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'Work and Don't Lose Hope': Republican Forced Labour Camps during the Spanish Civil War

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‘Work and Don’t Lose Hope’:

Republican Forced Labour

Camps during the Spanish

Civil War

JULIUS RUIZ

Abstract

This article examines the use of forced labour in Republican Spain during the civil war. Although much has recently been written on Francoist camps, very little research has been undertaken on their Republican counterparts. As a consequence the significance of Republican camps has not been recognised. Although some historians argue that the Republicans used forced labour only in a desperate attempt to avoid military defeat, this article demonstrates that labour camps were an integral aspect of Republican ‘popular justice’. Work, it was argued, would redeem ‘fascists’ by allowing them to contribute to the economic reconstruction and transformation of Spain.

Forced labour was utilised on a massive scale during and after the Spanish civil war. Undoubtedly the best-known example is the construction of the Francoist war memorial and symbol of victory over the ‘godless’ Republic, the Valle de los Caídos (Valley of the Fallen) at Cuelgamuros, a crag near El Escorial in Madrid province. It was ordered by Franco in April 1940, and at least 600 political prisoners were toiling at the site by the end of 1943, although the monument, with a memorial cross standing at 152 metres, was only inaugurated on 1 April 1959, the day after the remains of José Antonio Primo de Rivera were transferred to its crypt. More than sixteen years later, on 23 November 1975, the Falangist leader would be joined by

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General Franco himself. By this time the crypt had been declared a minor basilica by Pope John XXIII.¹

The association between Catholicism and the Valle de los Caídos was not coincidental; the Francoist use of forced labour was shaped by two of the main pillars of the regime: religion and the military. The systematic exploitation of prisoners began primarily as a response to the large numbers of Republican soldiers captured during the spring offensive on the Basque province of Vizcaya in 1937.² On 28 May 1937, a decree declared that prisoners of war (POWs) would be put to work according to the terms of the 1929 Geneva Convention.³ The Francoist evocation of international law permitting the deployment of POW labour by belligerent states – the British, for example, would employ 220,582 German and Italian prisoners by the end of the Second World War – was disingenuous.⁴ The regime's treatment of captured Republicans varied according to ideological criteria. According to a military order in March 1937, prisoners in concentration camps were to be classified into three groups. Those who could prove their ideological adhesion to the Francoist cause would be released (making them available for conscription); those who carried no 'criminal' responsibility would be classified as a POW and held in detention. Finally, commissioned officers 'who had clearly demonstrated their hostility to Nationalist troops' and anyone implicated in 'crimes' were to be transferred to military courts for investigation.⁵

Francoist policies towards POWs reflected the assumption that provided the pseudo-legal basis of repression in Nationalist Spain from July 1936: support for the legally constituted Republican government was potentially a crime of 'military rebellion'. As Ramón Serrano Suñer, Franco's brother-in-law and interior and foreign minister memorably put it in his memoirs, this was 'justicia al revés' or turning justice on its head.⁶ Thus POWs had the 'duty/obligation' to work, because by fighting for the Republic they had 'forgotten the most elemental responsibilities of patriotism'.⁷ Republican defeat placed thousands of such unpatriotic Spaniards in Francoist hands: between 1937 and 1942 perhaps as many as 500,000 soldiers of the Republican army

¹ Daniel Sueiro, *La verdadera historia del Valle de los Caídos* (Madrid: Sedmay, 1976); and Sueiro, *El Valle de los Caídos: los secretos de la cripta franquista* (Barcelona: Argos Vergara, 1983). For a personal memoir see Nicolás Sánchez-Albornoz, 'Cuelgamuros: presos políticos para un mausoleo', in Carme Molinero, Margarida Sala and Jaume Sobrequés, eds., *Una inmensa prisión: Los campos de concentración y las prisiones durante la guerra civil y el franquismo* (Barcelona: Crítica, 2003), 3–17.

² Although ad hoc camps did exist in the Nationalist rearguard from the beginning of the civil war, it was all too common in 1936 for military units, especially the Army of Africa in its brutal march towards Madrid, to shoot prisoners out of hand. For early camps see Javier Rodrigo, 'Campos en tiempos de guerra. Historia del mundo concentracionario franquista (1936–1939)', in Molinero et al., *Inmensa prisión*, 21–2. For the Army of Africa's attitude to POWs see Sebastian Balfour, *Deadly Embrace: Morocco and the Road to the Spanish Civil War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 268–317.

³ *Boletín Oficial del Estado* (henceforth BOE), 1 June 1937.

⁴ Bob Moore, 'Axis Prisoners in Britain during the Second World War', in Bob Moore and Kent Fedorovich, eds., *Prisoners of War and Their Captors in World War II* (London: Berg, 1996), 37.

⁵ The full text can be found in Javier Rodrigo, *Los campos de concentración franquistas: Entre la historia y la memoria* (Madrid: Siete Mares, 2003), 226–9.

⁶ Julius Ruiz, *Franco's Justice: Repression in Madrid after the Spanish Civil War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 5.

⁷ BOE, 1 June 1937.

were processed in 190 military camps.⁸ Of course, not all would be forced to work: by the end of 1937, for example, out of 106,822 classified prisoners, 59,000 (55 per cent) were deemed ideologically sufficiently reliable in 1937 to fight for Franco, while 34,143 (32 per cent) toiled in sixty-six work battalions.⁹ In mid-1942, nearly 47,000 Republican POWs, now reclassified as conscripts in Franco's army, worked on military fortification projects. These included the 'Pyrenees Line' on Spain's northern frontier.¹⁰

Francoist POW camps not only provided manpower for the military but were also intended to evangelise prisoners in preparation for their eventual entry into the national-Catholic 'new Spain'. Attendance at mass was seen as central to the recovery of 'anti-Spaniards' to the Patria.¹¹ However, work was also crucial to the moral redemption of the prisoner. This was especially evident in Francoist penal policy. The May 1937 decree gave Republicans convicted by military tribunals for 'rebellion' the same 'duty/obligation' to work as POWs. In October 1938, the Patronato Central para la Redención de las Penas por el Trabajo (Central Board for the Redemption of Sentences through Work), was created to implement redemption in Franco's jails. Based in the Justice Ministry, the composition of the Patronato Central reflected the power bases of the regime: as well as prison officials, it contained a representative from the Falange and the military, and a priest. Prisoners redeeming themselves were paid a basic 2 pesetas daily for their work, although they would receive only 50 cents; the rest was sent to their families via local redemption boards.¹² Francoist redemption therefore had a dual purpose. First, as the Jesuit priest on the Patronato Central, José Antonio Pérez del Pulgar, put it in 1939, the 'reparation of the damages that [prisoners] contributed to by their cooperation with the Marxist rebellion'.¹³ Second, work and family payments would 'draw out the poison of the ideas of hate and anti-patria from prisoners and their relatives, substituting them for mutual love and close solidarity among Spaniards'.¹⁴

Despite the mixed composition of the Patronato Central, the military continued to dominate in the use of forced labour. In order to maintain vigilance and discipline, many prisoners worked in militarised penal colonies created in September 1939.¹⁵ Furthermore, only a minority of prisoners – 18,741 of an estimated penal population of 280,000 in 1940 – worked under the Redención de las Penas por el Trabajo

⁸ Javier Rodrigo, *Cautivos: Campos de concentración en la España franquista 1936–1947* (Barcelona: Crítica, 2005), xxiv. The only POW camp to remain open after 1942 was in Miranda del Ebro (Burgos), which held interned foreign refugees until its closure in 1947. *Ibid.*, 223–4.

⁹ Rodrigo, *Campos*, 76, 130–1.

¹⁰ Rodrigo, *Cautivos*, 222–3.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 132–5.

¹² BOE, 11 Oct. 1938. From June 1939, prisoners could also expect work to be taken into account when applying for parole. BOE, 13 Jun. 1939.

¹³ Sueiro, *Verdadera*, 47.

¹⁴ BOE, 11 Oct. 1938. To emphasise the evangelical purpose of the scheme, Our Lady of Mercy, protector of *reconquistadores* in medieval Spain, was named patron saint of the Patronato Central and the local boards on 27 April 1939. BOE, 2 May 1939.

