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Educating the communists of the future: notes on the educational life of the Spanish children evacuated to the USSR during the Spanish Civil War

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Educating the communists of the future: notes on the educational life of the Spanish children evacuated to the USSR during the Spanish Civil War

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The high rate of child mortality registered during the early months of the Civil War led the Republican authorities to initiate several operations to evacuate youngsters with the purpose of protecting and saving the children of Spain. At the beginning, the children were evacuated to zones in the interior of the country far removed from the front lines. However, the rapid advance of the Nationalist Army caused the Government of the Republic to organise evacuations to other countries. The Soviet Union was one of many countries that offered to help the Republic. Between 1937 and 1938, minors numbering 2895 were taken under the protection of *Narkompros* in different collective Homes for Children (*Dietsky Dom*). This article discusses some of the educational practices carried out in the schools of these Homes, by analysing different documents produced by the children, both in this period (interscholastic and personal correspondence, school compositions, newspaper murals) as well as in their adult lives (autobiographies and memoirs). Through the analysis of these educative practices, the article will try to explain how the Soviet as well as the Spanish authorities wished to make these children into ideal communists, convinced that the future of Spain was in their hands.

Keywords: Spanish Civil War; children's evacuation; USSR; educational practices; History of Written Culture

1. Save the children, save the school!

At school the teacher spoke to us for a long time. She tried to make us conscious of the situation, but words seemed to fail her: “You must be brave. We are going to live difficult moments, serious circumstances ...”, she told us. Some days there was no class ... One morning news reached us: during the night the school had been bombed.¹

Emilia Labajos was barely five years old when the assault on Madrid began and she was left with no school. Hundreds of schools like hers succumbed under the bombing during the Spanish Civil War. Many others were commandeered to attend to the wartime necessities, and were converted into shelters, barracks, hospitals, storage spaces, factories or jails. Furthermore, many schools were forced to close their doors because of the continuous exposure of the children to indiscriminate

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¹Emilia Labajos-Pérez, *La casa de los geranios. Una huella discreta pero tenaz contra el olvido* (Bilbao: Excritos, 2003), 21 and 23.

aerial attacks or because of the lack of school supplies due to the crisis and, basically, because of the absence of so many teachers who were forced to abandon their classes to occupy their places in the trenches. This occurred despite the repeated petitions that thousands of students sent at the time to those responsible, in an attempt to impede this mobilisation. As an example, on 23 May 1937, the students of Eustasio Suárez González, a teacher at a school in Santiago del Monte (Castrillón, Asturias) sent this carefully thought out, designed and correctly written letter:

Comrade Delegate of Public Instruction of Asturias and León.

Those who sign off below, children of school age of the town of Santiago del Monte [Castrillón] and who with great joy attend school, with the greatest respect set forth to V. S. the following:

Because of the demands of the cruel war which Spain suffers, our instruction has been interrupted, our dear teacher Eustasio Suárez González having enlisted in the ranks, consequently, the doors of such an establishment, worthy of attention as is the school, being closed ...

In the trust that our wishes ... will be granted so that our great teacher, whom we greatly miss, return promptly to his school ... We have no doubt that with the honourable and noble course of action [of] V. S., the fulfilment of the sentiments of we the children, who place our signatures, will be achieved.²

With the dual aim of placing the children in a safe place and allowing them to continue their education despite the warfare, regardless of the fact that the reason, in the case of the students who signed this letter, was the lack of a teacher to teach class, both the Francoist and the Republican authorities, although in very different and distant degrees and moments, opted to evacuate the population of children who were at risk.

Boys and girls who were injured and sick, war orphans, children of combatants or simply those minors who lived in dangerous areas, near the battle fronts, were moved to children's colonies with very diverse characteristics (some collectives, others with families; some public, others the fruit of private initiatives; some of political, religious or social services nature, etc.). In the beginning, these were set up in the interior of the country taking advantage of the widespread and well-supplied network of school vacation camps that existed (in Levante and Cataluña by the Republicans;³ and by the Francoists mostly in Galicia). Subsequently they were

²Joint letter from the students of the Santiago del Monte school (Castrillón, Asturias) addressed to the Counsellor for Public Education of Asturias and León. Santiago del Monte (Castrillón, Asturias), 2 May 1937. Centre for Documents of Historical Memory, Salamanca (CDMH), Political-Social Piece (PS) Santander, series "CU," box 19, file 9, documents numbers 15 and 16. All the fragments of documents that have been transcribed for this work have been brought up to date in order to make them easier to read.

