 35

⁸ Emmanuelle Salgas, 'L'opinion publique et les représentations des réfugiés espagnols dans les Pyrénées-Orientales (janvier-septembre 1939),' in *Les Français et la guerre d'Espagne*, eds. Jean Sagnes and Sylvie Caucanas (Perpignan : Presses Universitaires de Perpignan, 2004) p. 187.

⁹ Sharif Gemie, 'The Ballad of Bourg Madame: Memory, Exile and the Spanish Republican Refugees of the Retirada of 1939', *International Review of Social History* 51 (2006), p. 33.

¹⁰ Geneviève Dreyfus-Armand, p. 47.

¹¹ Geneviève Dreyfus-Armand, p. 51., Scott Soo, p. 48.

¹² Geneviève Dreyfus-Armand, p. 49.

¹³ Scott Soo, p. 58.

the cold, a situation which aggravated sanitary problems including the widespread diarrhoea suffered by the internees.¹⁴ Pons equally alludes to the French obsession with surveillance in the camps, with the use of document checks and strict punishments on potentially ‘dangerous’ behaviour being commonplace.¹⁵ Much like its response at the border, in its organisation of the camps France was woefully unprepared, with lack of shelter and food proving to be particularly predominant. Even when conditions did start to slowly improve, it was in a chaotic manner, resulting in widespread confusion.¹⁶ Soo equally recognises a continuation of fundamental problems even after the government finally agreed to improve conditions and accept help from aid agencies; food was sometimes provided without adequate cooking tools and the guards’ cruel taunting further heightened feelings of humiliation and dehumanisation.¹⁷ Montagut’s account of life inside the camps points to the debasing effects of such conditions, which reduced a person to “a starving, dirty beast obsessed with the most elementary needs”.¹⁸ Salgas describes how the camps created a “sens d’un durcissement”, encouraging “l’engrenage de la peur”, and the creation of a politics of exclusion.¹⁹ In physically expelling the Spanish refugees from French life, we see the very antithesis of the friendly welcome which Sarraut tries to present as typical of the exodus, one which further depleted refugees’ already diminishing self-worth and which did, in some cases, lead to intense psychological damage.²⁰

Following its initial use of mass internment, France’s alternative response to the needs of the Spanish refugees lay in encouraging refugees to repatriate, despite potentially highly dangerous consequences. As the right wing continued to emphasise the economic strain of maintaining refugees, combined with the growing feelings of ambivalence of the general French population aided by right wing media, repatriation became the government’s “preoccupation première”.²¹ Sarraut’s instructions to authorities indicated the need for strict measures on encouraging repatriation and were often interpreted in correspondingly severe ways, in certain cases border officials did not even allow male refugees simple entry into France.²² Despite the fact that in March Sarraut publicly reaffirmed that France would uphold the right to asylum to all “honorable” refugees, in demands sent out to authorities he had emphasised the need for repatriations to be made at a faster pace.²³ Indeed, refugees’ accounts recall feelings of “une pression intolérable” when it came to repatriation, despite the traumatic consequences which such a return would entail.²⁴ As well as pressurising refugees to return to Spain, it is not uncommon to find examples of

¹⁴ Francisco Pons, *Barbelés à Argelès et autour d’autres camps*, (Paris : L’Harmattan, 1993) p. 34, 36, 25.

¹⁵ Francisco Pons, p. 36.

¹⁶ Denis Peschanski, *La France des Camps. L’internement 1938-1946*, (Paris : Éditions Gallimard, 2002) p. 42.

¹⁷ Scott Soo, pp. 61-62.

¹⁸ L. Montagut, *J’étais deuxième classe dans l’armée républicaine espagnole (1936-1945)*, (Paris, 2003)

¹⁹ Emmanuelle Salgas, p. 194.

²⁰ Scott Soo, p. 64.

²¹ Geneviève Dreyfus-Armand, p. 73.

²² Scott Soo, p. 76.

²³ Quoted in Geneviève Dreyfus-Armand, p. 73.

²⁴ Mariano Constante, *Les Années Rouges*, (Paris : Mercure de France, 1971) p. 139.

refugees being deceived by French authorities into repatriating. One example of this exists in the story of a pregnant woman Mathilde, who was tricked into believing that her husband had returned to Spain. Upon returning to her village and finding that she had in fact been lied to, she was then unable to reunite with her husband for another two years.²⁵ For those who refused to return to Spain, refugees were essentially left with two options: inscription in the Foreign Legion, or joining the CTE (Compagnies de Travailleurs Étrangers/Espagnols).²⁶ In both cases, joining did bestow some progress in refugee rights and offer an escape from the bleak conditions of the camps, however such employment did not equate to sharing the same rights afforded to French citizens. Equally, as Peschanski has noted, it is highly ironic that it was only when it became clear that France would be in need of greater manpower in the lead up to the Second World War that these rights began to develop.²⁷ Neither the Foreign Legion nor the CTE were renowned for their conditions and as a whole have given been remembered in a negative light by those refugees involved.²⁸ Overall, this emphasis on repatriation further demonstrates the inconsistencies in Sarraut's claims over France's hospitality. The use of manipulation and outright lying directly contradicts his depiction of a "grave", "doux" France. Similarly, the lack of universal rights given to those who did engage in alternatives negates his claim to the "Droits de l'homme". The tactical use of refugees, as they were only being given more progressive rights in response to France's own needs, again shows a reactionary response which prioritised France's concerns over refugee welfare.