¹⁵ BOE, 17 Sept. 1939.

programme.¹⁶ The pool of prison labour was diminished by executions (a maximum of 50,000 after the civil war), the failure of military tribunals to sentence defendants rapidly and, above all, by the mass parole of political prisoners: at least 187,038 were released between 1941 and 1949.¹⁷ The Valle de los Caídos, begun in 1941 with prisoners redeeming sentences of ‘rebellion’, by 1950 employed only free labour.¹⁸

This is not to imply that political prisoners played an insignificant part in the reconstruction of Spain after the civil war. In March 1938, Ramón Serrano Suñer, the interior minister, established the Servicio Nacional de Regiones Devastadas y Reparaciones (the National Service of Devastated Regions and Reparations) to co-ordinate the reconstruction of areas ravaged by war.¹⁹ This organisation had a representative on the Patronato Central para la Redención de las Penas por el Trabajo from October 1939, and in 1943, 4,075 convicted Republicans worked on its schemes.²⁰ Forced labour was also utilised in major infrastructure projects. For example, militarised penal columns constructed railways in Teruel and irrigation canals in Badajoz, Toledo and Lower Andalucía.²¹ Political prisoners could also redeem themselves by contributing to the spiritual reconstruction of the country: the first items made at the workshop in Alcalá de Henares (Madrid) jail in 1940 were 15,000 crucifixes.²²

Forced labour was therefore an important aspect of the Francoist repression and has increasingly attracted the attention of Spanish historians.²³ However, a feature of Spanish historiography has been the absence of research on Republican labour camps. During a major academic conference on ‘concentration camps and the penitentiary world in Spain during the civil war and Francoist [period]’, held in Barcelona in October 2002, only one paper, on archives and sources, referred to them.²⁴ Javier Rodrigo’s 2005 study of Francoist camps mentions their Republican counterparts in a single footnote, with the observation that the Republican ‘system of forced labour still needs to be examined in a monograph’.²⁵

The little research that has been carried out on the subject has concentrated almost exclusively on the use of forced labour by the Republican military. As in

¹⁶ José Manuel Sabín, *Prisión y muerte en la España de postguerra* (Madrid: Anaya & Mario Muchnik, 1996) 169.

¹⁷ Ruiz, *Franco’s Justice*, 117.

¹⁸ Sueiro, *Verdadera*, 93.

¹⁹ BOE, 29 March 1938. Reconstruction reflected the regime’s ideological priorities. The restoration of ‘artistic and national monuments’ and churches was given precedence over the rebuilding of municipal buildings, factories and housing. BOE, 15 June 1938.

²⁰ BOE, 21 Oct. 1939; Sabín, *Prisión*, 195–6.

²¹ José Luis Gutiérrez Molina, ‘Los presos del canal. El servicio de colonias penitenciarias militarizadas y el canal del Bajo Guadalquivir’ in Molinero et al., *Inmensa prisión*, 64.

²² Sabín, *Prisión*, 197.

²³ Apart from the works cited earlier, see, e.g., José Ángel Fernández, *Historia del campo de concentración de Miranda de Ebro (1937–1947)* (Miranda del Ebro: J. A. Fernández, 2003); Gonzalo Acosta Bono et al., *El canal de los presos (1940–1962): Trabajos forzados: de la represión política a la explotación económica* (Barcelona: Crítica, 2004); Fernando Mendiola Gonzalo, *Esclavos del franquismo en el Pirineo: la carretera Igal-Vidángoz-Roncal (1939–1941)* (Tafalla: Txalaparta, 2006).

²⁴ Manel Risques Corbella, ‘Archivos y fuentes documentales del mundo concentracionario y penitenciario español’, in Molinero et al., *Inmensa prisión*, 259–260.

²⁵ Rodrigo, *Cautivos*, 332n.

Francoist Spain, forced labourers were most likely to be found in militarised camps and battalions. Thanks mainly to the work of Francesc Badia, we know most about the six main camps created by the Servicio de Investigación Militar (SIM) in Catalonia in spring 1938.²⁶ The SIM was created by the Socialist defence minister, Indalecio Prieto, in August 1937 as a means of unifying military counter-intelligence within one agency. However, the SIM soon became a synonym for extrajudicial brutality against draft dodgers, deserters and the Republic's political enemies.²⁷ Badia estimates that around 7–8,000 worked to construct military fortifications before the fall of Catalonia in February 1939.²⁸ But since the SIM ran other camps in Republican Spain (for example in Cuenca from March 1938), the number of forced labourers working for the SIM will be substantially greater.²⁹

The SIM camp network was organically separate from the disciplinary battalions deployed from 1937 by Republican army commanders for auxiliary labour behind the lines.³⁰ They were used as a means of punishing undisciplined soldiers, draft dodgers, deserters and conscripts deemed too politically dangerous to serve in regular army units.³¹ The numbers that were forced to labour in disciplinary battalions remain a matter of conjecture. Estimates of a battalion's effective strength vary from 665 to 2,500.³² Moreover, not all carried out forced labour; those composed of *afecto* (politically reliable) men were sent to the front as shock units.³³ Nevertheless, it is likely that the figure exceeds that of forced labourers in SIM camps, as disciplinary battalions were attached to all large regular army formations.³⁴

The existence of militarised camps and disciplinary battalions has led some historians to conclude that the use of forced labour in the Republican zone was essentially a reaction to military defeats and the consequent deterioration of the Republic's position in 1937–8.³⁵ This is to ignore the camp system created in December 1936 by Juan García Oliver, the anarchist minister of justice in Francisco

²⁶ Francesc Badia, *Els camps de treball a Catalunya durant la guerra civil (1936–1939)* (Barcelona: Publicacions de l'Abadia de Montserrat, 2001). See also Pelai Pagès i Blanch, *La presó Model de Barcelona: Història d'un centre penitenciari en temps de guerra (1936–1939)* (Barcelona: Publicacions de l'Abadia de Montserrat, 1996), 79–91.

²⁷ For the SIM see François Hodgeau, 'La légende noire du Service d'Information Militaire de la République dans la guerre civile espagnole, et l'idée de contrôle politique', *Le Mouvement Social*, October–November 2001, 29–52.

²⁸ Badia, *Camps*, 112.

²⁹ Godicheau, 'Légende', 46.

³⁰ Badia, *Camps*, 16–18.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 287–9.

³² The first figure is given by Ramón Salas Larrazábal in his history of the Republican army, the second by Rafael Miralles Bravo, the commander of the Second Disciplinary Battalion of the Army of the East (based in Catalonia) between October 1937 and March 1938. Ramón Salas Larrazábal, *Historia del Ejército Popular de la República* (Madrid: Esfera de los Libros, 2006), IV, 2939; Rafael Miralles Bravo, *Memorias de un comandante rojo* (Madrid: Editorial San Martín, 1975), 129.

³³ *Gaceta de la República* (henceforth *Gaceta*), 20 Feb. 1938.

³⁴ Thus each of the five army corps that defended Catalonia in the autumn of 1938 had a disciplinary battalion. Salas, *Historia*, 2934–8.

³⁵ Santos Juliá et al., *Víctimas de la guerra civil* (Madrid: Temas de Hoy, 1999), 256–7. See also Helen Graham, *The Spanish Republic at War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 350–1.

Largo Caballero's government.³⁶ For García Oliver, forced labour was not a temporary expedient caused by the pressures of war; it was envisaged as an integral part of Republican justice after victory. Belief in the transformative power of forced labour, so evident in Franco Spain, is also manifest in García Oliver's penal policy. In a major speech on New Year's Day 1937, he argued that the

great problem . . . of politicofascist delinquency will be resolved by us with labour camps . . . There is no human reason that prevents soldiers, priests [and] sons of millionaires from working like the rest. They will carry out productive works or work with no immediate productive result like reforestation. We will make the uncultivated lands of our patria fertile. That cohort of fascists, working, will help us transform our country into a bountiful orchard.³⁷

Work would also rehabilitate the 'politicofascist', allowing him to re-enter Republican society. García Oliver told an audience at the Apollo Theatre in Valencia on 30 May 1937 that the 'first labour camp for convicted fascists has been inaugurated in Totana, Murcia province. At the entrance . . . whoever crosses the threshold is greeted with a large sign containing the words, "Work and don't lose hope"'.³⁸

García Oliver was referring to the creation of a camp on the grounds of a former Capuchin friary. Opened on 24 April, Totana saw a total of 1,799 prisoners pass through its gates until the end of the civil war.³⁹ Unlike militarised camps, Totana was under the jurisdiction of the Dirección General de Prisiones (Directorate General of Prisons, DGP) within the Republican Justice Ministry, and generally received political prisoners convicted by Republican courts (popular tribunals) for 'disaffection'.⁴⁰ Totana was not the largest camp run by the DGP; this was Albaterra (Alicante), opened in October 1937. Built with for a capacity of 2,000, it had received approximately 1,000 prisoners by early 1938.⁴¹ There were at least six other DGP camps in Republican Spain, although these were much smaller than Totana and Albaterra.⁴² It should also be stressed that the Republican 'penal universe' was not rigid: there was co-operation between the civil and military authorities. Thus the construction of the Torrejón de Ardoz (Madrid) to Tarancón (Cuenca) railway line, a project under the control of the Justice Ministry, utilised militarised labour.⁴³ By the end of May 1938, it was reported that 8,000 people were working on the railway.⁴⁴

³⁶ *Gaceta*, 27 Dec. 1936.

³⁷ *ABC* (Madrid), 2 Jan. 1937.

³⁸ Juan García Oliver, *Mi gestión al frente del Ministerio de Justicia* (Raus: CNT-FAI, 1937). See also his memoirs, *El eco de los pasos* (Barcelona: Ruedo Ibérico, 1978), 446–75, for a full copy of this speech.

³⁹ Archivo Histórico Nacional (Madrid) (henceforth AHN), Causa General-Murcia, 1067, legajo 1.

⁴⁰ A decree issued in February 1937 stipulated that all those convicted of political crimes were to be interned in a labour camp, not a prison. *Gaceta*, 24 Feb. 1937.