³Juan Manuel Fernández Soria, "La asistencia a la infancia en la Guerra Civil. Las colonias escolares," *Historia de la Educación. Revista interuniversitaria* 6 (1987): 102–03; and Rosalía Crego Navarro: "Las colonias escolares durante la Guerra Civil (1936–1939)," *Espacio, Tiempo y Forma* 2 (1989): 302 and 304–05. Also see, Cristina Escrivà Moscardó and Rafael Maestre Marín, *De las negras bombas a las doradas naranjas. Colonias escolares 1936–1939* (Valencia: L'Eixam, 2011). A special but paradigmatic case is that of the colonies under the supervision of Ángel Llorca in El Perelló, Valencia, studied by María del Mar del Pozo Andrés, *Ángel Llorca: Comunidades Familiares de Educación. Una experiencia de renovación pedagógica en la Guerra Civil* (Madrid: Octaedro, CIDE, 2008).

established and maintained outside Spain's borders, thanks to the aid received from countries such as France, Belgium, England, the Soviet Union, Mexico, Switzerland and Denmark, to cite the countries that took in the most children from the Republican side.⁴ Italy and Portugal were the countries of reference for sheltering children from the zones occupied and controlled by the army of Franco.

The relationship of the school to the exodus that took place during the war was so close that one can affirm that, in general, it was not individual children who were evacuated, especially at the beginning, but practically entire schools: "It was July. One day they stopped talking about high school and started talking about the evacuation ... They put down the names of those who wanted to go ... Afterwards they made us fill out some green card identification documents and told us to be ready to leave ...", José Fernández Sánchez recalls in his memoirs. He had just turned 12 in the spring of 1937 and was studying at the Alfredo Coto Orphanage of Gijón.⁵

In fact, when the Government of the Republic created the Central Delegation of Camps (*Delegación Central de Colonias*, DDC) on 1 March 1937, an organism that initially managed, financed and controlled the evacuation of the children, it did so under the auspices of the General Direction of Primary Education (*Dirección General de Primera Enseñanza*) of the Ministry of Public Education (*Ministerio de Instrucción Pública*), directed at that time by César García Lombardía.

Groups of children were formed and organised in the schools. The teachers had the responsibility, however, of informing the parents about everything regarding the evacuation of their children (timetables, routes, conditions, obligations, location of the camps, systems, etc.) They also helped them with the bureaucratic paperwork required to enrol the minors in these expeditions.

Furthermore, many of the teachers who taught the evacuated children were the same ones that later took care of them in the camps, both in Spain and abroad. Some of them were sent beforehand to the destinations in order to prepare for the arrival of their pupils. Others accompanied the students during the journey. Once over, some stayed with them in their new homes, while others returned to Spain. There were also those who came later to reinforce, supervise, substitute or enrich the team of teachers in charge of their care and education. At any rate, and given the identification that existed between school and evacuation during the war, saving the children meant, to a large extent, saving the school, a school which, undoubtedly, was as diverse as were the teachers, the educational methods, the

⁴For more information about the aid given by other countries to the Republic, see Abdón Mateos, ed., *¡Ay de los vencidos! El exilio y los países de acogida* (Madrid: Eneida, 2009). For a general analysis of the evacuations of children abroad, see Alicia Altet, Roger González and María José Millán, eds., *El exilio de los niños. Catálogo de la exposición* (Madrid: Fundación Pablo Iglesias, Fundación Largo Caballero, 2003); as well as Eduardo Pons Prades, *Los niños republicanos. El exilio* (Madrid: Oberón, 2005). Although the number of 30,000 minors evacuated abroad between 1936 and 1939 is what these and other authors have been handling, there is a need for a serious revision. The majority of them coincide in that the country which took in the most children was France (20,000), followed by Belgium (5000), England (4000), the Soviet Union (2895), Mexico (463), Switzerland (430) and Denmark (100). Other countries, such as Norway and Sweden, which did not care for children in their territories did, however, contribute personnel, material and money for the functioning of different colonies and refuges both in Spain and France.

