

Alambradas,
Arena and Art:
Postwar Spanish
Imprisonment in
France

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A review of Francie
Cate-Arries' *Spanish Culture
Behind Barbed Wire:
Memory and Representation
of the French Concentration
Camps, 1939-1945.*
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As the Republican defeat in the Spanish Civil War became imminent by 1939, thousands of refugees began streaming over the border into France, many seeking political asylum from Nationalist Spain, now under the charge of dictator Francisco Franco. Spain's newly-enacted "Law of Political Responsibility" threatened arrest, imprisonment and execution for anyone deemed to have been disloyal to the Nationalist forces. Fleeing Republicans sought refuge in France, but found their choices severely limited in a country whose relative peace was soon to be rudely interrupted by World

War II: they could be deported back to Spain, or enter a French concentration camp. The camps, located on the country's shores, provided little more than sand and barbed wire stretching out into the ocean, and were breeding grounds for disease, filth and hunger. Prisoners developed what they termed *arenosis* (sand-neurosis), their minds subject to sand-induced psychoses. For some, year after year in the camps brought no more than a slow death or the equally fatal return to Spain; for others, the long wait brought a coveted exile to Mexico. While the historical bookends to this period have been well-examined in volumes on the Spanish Civil War and Nazi concentration camps, less has been written about the French camps and their manifestations in art and literature. This six-year limbo and the cultural production it inspired is the subject of Francie Cate-Arries' study entitled *Spanish Culture Behind Barbed Wire: Memory and Representation of the French Concentration Camps, 1939-1945*.

Cate-Arries approaches the French concentration camps from a historical, cultural and political perspective, interpreting them "as a place of collective memory; as grounds for political legitimacy and moral authority; as the site of creative resistance and cultural renewal" (15). Her volume is divided into four sections, each examining multiple texts and visual representations as testimony by camp survivors about their ordeal. At the same time, the author combs this space of cultural production for signs of an emerging exile identity, postulating that Spanish Republicans were able to uphold and renew a national identity and opposition culture in the camps. These memoirs, drawings, novels and plays represent a collective memory engulfed in the recurring images of the endless sand and barbed wire of the prisoners' daily lives in the camps.

Cate-Arries begins with a brief sketch of the scenes of border crossings, describing the refugees, their belongings scattered and abandoned, crawling out of Spain, with crowds of French citizens watching passively by the side of the road. Unfortunately, the author glosses over a more historically-based foundational discussion of the diaspora and the camps, which would aid in interpreting the artistic renditions of this historical moment. One must glean a sense of history from the accounts Cate-Arries analyzes, most of which are a blend of testimony and fiction. This historical omission is, however, the only element missing from this well-documented and enthralling study.

In the first section, the author cites the poet Antonio Machado's death in Collioure, just weeks after he had exiled to France, as a symbol

of exiled Spain. She discusses works such as Joaquín Xirau's "Por una senda clara" (1959), Agustí Cabruja's *La ciudad de madera* (1947), and Celoso Amieva's "Corona de espinas" (1960) as literary examples of how Machado's death reverberates through the French camps. Although Machado himself was never imprisoned, this does not prevent the other deportees from co-opting his poetry and his exile experience as part of their own collective memory.

The author continues with an analysis of Narcís Molins i Fàbrega's and Josep Bartolí's *Campos de concentración, 1939-194 . . .* (1944), perhaps the most engrossing of the texts included in the study. Bartolí's drawings, at once grotesque and captivating, provide surreal illustrations set against Molins i Fàbrega's descriptions of the horrors of life in the camps. This volume, like many of the texts that Cate-Arries has collected, was published in Mexico before the end of World War II, thus freezing it in a moment in time when the future of Spain and the rest of Europe was entirely uncertain. Many of Bartolí's drawings, reproduced in Cate-Arries book, show Franco's Spain as a ghoulish nightmare to which the deportees feared being returned, while the French are portrayed as sadistic hedonists, reveling in the pain they inflict on Spanish refugees. Cate-Arries weaves her analysis of *Campos de concentración* with a fascinating discussion of encoded letters to and from prisoners in the camps. One letter from a family in Spain to a prisoner eager to know if it is safe to return to his homeland reads: "Come as soon as you can; you can go live with your uncle, he's expecting you." The author translates this as "the uncle had been dead for some time, which meant: don't move a muscle" (69). Despite the uncertainty of life in the camps, a return to Spain was unambiguously impossible.