⁴¹ Glicerio Sánchez Recio, *Justicia y guerra en España: Los tribunales populares (1936–1939)* (Alicante: Instituto de Cultura 'Juan Gil-Albert', Diputación de Alicante, 1991), 186.

⁴² Orihuela, San Juan and Calpe (Alicante), Valmuel (Teruel), Venta de Aroaz (Almería) and Rosas (Girona). The camps at San Juan and Rosas had fewer than seventy prisoners. *Ibid.*, 191–2; Archivo General de la Guerra Civil Española (Salamanca), Político-Social de Madrid (henceforth AGGCE, PS Madrid), legajo 1452.

⁴³ *ABC* (Madrid), 1 Dec. 1937.

⁴⁴ *The Volunteer for Liberty*, 25 May 1938.

Nevertheless, this article will suggest that the DGP camp network stagnated and became increasingly secondary to the demands of the military for cheap manpower from spring 1938. Even so, it will argue that we cannot relegate García Oliver's vision of an anti-fascist Spain built on forced labour to a minor footnote in the history of the civil war. The idea that work would rehabilitate – or redeem – political prisoners found support across the Popular Front. As we shall see, the rapid expansion of the DGP camp system took place under Juan Negrín's administration of May 1937–April 1938, despite the absence of anarchist ministers. Bourgeois republicans were part of this consensus; in a radio broadcast on 13 September 1938, a militant of President Manuel Azaña's party, Izquierda Republicana, claimed that '[Our] labour camps, [which can be] visited at any time, place our penitentiary system at the level of the cultured peoples by their humanitarian and scientific organisation.'⁴⁵

The association between forced labour and modernity was a regularly invoked theme by those involved in the DGP camp system. In August 1937, Simón García del Val, a DGP official, carried out a feasibility study on what was to become the Albaterra camp. In his report he traced the historical origins of the use of convict labour in Spain, relating how technological progress rendered the use of prisoners in the royal galleys obsolete. He emphasised how convicts, redirected into public works programmes, had facilitated economic progress. This was particularly evident in the seventeenth century, when the draining of salt marshes in Alicante created prosperity in the province, although he also noted that convict labour continued to be used in Spain until the early twentieth century.⁴⁶

But García de Val considered that the fact that other European states used forced labour was conclusive proof of its modernity, citing with approval the British and French penal colonies in Australia and Guyana and the recently completed White Sea Canal in the Soviet Union.⁴⁷ The DGP official's attitude is illustrative of the degree to which Spanish penal experts were traditionally influenced by foreign ideas. This can be seen by the decision of the Republican-Socialist government of Manuel Azaña to order compulsory labour for 'idlers and evildoers' (*ley de vagos y maleantes*) in August 1933.⁴⁸ Conceived by the socialist jurist Luis Jiménez de Asúa, this was a Spanish response to the internationally debated issue of 'incurable' offenders. Some states acted earlier; in England the Prevention of Crime Act of 1908 allowed convicted 'habitual criminals' to be detained for a further five to ten years. In Weimar Germany, a draft to allow courts to detain indefinitely 'dangerous habitual criminals' was completed in 1927, although it would only become law under the Nazis in November 1933.⁴⁹

The Republican-Socialist law permitted the arrest and administrative detention of the 'work-shy', 'ruffians', pimps, professional beggars, habitual drunks and addicts,

⁴⁵ AGGCE, PS Madrid, 937.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 2050/4627.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* It is curious that he failed to mention that the Spanish also transported convict labour to their colonies. As late as 1889, the then Liberal government of Práxedes Mateo Sagasta created a penal colony on the Philippine island of Mindoro. *Gaceta de Madrid*, 25 Dec. 1889.

⁴⁸ *Gaceta de Madrid*, 5 Aug. 1933.

⁴⁹ Nikolaus Wachsmann, *Hitler's Prisons* (London: Yale University Press, 2004), 367, 375.

and anyone 'inclined' to commit crimes and 'habitual' criminals. Such 'socially dangerous' individuals were potentially liable to be interned in a 'labour camp' (*establecimiento de régimen de trabajo*) or 'agricultural labour camp' (*colonias agrícolas*) for up to three years. Although police roundups of 'idlers' and 'evildoers' began soon after the promulgation of the law, arguments over the location of the camps meant that none were built before the civil war.⁵⁰

The *ley de vagos y maleantes* was not formally derogated in Republican Spain during the conflict and, as we shall see, was used by the secret police to intern suspects in labour camps. Yet the continuities between the civil war and pre-civil war periods should not be exaggerated. The camp system created by García Oliver was a product of the failed military rebellion of July 1936. It was a response to one of the most pressing questions in the Republican zone in 1936: what to do, as García Oliver put it on 1 January 1937, with the 'great problem . . . of politicofascist delinquency'.

In 1936 one solution to this 'problem' was the creation of new prisons, often in confiscated religious buildings, throughout Republican Spain. Prisons designed for pre-war use struggled to cope with the influx of 'politicofascists'. Madrid's Model Prison, for example, with just over a thousand individual cells, had approximately 5,000 inmates by mid-November 1936.⁵¹ Five new jails were therefore opened in the Spanish capital during the first four months of the conflict.⁵² But even the smallest towns and villages would make use of their local religious establishments: the Franciscan monastery in Cehegín (Murcia), abandoned after its brothers were expelled, was turned into a local jail.⁵³

Such was the pressure for jails that prisoners held in coastal areas were sometimes sent to converted prison-ships. In Bilbao, a maximum of 3,000 in 1936–7 were distributed among its four prisons (including two convents) and three prison-ships.⁵⁴ In Almería the holds of two merchant vessels, as well as a sugar factory, a convent and a religious college were used to house detainees.⁵⁵ There were also three prison-ships in Castellon and Alicante, while in Valencia prisoners were interned on four vessels.⁵⁶ However, the most well-known prison-ship was the *Uruguay*, docked in Barcelona, which not only provided the courtroom for the military tribunals trying the leaders

⁵⁰ Not surprisingly, no one wanted to live close to a camp. Thus a proposal to place one at Figueras castle in September 1933 was met by a petition and street demonstrations. *ABC*, 15 and 23 Sept. 1933. The first order to build a camp was only given by the Popular Front government of Casares Quiroga in June 1936. *ABC* (Madrid), 21 June 1936.

⁵¹ Javier Cervera, *Madrid en guerra: La ciudad clandestina* (Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1998), 79–80; AHN, Causa General-Madrid, 1511/I, II, 637.

⁵² Cervera, *Madrid*, 80–2.

⁵³ Miguel Écija Rioja, 'Casa de Reforma de Cehegín', *Alquiper: Revista de Historia*, 11 (2001), 103–13.

⁵⁴ José Luis de la Granja, 'La Justicia en la Euskadi en guerra. La Consejería de Justicia del Gobierno Vasco (1936–37)', in AHN, *Justicia en guerra* (Madrid: Ministerio de Cultura, 1990), 77.

⁵⁵ Rafael Quirosa-Cheyouse y Muñoz, 'Procedencia social de las víctimas originadas por la repression en la provincia de Almería durante la guerra civil', in AHN, *Justicia*, 159.

⁵⁶ Vicent Gabarda, *La represión en la retaguardia republicana: País Valenciano, 1936–1939* (Valencia: Edicions Alfons el Magnànim, 1996), 32 n.

of the rebellion in the Catalan capital but later became one of the most feared 'secret prisons' of the SIM in Catalonia.⁵⁷

Of course, the vast majority of the estimated 60,000 executed in the Republican zone during 1936 never appeared before a regular court.⁵⁸ These killings took place in a context where the administration of justice was paralysed and revolutionary organisations acting in the name of the Popular Front attempted to fill the vacuum.⁵⁹ On 23 July 1936, the justice minister Manuel Blasco Garzón, confronted with the disappearance, arrest and killing of legal officials, lawyers and magistrates in those areas where the military rebellion was defeated, formally recognised the situation by temporarily suspending all criminal, civil and administrative cases.⁶⁰ For a month only military tribunals, restricted to hearing the cases against such leaders of the rebellion as General Fanjul and Colonel Fernández de la Quintana in Madrid and General Goded and General Fernández Burriel in Barcelona, remained active.⁶¹

This is not to suggest that all those labelled 'politicofascist' in 1936 had actually taken part in – or even sympathised with – the military rebellion. Entire social groups were held collectively guilty for the rising. Revolutionaries saw the civil war as a struggle between the 'old' and 'new' Spain. Typical is the distinction made in Largo Caballero's Socialist newspaper *Claridad* on 10 August 1936, which distinguished between 'the castes that murder to maintain or recover their historical privileges' and those 'murdered classes that fight for their political and economic liberation'. The former, 'feudal landowners', 'the bellicose and antichristian clergy', 'the barbaric military', 'the bankers who had lent their capital to the service of this great crime [the rebellion]', and in sum 'all this anachronistic and bloodthirsty Spain', were the 'anti-patria'.⁶² But it was not only revolutionaries who established collective guilt. Largo Caballero's main rival in the Socialist movement, Indalecio Prieto, wrote in *Informaciones* on 24 August that 'if we win, things cannot and will not be like 17 July . . . Capitalism, the Church and the Army, which undeniably have together advanced, promoted and sustained the [rebel] movement, should be punished, deprived of their power'.⁶³

Collective responsibility would be also reflected in the new 'popular' justice system that was slowly being constructed in the Republican zone to judge the Republic's enemies, following the creation on 23 August 1936 of the first Tribunal Especial (Special Tribunal, which later became known as the Tribunal Especial Popular or

⁵⁷ Raúl C. Cancio Fernández, *Guerra civil y tribunales: de los jurados populares a la justicia franquista (1936–1939)* (Cáceres: Universidad de Extremadura, 2007), 100.