Although France's response to the Spanish exodus was underpinned by a panic which frequently gave way to cruelty, there are nonetheless examples of positive, humanitarian reactions in the face of the increasing tension. However, it is important to note that these responses depended on personal circumstances and convictions. When refugees were received positively with "le sourire" and "le confort" which Sarraut imagines, it was not as a result of governmental actions, which, as we have seen were reactive, and had highly problematic consequences.²⁹ Certain areas have been recorded as coming together to help the refugees, such as the commune of Orolon-Sainte-Marie in the Pyrénées-Atlantique, where the local population co-operated to organise collections, fundraising and displays in favour of the Republicans.³⁰ However this was not the case across all of Béarn, as in neighbouring Laruns, refugees were treated with mistrust and hostility, as the inhabitants were fearful of the effects their presence had on their children.³¹ Here we see the highly localised nature of the differing responses, illustrating the lack

²⁵ Isabel Fernández, *Pauline ou l'histoire d'une intégration. De Madrid à Mazamet*, (Mazamet : Sud 81, 1997) p. 33.

²⁶ Geneviève Dreyfus-Armand and Émile Temime, *Les Camps sur la plage, un exil espagnol*, (Paris : Autrement, 1995) p. 109.

²⁷ Denis Peschanski, p. 36.

²⁸ Geneviève Dreyfus-Armand and Émile Temime, p. 110.

²⁹ Geneviève Dreyfus-Armand, p. 46.

³⁰ Claire Arnoud, 'L'accueil des réfugiés espagnols en Béarn et en Soule de 1936-1940' in *Les Espagnols et La Guerre Civile*, ed. Michel Papy (Biarritz : Atlantica, 1999) p. 344.

³¹ Claire Arnoud, p. 345.

of a united sense of solidarity when it came to helping refugees. In political terms, one prominent group who came to the refugees' aid was the le Parti Communiste Français (PCF), who, by the end of 1938, had already set about sending a delegation of their committee to Barcelona to see how they might begin to transfer aid and organise accommodation.³² When the exodus did arrive, the PCF set up welcome committees along the border made up of communist soldiers, working with other organisations to give first aid to the injured. Equally, their press campaigned against the camps and tried to alleviate their conditions not only in practical ways through the sending of much needed sanitary provisions, but equally in political and cultural terms, organising the passing of propaganda as well as the creation of cultural centres for students and intellectuals.³³ Noble as these actions were, it is important here to emphasise that such actions were driven by pre-existing political beliefs, a trend which Soo identifies as "the correlation between hospitality and political background".³⁴ Such responses were not reflective of a general French attitude towards refugees, nor were they pushed through as a result of a premediated policy on behalf of the French government. This is also evident in the case of Mazamet, a commune in the Tarn department of France. The Mayor at the time, Charles Cazenave, declared that he did not want his town to become "le dépôt d'une racaille", prompting outrage from former mayor, Albert Vidal.³⁵ In response to his anger, Cazenave responded simply "prenez-les donc chez vous", which is exactly what Vidal did do, organising a hospital within his own wool warehouses, enlisting the help of his entire family alongside the Red Cross.³⁶ Given Mazamet's conservative history, it is perhaps surprising to see such a strong identification with the plight of the republican refugees coming from a former authoritative figure, and yet Vidal's humanitarian efforts are a result of long term commitment to what Cazals describes as "un sens de ce qui doit être fait".³⁷ In the face of his conservative counterpart, Vidal remained faithful to his sense of duty, which, it is vital to note did not stem from political motivation, as he had previously avowed that it was not his intention to follow a political life.³⁸ Whilst many became confounded in feelings of indifference towards refugees, those who did step up to help did so, as Laborie has noted, for diverse, manifold reasons.³⁹ Whilst Sarraut tried to assert a sense of national duty, in these examples we witness the personal nature of humanitarian action, contingent on the individual and which cannot be reduced to a natural manifestation of the French identity as a whole.

³² Jean-Pierre Barthonnat, 'Le Parti Communiste et les réfugiés d'Espagne en 1939', *Le Mouvement Social* (1978), p. 125.

³³ Jean-Pierre Barthonnat, p. 135.

³⁴ Scott Soo, p. 74.

³⁵ Remi Cazals, 'L'accueil des réfugiés républicains à Mazamet' in *Les Français et la guerre d'Espagne*, Second ed., ed. by Jean Sagnes and Sylvie Caucanas, (Perpignan : Presses Universitaires de Perpignan, 2004) p. 213.

³⁶ Remi Cazals, p. 215.

³⁷ Remi Cazals, p. 218.

³⁸ Remi Cazals, p. 218

³⁹ Pierre Laborie, 'Espagnes imaginaires et dérives pré-vichystes de l'opinion française', in *Les Français et la guerre d'Espagne*, Second ed., ed. by Jean Sagnes and Sylvie Caucanas, (Perpignan : Presses Universitaires de Perpignan, 2004) p. 91.

In contesting the message of solidarity and benevolence evoked by Sarraut, it is clear that France's role in the Spanish exodus proved highly problematic. The degree to which France was willing to help its Spanish neighbours was varied and often marked by indifference. In the panic of the initial reception, the inhumane conditions of the internment camps, and the pressure to repatriate, we see clear examples of direct contradictions to Sarraut's affirmation of a level-headed, reasonable French reaction. Despite humanitarian efforts made by various groups, the French press and the mood of the time was dominated by a mounting sense of fear, especially given France's own precarious state prior to the exodus itself; the ambivalent response to the refugees is representative of an increasingly divided country, especially concerning refugees and asylum. Therefore, it is not surprising that when we do examine the reasons behind positive responses to refugees, their multiple and politicised motivations reveal how France's response was by no means a result of a universally *French* feeling. France could no longer uphold its mythic status as *the* country of asylum and the divisive reaction and effects of the exodus ultimately debunk its idealised self-image as a benevolent state of refuge.

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