The Spanish prisoners' imaginings of France and the world beyond the camps is the subject of the second section of the study, focusing on Max Aub's drama "Morir por cerrar los ojos," and Luis Suárez's memoir *España comienza en los Pirineos*, both published from Mexico in 1944. Cate-Arries sees Aub's work as an argument defending the Spanish Republicans, whom she considers to have the "moral and legal authority as the only legitimate Spanish political entity" (85). The author argues that Aub's text, along with other artistic interpretations—José Herrera Petere's novel *Niebla de Cuernos (Entreacto en Europa)* (1940); Remedios Varo's paintings; Victoria Kent's novel *Cuatro años en París (1940-1944)* (1947); and Manuel Benavides' novel *Los nuevos profetas* (1942)—demonstrate a shift in perception of the camps: from squalid, disease-

ridden infernos to symbols of Spanish resistance and moral fortitude. France, and Paris in particular, represents an opposing moral decay and betrayal. Suárez's memoir expands on this idea, argues Cate-Arries, by in effect blaming Spain's neighbors for their policy of non-intervention during the Spanish Civil War, ultimately leading to the French and German concentration camps, and World War II itself. This feeling of rancor toward the 'enemies' of the Spanish Republic leads in part to the sentiment that Mexico is the Spaniard's great liberator, a theme Cate-Arries explores in the fourth section.

Tales of creative uses of barbed wire and sand – not the least of which are as inspiration for a slew of writing– is the theme of the third section of the volume. Manuel Angújar, whom Cate-Arries calls “one of the most articulate voices of his generation of post-civil war émigrés” (165), treats this disjunction between the physical discomfort of the camps and its translation into artistic representation in his personal account of four months in a camp that was anything but a beach: *St. Cyprien, plage . . . campo de concentración* (1990). Celso Amieva's poetry in *La almohada de arena* (1960) and Agustí Bartra's novelized memoir *Cristo de 200.000 brazos (Campo de Argelès)* (1958) approach exile identity from a more mythical standpoint. Amieva's verse centers on the slow passage of time, represented by sand, trickling through an hourglass, that drives men to arenosis and also to imagine buried treasure under the sand. Bartra works within a Christ-like imagery to emphasize the positive moments of fraternity witnessed in the camps. All three of these texts, Cate-Arries asserts, transform the space of the camps into the site of “subversion, resistance, and agency” (148) on the part of the Spaniards.

The final section explores Mexico envisioned as an escape from the barbed wire in the exiles' imagination. Cate-Arries discusses the complicated interplay between the dueling Republican relief agencies SERE (Servicio de Evacuación de Republicanos Españoles) and JARE (Junto de Auxilio a los Republicanos Españoles), and describes the lengthy process of gaining permission to leave France, mired in corruption and favoritism. The author juxtaposes two exile accounts on opposite sides of the class divide, nevertheless written by authors who share the opinion that emigration to America is the exile's primary goal. Antonio Ros's *Diario de un refugiado republicano* (1975) is a tale of an upper-class exile who skirts imprisonment in the camps while furiously currying favor with influential Frenchmen by inviting them to lavish meals, which he recounts down to the vintage of the wine

served. Manuel García Gerpe's *Alambradas: mis nueve meses por los campos de concentración de Francia* (1941), on the other hand, chronicles the Spanish prisoners' vulnerability at the caprices of the French government, describing the exam prisoners had to take in order to be considered for exile to Mexico, which could only be passed by lying about one's level of political involvement.

The last text Cate-Arries examines is the most poignant of her study. Eulalio Ferrer was a teenager when he was imprisoned in the French camps with his father, who encouraged him to keep a diary of his experiences. Ferrer published the reams he wrote in 1939 years later from Mexico as *Entre alambras, diario de los campos de concentración* (1987). Among the meager possessions that Ferrer brings with him to the camp is a dog-eared copy of *Don Quijote*, to which he retreats at intervals while imprisoned. The diary is littered with comparisons between the oddities and paradoxes of the camp and Don Quijote's quests and intercalated stories, lending it the quality of a literary study, undertaken in the most absurd and daunting of conditions. Although Cate-Arries does not make this connection explicitly, it is clear that Ferrer's diary and its literary allusions are representative of all of the texts in this study: Cate-Arries has shown how concentration camp prisoners turn to literature and the visual arts as an escape from and proof of their miserable experiences in the camps. *Spanish Culture Behind Barbed Wire* weaves a gripping tale of survival in the camps through its manifestations in art and imagination: it unfolds as not only an analysis of the creative pursuits of Spanish exiles but also as a reconstruction of the perceptions the prisoners had of the volatile world outside the barbed wire and endless sand.