⁵⁸ Juliá et al., *Víctimas*, 117–57.

⁵⁹ Sánchez Recio, *Justicia*, 23–41.

⁶⁰ *Gaceta de Madrid*, 24 Jul. 1936.

⁶¹ Fanjul and Fernández de la Quintana were tried on 15 August and shot two days later. See, e.g., *El Socialista*, 15 Aug. 1936, for a contemporary account of proceedings. The trial of Goded and Fernández Burriel took place on the *Uruguay* on 11 August and their execution took place the following day. Pelai Pagès i Blanch, *Cataluña en guerra y en revolución 1936–1939* (Seville: Espuela de Plata, 2007), 102.

⁶² *Claridad*, 10 Aug. 1936.

⁶³ *Informaciones*, 24 Aug. 1936.

Special Popular Tribunal) in Madrid.⁶⁴ Thus on 10 October 1936 the Justice Ministry issued a decree establishing *jurados de urgencia* (emergency juries) to hear cases against those who were accused of ‘acts that being by their nature hostile or of disaffection towards the Regime [nevertheless] do not have characteristics of a crime’. These actions, which carried a sentence of a maximum of three years, included ‘conduct . . . demonstrating, by background or motives, that [the person] is clearly an opponent [*desafecto*] of the Regime’.⁶⁵ Thus anyone who opposed the Popular Front before the war was potentially (and retrospectively) guilty.⁶⁶ The political nature of the *jurados de urgencia* was further accentuated by the fact that only one of the three members of this jury was a professional magistrate; the other two were representatives of Popular Front trade union and political organizations.⁶⁷

Obviously, a relatively short sentence was preferable to being murdered. But in summer 1936, extrajudicial killings were a brutally effective way of settling the question of what to do with ‘politicofascists’. Some perpetrators bemoaned the lack of options: Benigno Mancebo, an anarchist member of the dreaded Madrid Comité Provincial de Investigación Pública (CPIP – better known as the *cheka* of Bellas Artes/Fomento), told the anarchist youth leader Gregorio Gallego that he would have preferred to have put his victims to work.⁶⁸

Mancebo was not the only one to suggest alternatives. As early as 30 July, an editorial in *ABC* claimed that ‘in any other country . . . concentration camps would have emerged for dangerous people’.⁶⁹ In early October, the interior minister, Angel Galarza, told the British chargé d’affaires, George Ogilvie-Forbes, that ‘the government were considering establishing outside Madrid a concentration camp where prisoners would be lodged and made to work for a fair wage under reliable guards’.⁷⁰ The aforementioned decree establishing *jurados de urgencia* on 10 October specifically referred to ‘obligatory work with restriction or deprivation of liberty’ as one of the punishments available for political opponents of the Republic.⁷¹

However, the Federación Anarquista Ibérica (FAI), an elite group created in 1927 to preserve the purity of anarchist doctrine within the anarcho-syndicalist trade union

⁶⁴ *Gaceta de Madrid*, 24 Aug. 1936. A decree issued two days later extended special (or popular) tribunals to the rest of Republican Spain, with the important exception of Catalonia. *Gaceta de Madrid*, 26 Aug. 1936. The Catalan government, which under the terms of the 1932 Statute had control over the administration of justice, created its own tribunals on 26 August. For the evolution of Catalan justice, which did not become harmonised with the rest of the Republican zone until 1937–8, see Pelai Pagès i Blanch, ‘La Administración de Justicia en Catalunya durante la guerra civil española’ in AHN, *Justicia*, 47–65. For the slow institutionalisation of these tribunals see Sánchez Recio, *Justicia*, 84–90.

⁶⁵ *Gaceta de Madrid*, 11 Oct. 1936.

⁶⁶ See Cervera, *Madrid*, 135–6, for a discussion of this decree.

⁶⁷ The dominance of political appointees was also apparent in the composition of the popular tribunals created in August 1936 which tried more serious cases. Although each tribunal comprised three career judges, guilt or innocence was decided by a jury nominated by Popular Front organizations. For a recent survey of Republican justice see Cancio, *Guerra*, 45–95.

⁶⁸ Gregorio Gallego, *Madrid, corazón que se desangra* (Madrid: G del Toro, 1976), 127.

⁶⁹ *ABC* (Madrid), 30 Jul. 1936.

⁷⁰ The National Archives (London) (henceforth NA), FO 371/20542, W13020/62/41.

⁷¹ Article 3(f), *Gaceta de Madrid*, 11 Oct. 1936.

movement, did not wait for discussions within the Republican government to come to a conclusion before deciding to act. It founded the first labour camp at Valmuel (Teruel). The only detailed testimony that we have of this camp comes from Agustín Souchy Bauer, a former leader of the Asociación Internacional de los Trabajadores (AIT), the international anarcho-syndicalist movement. Souchy, together with the American anarchist Emma Goldman, travelled around Aragón in 1936–7 to see the revolution in action.⁷²

Valmuel had many of the characteristics that would later typify García Oliver's camps. The first was that the prisoners themselves built it. The second was the camp's location and purpose: established in an arid area of Aragón, it was for the construction of a canal to allow irrigation and thus cultivation. Third, there was close co-operation with the local authorities: not only did the local council in nearby Alcañiz provide funds, but the local collective also sent 125 free workers to work alongside 180 forced labourers.⁷³

At first sight it seems paradoxical that anarchist militants should be the first to create a forced labour camp. But Souchy did not see the irony: 'Why are there still concentration camps?' he asked rhetorically. '[Because] the struggle against fascism has not ended. The anarchists have to protect themselves against the fascists.' Yet the use of 'fascist' forced labour was more than simply self-defence; work had a redemptive quality that would transform 'fascists'. Doubtless idealising the reality of hard labour in difficult working conditions, Souchy wrote that 'prisoners and guards are comrades'.⁷⁴ Souchy was no maverick: the anarchist youth leader in Madrid, Gregorio Gallego, wrote in his memoirs that forced labour 'responded to the anarchist conception of re-education rather than punishment'.⁷⁵

This makes it easier to understand why Juan García Oliver, on being appointed justice minister in Largo Caballero's government on 4 November, told reporters that his first priority was the creation of 'concentration camps for rebel prisoners, making them work'.⁷⁶ García Oliver was an unlikely choice as justice minister. Only thirty-five in 1936, García Oliver, along with Francisco Ascaso and Buenaventura Durruti amongst others, was a member of the anarchist action group Los Nosotros, which not only financed its activities in the 1920s by armed robbery but also carried out assassinations.⁷⁷ As a leading member of the FAI in Catalonia before the civil war, he was vehemently opposed to moderates within the syndicalist wing of the

⁷² His experiences were published in 1937 under the title *Entre los campesinos de Aragón: El comunismo libertario de las comarcas liberadas*. Citations come from the 1977 edition published by Tusquets in Barcelona.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 26–7.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ Gallego, *Madrid*, 127. Emma Goldman, on the other hand, was horrified at the prospect of anarchists opening concentration camps. On New Year's Day 1937, she wrote to the CNT National Committee reminding them of the fate of anarchists in the Soviet Union. Emma Goldman, *Vision on Fire: Emma Goldman on the Spanish Revolution*, ed. David Porter (Edinburgh: AK Press, 2006), 108.

⁷⁶ *ABC* (Madrid), 6 Nov. 1936.

⁷⁷ Chris Ealham, *La Lucha por Barcelona: Clase, cultura y conflicto 1898–1937* (Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 2005), 99–100.

movement, the Confederación Nacional del Trabajo (CNT), who argued for a more accommodating attitude towards the Republic and was prominent in violent attempts to bring libertarian communism to Spain in the early 1930s.⁷⁸

It was not surprising therefore that García Oliver was at the forefront of the CNT–FAI-led revolution in Catalonia in summer 1936: he became the ‘strong man’ of the Comité Central de Milicias Antifascistas that had de facto replaced the Catalan government on 21 July.⁷⁹ In mid-August he decided to take personal command of the Aguiluchos (Eaglets) column that left Barcelona to recapture the anarchist stronghold of Zaragoza: its passage through Lleida saw the destruction of the cathedral and the ‘cleansing’ of the local prison, with between seventeen and twenty-two inmates being killed.⁸⁰

García Oliver, like other anarchist leaders, increasingly came to the conclusion that military victory had to take precedence over the introduction of libertarian communism. As well as being one of the four CNT–FAI leaders that entered the Republican government in November, he also agreed to serve on the Consejo Superior de Guerra, a military council presided over by the prime minister, Largo Caballero, with the mission of forging a ‘popular army’ out of the militias.⁸¹

García Oliver’s assumption of ministerial office did not necessarily mean a total repudiation of anarchist principles. He drew a sharp distinction between political and common criminals. Explaining his general approach in the speech given in Valencia on New Year’s Day 1937, entitled ‘New Directions in Justice’, García Oliver promised justice that was ‘hot [and] alive’. For him, a ‘common criminal is not an enemy but a victim of society’ who needed culture. Thus the ‘penal community which he will be sent to will have all the most important elements of progress: theatres, sports, universities and libraries’. Political criminals, on the other hand, were to be put into labour camps and given work to prevent them reoffending. This, García Oliver insisted, did not mean that they would be ‘deprived of freedom’; they were in fact beneficiaries of a ‘humanised’ justice system.⁸²

This difference in treatment was apparent in the preamble of the 26 December 1936 decree ordering the creation of labour camps. Only those prisoners convicted of crimes related to the military rebellion were to carry out ‘works of public utility . . . that will orientate them . . . in work habits and training in harmony with the social principles that necessarily [guide] all the citizens of our people’.⁸³ The camps were a solution to the problem of prison overcrowding: ‘As a logical consequence of the cruel civil war . . . there are in the prisons. . . large numbers of prisoners, who are

⁷⁸ See Julián Casanova, *Anarchism and the Spanish Civil War* (London: Routledge, 2005), for a comprehensive history of Spanish anarchism during the 1930s.

⁷⁹ Pagès i Blanch, *Cataluña*, 67.

⁸⁰ Julia et al., *Victimas*, 119–20.

⁸¹ The Consejo was created by decree on 11 November 1936. Salas, *Historia*, II, 958–9.

⁸² *ABC* (Madrid), 2 Jan. 1937.

⁸³ *Gaceta*, 27 Dec. 1936.

being judged by the *Tribunales Especiales Populares* [for their responsibility for the military rebellion] and *Jurados de Urgencia* [for political opponents].⁸⁴

The political nature of the forced labour system can also be seen by its structure. This was similar to that later adopted by the Francoist redemption-through-work scheme in 1938.⁸⁵ DGP camps were placed under the general supervision of a *Patronato Nacional de los Campos de Trabajo* (National Board of Work Camps) within the Justice Ministry. The composition of this committee, like the Francoist *Patronato Central*, reflected the realities of political power: as well as García Oliver and the Prisons Director-General, Antonio Carnero Jiménez (both anarchists), there were eight representatives from all the other Popular Front trade unions and political parties, excluding the anti-Stalinist *Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista* (POUM).⁸⁶ The *Patronato Nacional* had powers to inspect camps and order the creation of new ones in newly liberated territories. But its main role was to administer the ‘marks’ (*bonos*) scheme that reduced political sentences according to the amount and quality of work carried out.⁸⁷ It would also provide ‘tutelage to prisoners on the completion of their sentence’ by watching them as they ‘incorporate themselves in the new society’, thereby minimising the risk of (political) recidivism.⁸⁸

The Republican system of redemption placed more emphasis on the offender than did the Francoist scheme. Since the latter was intended to ‘draw out the poison of the ideas of hate and anti-patria from prisoners and their relatives’, payments to families was central for salvation through work; prisoners could only hope that the *Patronato Central* would take their labour into account when it considered their parole applications.⁸⁹ By contrast, as García Oliver enthusiastically pointed out in his Apollo Theatre speech on 30 May 1937, ‘any prisoner sentenced to thirty years . . . working normally [and] living in a dignified manner, can extinguish that sentence of thirty years in six, seven, eight, nine or ten years . . . There is nothing in the world as advanced as this . . .!’⁹⁰

⁸⁴ An earlier draft of the decree was more explicit. Declaring that the ‘decongestion’ of prisons was an ‘urgent necessity’, it stated that forced labour was reserved for those convicted of rebellion, as well as those who ‘spiritually adhered to the [rebel movement], [and] carried out acts of opposition before or after [the rebellion]’. AGGCE, PS Madrid, 2050/4627.

⁸⁵ The extent to which Francoist policymakers based their redemption programme on the Republican model is a question that deserves further examination. That Francoists analysed their opponents’ repressive legislation is suggested by the fact that Republican decrees relating to the elimination of ‘enemies’ in the teaching profession in 1936 can be found among papers dealing with their own purge of ‘red’ teachers. Francisco Morente, *La depuración del magisterio nacional (1936–1943)* (Barcelona: Ámbito Ediciones, 1997), 189. It is certainly the case that Republican policymakers scrutinised the way in which their adversaries used forced labour; a copy of the May 1937 decree establishing that work was a ‘duty/obligation’ for prisoners is among DGP camp documents. AGGCE, PS Madrid, 1913.

⁸⁶ The anarchists had the most representatives (four) on the *Patronato Central* until the departure of García Oliver and Carnero from the Justice Ministry in May 1937.

⁸⁷ Prisoners could earn a maximum of 52 ‘marks’ a year. This meant ninety days off tariffs of less than two years and twelve months off tariffs of over 12 years. *Gaceta*, 9 May 1937.

⁸⁸ *Gaceta*, 7 Feb. 1937.

⁸⁹ BOE, 13 Jun. 1939.

⁹⁰ García Oliver, *Mi gestión*.

In fact, as García Oliver himself recognised, the marks scheme was not original: it was based on that devised for convict labour by Alexander Maconochie, commandant of the penal colony established on Norfolk Island, Australia, in the 1840s.⁹¹ He was also influenced by Manuel Montesinos y Molina, a military officer who pioneered a redemption-through-work programme when in charge of Valencia's prisons during the Carlist wars of the 1830s.⁹²

The DGP camp system was therefore influenced by foreign models of prisoner reform and Spain's own historical experiences of forced labour. The latter was central to the decision in September 1937 to place the largest camp in Albaterra (Alicante), as its objective – the drainage of 30,000 hectares of salt marshes on the left bank of the Segura river and the resettlement of hundreds of farmers on the reclaimed land – had been achieved in an adjoining area in the seventeenth century by Cardinal Belluga's deployment of convict labour.⁹³ The first camp at Totana (Murcia) was also based on a long-standing agricultural project. In 1566 a scheme was devised to irrigate the Guadalentín valley by means of a reservoir and canal from the Segura river. Although it was abandoned in the late eighteenth century due to lack of foreign investment, it was revived in 1936 on financial grounds, that forced labour would save the Republican state 10 million pesetas.⁹⁴ It must be stated, however, that the Franco regime also employed political prisoners to resurrect expensive agricultural improvement programmes after the civil war. For example, the construction of a canal from the Guadalquivir river south of Seville, which in mid-1943 employed over 5,000 Republicans convicted of 'rebellion', was originally designed by engineers in the early nineteenth century to irrigate lower Andalucía.⁹⁵

Not all forced labourers under DGP jurisdiction in Republican Spain were engaged in long-term agricultural infrastructure projects. In order to improve strategic and supply links to the besieged Spanish capital, the construction of the Torrejón de Ardoz (Madrid) to Tarancón (Cuenca) railroad was undertaken by the Justice Ministry in conjunction with the War and Public Works ministries from August 1937.⁹⁶ Evidence of cross-ministerial utilisation of forced labour can be seen, for example, in the irrigation work carried out by prisoners at Melusa, an estate owned by the Public Works Ministry in the Aragonese municipality of Tamarite de Litera.⁹⁷ But the Republican state did not lease political prisoners to companies to carry out projects. This is in sharp contrast to Francoist Spain, where collaboration between state and business was a central feature of the redemption-through-work scheme. The

⁹¹ For Maconochie see John V. Barry, *Alexander Maconochie of Norfolk Island: a study of a pioneer in penal reform* (London/Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1958).

⁹² See the preamble of 8 May 1937 decree. *Gaceta*, 9 May 1937.

⁹³ *Gaceta*, 9 Sept. 1937. See also an agronomist report and the DGP feasibility study in AGGCE, PS Madrid, 2050/4627.

⁹⁴ See the comments of Antonio Carnero at a press conference reported in *El Socialista*, 27 Dec. 1936, and the proposed project report in AGGC(Salamanca), PS Madrid, 2050/4627.

⁹⁵ Gutiérrez Molina, 'Presos', 65–9.

⁹⁶ *Gaceta*, 13 Aug. 1937.

⁹⁷ Unsigned Justice Ministry memorandum, December 1937, AGGC(Salamanca), PS Madrid, 2050/4627.

Valle de los Caídos was built by various construction firms supplied with prisoner labour, including Banús, San Román and Molán.⁹⁸

The initiation of DGP projects throughout the course of 1937 belied anarchist fears that the replacement of García Oliver by the Basque nationalist Manuel de Irujo as justice minister that May would mean the end of labour camps.⁹⁹ A Justice Ministry memorandum at the end of December 1937 presented a buoyant picture of developments during the year, although it admitted that prisoners were still largely engaged in the construction of the camps. Yet it was keen to emphasise that the policy of utilising forced labour for public works was already a success: prisoners used to improve access to San Fernando castle in Alicante had exceeded normal productivity levels ‘without one . . . offering resistance to work’; and prisoners working under military direction in Almería had saved the state ‘over 4 million pesetas’.¹⁰⁰

The memorandum did admit to difficulties concerning transport and shortages in the supply of uniforms, tools and medicine, as well as hygiene problems.¹⁰¹ This provides us with an indication of the real conditions that prisoners had to face. Still, it is important to stress that the purpose of these camps, like Francoist ones, was punishment and redemption, not extermination by labour. There were fourteen deaths during the protracted construction of the Valle de los Caídos after the civil “war”.¹⁰² Similarly, of the 1,799 who entered Totana between April 1937 and March 1939, twelve died.¹⁰³ There were only five fatalities in Albaterra.¹⁰⁴

To judge from the available exiguous evidence, mainly drawn from Republican sources, conditions were hard but not intolerable. Naturally they would vary. They were probably best in Orihuela, a camp established near Albaterra with the task of converting a ruined religious seminary into a prison hospital and convalescent home.¹⁰⁵ With the connivance of the camp director, Manuel Díaz Duque, María Bautista Pérez de Torres, leader of the local clandestine pro-Nationalist Socorro Blanco (White Aid) organisation, distributed food, clothing and war reports to prisoners.¹⁰⁶ Rumours of leniency reached the ears of the local communists, who denounced the ‘scandal’ in their regional press during autumn 1937.¹⁰⁷

Life in neighbouring Albaterra was tougher, especially in the first months of its existence, as prisoners worked to assemble the camp’s infrastructure. The first prisoners arrived at the beginning of October 1937 at a site alongside the

⁹⁸ Suero, *Verdadera*, 32–3. For an extensive list of companies using forced labour see Acosta Bono et al., *Canal*, 65–79.

⁹⁹ See, e.g., the CNT’s Central Committee internal bulletin of 3 September 1937. International Institute of Social History (Amsterdam) (henceforth IISH), CNT archive, legajo 85A(5).

¹⁰⁰ AGGCE, PS Madrid, 2050/4627.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² Suero, *Verdadera*, 76.

¹⁰³ AHN, Causa General–Murcia, 1067/1.

¹⁰⁴ Jesús Aguilar Hernández, *Historia de Albaterra* (Albaterra: Ayuntamiento de Albaterra, 2002), 807–8.

¹⁰⁵ AGGCE, PS Madrid, 2050/ 4627. See also Elías Abad Navarro, *Una heroína Orcelitana bajo la dominación roja* (Valencia: Imp F Domenech, 1940), 17.

¹⁰⁶ Duque even allowed Pérez de Torres to take 80 kg of sugar, beans, lentils and rice from camp stores for rightists, including a monk and a priest, whom she hid in the village. Abad, *Una heroína*, 17.

¹⁰⁷ See *Nuestra Bandera* (Alicante), 25–8 Sept. 1937; 15 Oct. 1937.

main Alicante–Murcia railroad with twenty-seven carriages of building materials.¹⁰⁸ Construction of accommodation blocks, a road, two wells and sentry boxes and the opening of a stone quarry were completed before the formal inauguration of the camp by Irujo on 24 October. However, this only gave Albaterra a capacity of 600, well below the projected figure of over 2,500, and overcrowding became a pressing problem as new arrivals brought the camp population to 783 by 1 December. That month therefore saw an accelerated programme of construction which increased capacity to 2,000. By the end of the year the prisoners, who were organised in sixty-seven work brigades, had also managed to recover 150 hectares of land for cultivation.

Such a work schedule inevitably took its toll. Camp infirmary statistics contained in the 1937 annual camp report stated that out of a population that oscillated between 783 and 960 in December 1937, 3,224 consultations were carried out by the medical staff. Of these, 2,507 (representing 11.3 per cent of the camp population) ended with the prisoner being deemed temporarily unwell or unfit for work. The main causes were listed as respiratory and digestion problems, rheumatism and work accidents.

Conditions at the first camp at Totana in 1937 were equally, if not more, arduous, although this was partly caused by the incompetence and inexperience of the camp administration. In his feasibility study of 2 December 1936, the architect Francisco Alonso Martos warned García Oliver that hygiene at the site would be difficult to maintain as there were no adequate local water supplies. While the camp still opened in April 1937, an investigation ordered by the Prisons Director-General Vicente Sol in June revealed that construction of the washing areas, as well as the kitchen and workshops, had not been completed. It also revealed that food supplies were a problem, as no local suppliers could be found to feed a camp population of ‘more than 500’. It concluded that the first director, Olaria, a crony of García Oliver with no previous administrative experience, had cut corners to ensure the rapid completion of the camp.¹⁰⁹

Food shortages were also an issue for prisoners working on the Tarancón–Torrejón de Ardoz railway. In February 1938, the project’s chief engineer wrote to the Director-General of Prisons complaining that 160 prisoners in the sub-camp El Carrizal were suffering from malnutrition and unable to work. Since this ‘creates significant delays in the progress of the works’, the chief engineer had been forced to order a consignment of oranges from Tarancón out of his production budget.¹¹⁰

Unfortunately there is little information on the other camps or specific reports on how living environments in Orihuela, Albaterra, Totana and the Tarancón–Torrejón railway construction sites evolved during the course of 1938–9. But given the general decline in socio-economic conditions in Republican Spain during this period, one can only assume that they deteriorated. This is also suggested by internal Justice Ministry correspondence regarding basic supplies to regular prisons. As early as 12

¹⁰⁸ This section is based on the 1937 annual report written by the Albaterra camp director and received in the Justice Ministry on 21 March 1938. AGGCE, PS Madrid, 2468. See also Sánchez Recio, *Justicia*, 181–93.

¹⁰⁹ AGGCE, PS Madrid, 1177.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 1125.

June 1937, Irujo wrote to Sol bemoaning the 'shameful spectacle of [prisoners] being forced to survive on what relatives bring to prison'.¹¹¹ By December 1938, prisoners in Madrid's jails were receiving barely a kilogram of oil per month, a shortage exacerbated by the absence of other fats in their diet.¹¹² It is therefore unlikely that prisoners carrying out heavy manual labour – we know, for example, that Totana prisoners in the winter of 1937–8 were digging a 20-km canal and laying a road of the same length – received adequate rations.

Those working in DGP camps were still better off than those detained in SIM camps or in army disciplinary battalions. As the course of the war continued to turn against the Republic, 1938 would witness a decisive shift away from 'legal' to 'extra-legal' or 'militarised' forced labour. But this was not yet apparent in winter 1937–8. On 29 December 1937, Vicente Sol wrote to the commander of the Republican army corps in Extremadura requesting permission to establish a camp in Cijara (Cáceres). This camp, in an area that had been designated a war zone, would have held 'over 1,000' prisoners who were to build a reservoir and 'communication links'.¹¹³ Although it appears that this proposal was never implemented, a new camp was ordered for Calpe (Alicante) on 19 February 1938 by Mariano Ansó, Irujo's successor as justice minister.¹¹⁴

Such plans came to an end because of the Nationalist offensive in Aragón, which split the Republican zone in two in April 1938. Henceforth the long-term infrastructural projects being undertaken by the existing camps – predominantly clustered in south-east Spain – would be subordinate to the military defence of Valencia. While the camps never closed, prisoner numbers stagnated: despite Albaterra's capacity of 2,000, its population, which reached 1,039 in February 1938, remained at this level for at least the next four months.¹¹⁵ Totana increasingly acted as a transit camp, with one of the most common final destinations being the army disciplinary battalion in the mercury mines of Almadén (Ciudad Real).¹¹⁶

Military defeat in 1938 also led to the transfer of prisoners held in police custody or on remand in regular jails to forced labour camps run by the SIM. This was not in itself a novelty: suspects held by Republican security agencies in 1937 were often made to work. In June 1937 Juan Negrín's Socialist interior minister Julián Zugazagoitia created the Departamento Especial de Información del Estado (DEDIDE) to combat clandestine Nationalist fifth-column activity in the Republican rearguard.¹¹⁷ The DEDIDE, which was placed under the command of the Madrid Socialist Julio de Mora Martínez, had the power to open its own labour camps outside the jurisdiction of the

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 1177.

¹¹² AGGCE, PS Madrid, 1913, contains a plea from the city's prison authorities to the Justice Ministry in Barcelona for extra supplies.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁴ *Gaceta*, 22 Feb. 1937. Ansó, a member of the Izquierda Republicana, replaced Irujo in December 1937.

¹¹⁵ Sánchez Recio, *Justicia*, 186. There are no figures beyond June 1938.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁷ *Gaceta*, 13 Jun. 1938.

Justice Ministry. According to a report written by Socialist legal officials in Madrid to the Socialist Party's executive committee in November 1938, these camps held in administrative detention those 'antisocial elements who, for indiscipline, bad social conduct or a suspicious way of living, made themselves dangerous to the health of the regime, without having infringed legal precepts that would have classified them as delinquents': in other words, those defined as 'idlers' and 'evildoers' before the war.¹¹⁸

This report gives the only description we possess of conditions in one of these camps: Ambite in Madrid province. When this camp was taken over by the SIM following the dissolution of the DEDIDE in March 1938,¹¹⁹ it was found that the inmates lacked adequate clothing and were subject to 'mistreatment'.¹²⁰ Despite this, Julio de Mora, the former head of the DEDIDE, became camp commandant following its subsequent transfer from Ambite to Cuenca.¹²¹

The military crisis of 1938 saw a rapid extension in the extrajudicial use of forced labour. In Catalonia, the SIM established a network of six camps; the base camp was located at the Pueblo Español complex in Montjuïc (Barcelona), with branches in the municipalities of Hospitalet de l'Infant (Tarragona), Omells de Na Gaia (Lleida), Concabella (Lleida), Ogern (Lleida) and Falset (Tarragona). Each of these would in turn have sub-camps: Falset, for example, had three further sections in the local district. These camps were intended to assist in the construction of six defensive lines ordered by General Rojo, the Republican army's chief of staff, at the end of March 1938.¹²²

As we saw earlier, the number of those forced to work in these SIM camps has been estimated at 7–8,000. Many came from jails: on 2 July 1938, Manuel López, the SIM's chief of prisons, ordered the prison authorities in Barcelona to hand over 2,250 prisoners of military age (18–45).¹²³ Others would be immediately mobilised on their release from jail and sent to SIM camps.¹²⁴ Some would simply be picked up by SIM agents on the street. In its hunt for draft dodgers, for example, the SIM arrested eighteen-year-old Miguel Mirapeix and his father while they were travelling on a bus in the outskirts of Montseny (Barcelona) during spring 1938. After being held for three months at the Montjuïc base camp, Mirapeix was taken to Ogern; his father was sent to Falset.¹²⁵

The deteriorating military situation also witnessed an expansion of army disciplinary battalions. The deployment of militarised labour in auxiliary tasks dated

¹¹⁸ AHN, CG-Madrid, 1537, legajo 1.

¹¹⁹ *Gaceta*, 28 Mar. 1938.

¹²⁰ AHN, CG-Madrid, 1537, legajo 1.

¹²¹ Godicheau, 'Légende', 46. De Mora's appointment was indicative of Socialist control of the SIM in Madrid. Its commander, Ángel Pedrero, an ally of the Indalecio Prieto, took part in the anti-communist Casado coup in March 1939.

¹²² Badia, *Camps*, 60–1; 265; 344.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 238–9. Prisoners were to be transferred in three batches of 750. However, when the SIM were told that the number of available prisoners was significantly lower, the quota was reduced to 225–250 prisoners. In total 1,570 prisoners were sent from the Model Prison to SIM camps between April and September 1938. Pagès i Blanch, *Presó*, 81.

¹²⁴ Badia, *Camps*, 58.

¹²⁵ Pedro Corral, *Desertores: La Guerra Civil que nadie quiere contar* (Barcelona: Debate, 2006), 307–9.

back to winter 1936–7 with the creation by José Cazorla, the Communist Public Order Councillor of the Madrid Junta de Defensa (Defence Council), of a disciplinary fortification battalion of over 400 prisoners taken directly from the city's jails.¹²⁶ At least one forced labour battalion (based in Nuevo Baztán) would be operational in the Madrid theatre throughout the civil war.¹²⁷

As the military tide turned against the Republic in 1937–8, disciplinary battalions were increasingly used as a means of maintaining discipline within the Republican army.¹²⁸ On 19 February 1938, a Defence Ministry decree codifying their deployment stipulated the creation of two types of disciplinary battalions: '*combate*', front-line 'shock' units, and '*trabajo*', forced labour rearguard units. The former were made up of those prisoners classified as politically reliable and who could hope to be transferred to normal army battalions; the latter was composed of political enemies who were forced to carry out heavy manual labour.¹²⁹

Although SIM camps and army disciplinary battalions claimed authority over broadly the same types of prisoner, it appears that the SIM took charge of the most 'political' cases. Thus Rafael Morales Bravo, Communist commander of the *trabajo* Second Disciplinary Battalion of the Eastern Army in Catalonia in 1937–8, recalled in his memoirs that the battalion was composed mainly of common criminals and habitual troublemakers at the front; there were few 'fascists'.¹³⁰

But working conditions in *trabajo* disciplinary battalions were still worse than those for 'fascists' in DGP camps such as Albaterra and Totana. In November 1942 the widow of Francisco del Castillo Collado, a street hawker in Madrid, told Francoist investigators that her husband had been sent straight to the Nuevo Baztán disciplinary battalion from jail in March 1937. After months of 'mistreatment . . . and enormous privations', del Castillo, originally arrested in October 1936 on suspicion of being a member of the proto-fascist Partido Nacionalista Español, collapsed and died in December 1938.¹³¹ At least seven Nuevo Baztán camp guards and commanders were accused by the Francoist military authorities of inhumane treatment of prisoners and sentenced to death.¹³²

¹²⁶ Minutes of the 15 April 1937 session of the *Junta de Defensa* reproduced in Julio Aróstegui and Jesús A. Martínez, *La Junta de Defensa de Madrid* (Comunidad de Madrid: Madrid, 1984), 447. At the same meeting, its head, General Miaja, revealed that the battalion was his suggestion 'because I am an enemy of having men in prison because work regenerates and prison degrades'.

¹²⁷ Colonel Tomás Ardid Rey, the commander of Madrid's disciplinary battalions during the civil war, was held responsible by Francoist military prosecutors for alleged poor treatment of rightists in the Nuevo Baztán battalion, and on 9 November 1939 was sentenced to death. He was reprieved three months later. Archivo General de la Administración (henceforth AGA) (Alcalá de Henares), Justicia (Responsabilidades Políticas) (J(RP), caja 30323.

¹²⁸ See, e.g., the decrees issued by defence minister Indalecio Prieto on 18 June 1937, detailing the crimes and punishments available to military tribunals for infractors. These decrees were published in the *Gaceta de la República* on 19 June 1937, the same day as the fall of Bilbao to Nationalist forces.

¹²⁹ *Gaceta*, 20 Feb. 1938.

¹³⁰ Miralles, *Memorias*, 129.

¹³¹ AHN, CG-Madrid, 1523, legajo 2.

¹³² Apart from Ardid Rey, these included brothers José and Salvador Espinosa de los Monteros y Manso, convicted in August 1939 for two deaths in their work company. The latter was executed that December. AGA, J(RP), 1238.

The available testimony on *trabajo* disciplinary battalions in Catalonia suggests that conditions elsewhere were scarcely better. Morales Bravo's Second Disciplinary Battalion contained a 'company of death' that also saw fatalities due to alleged escape attempts.¹³³ Similarly, former internees in the Fifth Disciplinary Battalion of the Eastern Army based in the village of Clariana de Cardener (Lleida) in 1938 remember long working hours and poor hygiene conditions. They also recall incidents of prisoners 'shot while trying to escape': at least eight were killed in such a manner, including a priest. But battalion commanders and guards did not operate with total impunity. Following a series of shootings in the Fifth Disciplinary Battalion during summer 1938, an investigation by the Eastern Army's legal section ordered the transfer – if not the arrest – of the battalion commander and political commissar.¹³⁴

Such investigations of fatalities in camps under SIM administration were unlikely. As Badia notes, the military police operated with *de facto* autonomy within Republican Spain. Conditions in SIM camps in Catalonia were even worse than those in army disciplinary battalions. They were administered by Manuel Astorga, a Madrid Communist, with guards that were mainly anarchists who had fled Franco's advancing armies in Aragón. Discipline was extreme and punishment exemplary; in Concabella (Lleida) camp, for instance, a prisoner was executed for stealing a chicken. In order to dissuade them from making escape attempts, prisoners were threatened that all the members of the escapee's work squad (usually five people) would be shot. Shirking was also not tolerated; twenty-one prisoners in Omells de Na Gaia (Lleida) camp were killed for claiming that they were too ill or hungry to work.¹³⁵

Attempts were made to shroud the camps in secrecy; prisoners were not allowed to make contact with their families or with the local population.¹³⁶ However, reports of what went on in SIM camps did reach Barcelona, the Republican capital, from autumn 1937. One incident that sparked complaint at the highest political level was the execution of thirteen people following the escape of two prisoners at the Omells de Na Gaia (Lleida) camp on 8 May 1938.¹³⁷ This was because six of the victims were members of the CNT. Segundo Blanco, an Asturian anarchist who was education minister in Negrín's last government, demanded a full investigation of this 'monstrosity', telling the Republican premier in a letter dated 30 May that the six anarchists died screaming 'Viva la CNT y la Revolución!'¹³⁸ Yet no inquiry was forthcoming despite protests in Republican Spain and abroad.¹³⁹

Blanco's letter reveals that Republican leaders knew about the terror in the camps in Catalonia. He told Negrín that 'Even before this [the thirteen executions] I have managed to find out that in these camps it is the custom to shoot those who remain in a group of the one that escaped on the pretext of making them

¹³³ Miralles, *Memorias*, 143–6.

¹³⁴ Badia, *Camps*, 294–6.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 44; 289; 294; 297; 75; 82; 128; 120.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 139–50. Thus deaths of prisoners were not always reported to their families.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 199–202.

¹³⁸ IISH, CNT, 29A(1), Blanco to Negrín, 30 May 1938.

¹³⁹ It appears that anarchists took their revenge when they murdered Manuel Astorga after he went into exile in France in 1939. Badia, *Camps*, 76; 201.

collectively responsible for the escape.’ He also sent attached a general (and accurate) memorandum on the structure and activities of the Omells de Na Gaia (Lleida) camp.¹⁴⁰ Another with good sources of information was the Catalan Generalitat’s justice minister Pere Bosch Gimpera. Among his papers is a detailed report on Omells de Na Gaia camp, which described its regime as ‘barbaric’.¹⁴¹ Bosch Gimpera would attempt, without much success, to prevent prisoners from being transferred from regular Catalan prisons to SIM camps.¹⁴²

The massacre at Omells de Na Gaia camp also illustrates the political diversity of those forced to labour in the SIM camps in Catalonia. Among the victims not mentioned by Blanco was Francesc Pina Orce, a member of the POUM youth.¹⁴³ It is well known that the ‘return to order’ in Catalonia following the ‘May Days’ in Barcelona in 1937 led to the proscription of the anti-Stalinist POUM and the arrest of revolutionaries.¹⁴⁴ The number of inmates in Barcelona’s Model Prison increased from 801 in January 1937 to 2,053 in April 1938.¹⁴⁵ Anarchists, Poumistas and other anti-fascists including international brigaders were sent to SIM camps.¹⁴⁶

The heterogeneity of prisoners in Catalonia after May 1937 does not support the claim that it reflected the ‘restitution of a liberal Republican order in law, economy and society’.¹⁴⁷ While it is true that Catalan SIM camps contained individuals accused of offences against property or black marketeering, others were forced to labour despite the absence of any specific accusation. Among the prisoners at the Hospitalet de l’Infant (Tarragona) camp were civilians evacuated from Teruel following the brief Republican occupation of the town.¹⁴⁸ In any case, the SIM camps also held large numbers of ‘fascists’, including priests.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁰ IISH, CNT, 29A(1) Blanco to Negrín, 30 May 1938. However, anarchist protests about the brutalities inflicted in Catalan SIM camps were contradictory. Blanco’s report also asserted that ‘if one has to shoot prisoners [for escapes] then it should be done to prisoners of marked fascist tendencies’. The CNT–FAI leadership (if not necessarily the rank-and-file) continued to support the *raison d’être* of the SIM – protection of the Republic against internal enemies – and in May 1938 Mariano R. Vázquez, the secretary of the CNT National Committee, proposed to Negrín that García Oliver should be its next leader. IISH, CNT, 004B (3), Vázquez to Negrín, 14 May 1938.

¹⁴¹ Pagès i Blanch, *Presó*, 84.

¹⁴² Albert Balcells, *Justícia i presons, després de maig de 1937, a Catalunya (intents regularitzadors del conseller Bosch Gimpera)* (Barcelona: Rafael Dalmau, 1989).

¹⁴³ Pagès i Blanch, *Presó*, 87–8.

¹⁴⁴ For the ‘return to order’ see François Godicheau, *La Guerre d’Espagne: République et Révolution en Catalogne (1936–1939)* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2004), 174–296.

¹⁴⁵ Pagès i Blanch, *Presó*, 57–60.

¹⁴⁶ Badia, *Camps* 99–100, 105–6. International brigaders, captured by the SIM attempting to leave Spain, were sent mainly to Concabella (at least thirty) and Falset (at least six). They were most inclined to organise escape attempts, possibly because they believed that their SIM captors would not execute them for fear of the diplomatic consequences. *Ibid.*, 156n.

¹⁴⁷ Graham, *Republic*, 351.

¹⁴⁸ Over 5,000, including at least 3,000 civilians, were taken from Teruel to prisons in Valencia, Alicante and Murcia. Many, including Anselmo Polanco, the bishop of Teruel, and Colonel Rey d’Harcourt, the Nationalist garrison commander, were taken to Catalonia. Polanco and Rey would be executed by their Republican guards fleeing the Nationalist push towards the French frontier in February 1939. Eloy Fernández Clemente, *El Coronel Rey D’Harcourt y la rendición de Teruel: Historia y fin de una leyenda negra* (Teruel: Instituto de Estudios Turoleses, 1992), 34–5; 61–3. See also Badia, *Camps*, 162–6.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 91–8, 257.

Nevertheless, we should place these camps in the context of the critical military situation facing the Republic. Apart from the base camp at Montjuic, they were placed close to the front line: the camp at Falset was so close to the fighting during the battle of the Ebro in the summer of 1938 that it was bombed by Nationalist pilots believing they had discovered a build-up of Republican forces. Although brutal, the work carried out by SIM camps (as well as army disciplinary battalions) were militarily significant; the collapse of Republican resistance in Catalonia in winter 1938–9 was caused by demoralisation and a massive disparity in arms between the two sides, not by inadequate defensive preparations.¹⁵⁰

We should also bear in mind that brutality characterised Francoist camps.¹⁵¹ The reality of ‘redemption’ was severe discipline, long working hours, poor food and dangerous working conditions. In the early 1940s, food sent from relatives became an essential supplement to the meagre fare offered to prisoners working on the irrigation canal from the Guadalquivir river in lower Andalucía.¹⁵² Life was little better elsewhere; Dr Angel Lausín, the camp doctor at Cuelgamuros, recalled in the 1970s that the construction of the Valle de los Caídos caused serious but non-fatal accidents on an almost daily basis and silicosis among many of those who laboured in the crypt.¹⁵³

The grim realities of forced labour in Spain have led historians to draw parallels with Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia. For Badia, SIM camps in Catalonia were akin to Soviet gulags.¹⁵⁴ Rodrigo argues that Francoist and pre-war Nazi camps shared a common determination to re-educate political enemies.¹⁵⁵ Yet these comparisons can be misleading. Republican army disciplinary battalions and SIM camps were a means to facilitate military victory, not a stable system of forced labour. Despite the claims of Soviet propaganda during the construction of the White Sea Canal between 1931 and 1933, Stalin was not particularly interested in rehabilitating political prisoners through work: in 1940, a NVKD directive specifically stated that political guilty of counter-revolutionary crimes could not be reformed.¹⁵⁶

Religious concepts of redemption were peripheral in Nazi Germany. It is true that the German press praised prison camps opened by the Reich Ministry of Justice after 1933 for restoring fallen racial comrades to the national community.¹⁵⁷ But in these camps, which until 1939 held more prisoners than the better-known SS concentration camps, only one in ten were convicted for political crimes.¹⁵⁸ Ultimately, the racial determinism of Nazi ideology made ideas of rehabilitation irrelevant. From late 1942,

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 257.

¹⁵¹ For POW camps see, e.g., Rodrigo, *Cautivos*, 156–66.

¹⁵² Acosta Bono et al., *Canal*, 217.

¹⁵³ Sueiro, *Verdadera*, 76.

¹⁵⁴ Badia, *Camps*, 71.

¹⁵⁵ Rodrigo, *Cautivos*, 317.

¹⁵⁶ Anne Applebaum, *Gulag: A History of Soviet Camps* (London: BCA, 2003), 220.

¹⁵⁷ Robert Gellately, *Backing Hitler: Consent and Correction in Nazi Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 57.

¹⁵⁸ Wachsmann, *Prisons*, 102. By the late 1930s there were five large prison camps with approximately 10,000 in each. By contrast, there were 12,921 in SS camps by the end of 1938. Ibid., 188, 394.

over 20,000 'asocials' (juvenile offenders, petty criminals, vagrants and so forth) were taken out of the state penal system for 'annihilation through labour' in concentration camps.¹⁵⁹ Yet the Francoist use of forced labour was not *sui generis* in the history of mid-twentieth century Europe. In Greece, the military dictatorship of General Metaxas created labour camps for communists in 1938; the authoritarian government also used hard labour a decade later during the civil war to turn leftist opponents into loyal nationalist Greeks.¹⁶⁰

Even so, the most instructive parallel with Franco Spain remains its Republican adversary. Both sides used forced labour for military objectives, and believed that political prisoners would provide the cheap labour necessary to make reconstruction projects economically feasible. Above all, both argued that forced labour would transform the ideological enemy into a valuable member of the 'new' Spain. In the end, military defeat in 1939 dashed García Oliver's dreams that the problem of 'politicofascist' delinquency would be resolved with labour camps; Albaterra, opened in October 1937 with hopes of providing reclaimed land to anti-fascist peasants, was turned into a POW camp at the end of the civil war and closed in October 1939.¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁹ Nikolaus Wachsmann, "'Annihilation through Labor": The Killing of State Prisoners in the Third Reich', *Journal of Modern History*, 71, 3 (1999), 624–59.

¹⁶⁰ Polymeris Voglis, 'Political Prisoners in the Greek Civil War, 1945–50: Greece in Comparative Perspective', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 37, 4 (2002), 527, 529–30.

¹⁶¹ Aguilar, *Historia*, 813.