⁵José Fernández Sánchez, *Memorias de un niño de Moscú. Cuando salí de Ablaña* (Barcelona: Planeta, 1999), 77.

norms, and the values and ideas that sustained the two educational models operating in Spain at that time.⁶

2. Two fatherlands, three thousand destinies⁷

Despite the fact that the Soviet Union had signed the Treaty of Non-Intervention in the Spanish Civil War on 23 August 1936, when Stalin learned of the aid Germany and Italy were providing to the Nationalist Army he decided to openly demonstrate his support for the Republic.⁸ This support materialised in several ways, in the shipment to Spain of arms, provisions, medicines and sanitary supplies; in the creation, together with other international powers, of the International Brigades; in the admittance of Republican aviators to its prestigious academies to better their training and, with it, the effectiveness of the Republican air force; in the assignment of its most important political and military experts to the Popular Army for functions of advising, organising and managing; and above all, in the reception of the various expeditions of children:

The USSR made us an offer to receive several thousand children of combatants in order to save them from the horrors of the bombings and to educate them properly. At the time, I was the Minister of Public Education ... I was convinced of the good fortune of the children, to be able to be removed from the Civil War as well as to receive an education in the socialist country.⁹

A total of 2895 Spanish children between the ages of three and 15 were evacuated to the USSR between 1937 and 1938. Their age, their circumstances and the political affiliation of their parents were the main criteria of selection that the four official expeditions, organised by the Republican Government to the “proletariat country”, had in common. These expeditions were carried out, to a greater or lesser extent, under the control of the Communist Party of Spain (PCE) and thanks to the

⁶To learn about the main characteristics of these two models of education (Republican and Francoist), the following may be consulted: Juan Manuel Fernández Soria, *Educación y cultura en la Guerra Civil (1936–39)* (Valencia: Nau Llibres, 1984); Manuel de Puelles Benítez, *Educación e ideología en la España contemporánea* (Barcelona: Labor, 1991); and Alejandro Mayordomo and Juan Manuel Fernández Soria, *Vencer y convencer. Educación y política. España, 1936–1945* (Valencia: Universitat de València, 1993).

⁷The title is taken from Immaculada Colomina Limonero, *Dos patrias, tres mil destinos: vida y exilio de los niños de la Guerra de España evacuados a la Unión Soviética* (Madrid: Cinca, Fundación Francisco Largo Caballero, 2010).

⁸Indispensable references concerning the aid to the Republic during the Spanish Civil War are the works of Antonio Elorza and Marta Bizcarrondo, *Queridos camaradas: la Internacional Comunista y España, 1919–1939* (Barcelona: Planeta, 1999); Pablo Martín Aceña, *El oro de Moscú y el oro de Berlín* (Madrid: Taurus, 2001); Daniel Kowalsky, *La Unión Soviética y la Guerra Civil española* (Barcelona: Crítica, 2003); and Stanley Payne, *Unión Soviética, comunismo y revolución en España* (Barcelona: Plaza y Janés, 2003); without forgetting the trilogy of Ángel Viñas, *La soledad de la República: el abandono de las democracias y el viraje hacia la Unión Soviética* (Barcelona: Crítica, 2006), *El escudo de la República, el oro de España, la apuesta soviética y los hechos de mayo de 1937* (Barcelona: Crítica, 2007) and *El honor de la República: entre el acoso fascista, la hostilidad británica y la política de Stalin* (Barcelona: Crítica, 2009).

⁹Jesús Hernández, *Yo fui un ministro de Stalin* (Mexico: América, 1953), 288.

collaboration of different political organisations, labour unions and social services.¹⁰

The first official expedition carried out by the Republican Ministry of Public Instruction left Valencia on 21 March 1937 aboard the merchant ship *Cabo de Palos*. There were between 72 and 88 children aboard, the majority being from Madrid, Valencia, Alicante and Andalucía. They docked at Yalta (Ukraine) on Sunday, 28 March 1937. After spending the summer by the shores of the Black Sea in Artek (Crimea), they were transferred to Moscow, where they inaugurated the first Home for Spanish Children in the Soviet Union, “La Pequeña España”, situated on Bolshaia Pirogóvskaia street.

The second official expedition, organised by the Basque Government, led by José Antonio de Aguirre, was effected during the month of May 1937 in the face of the Nationalist offensive against Biscay. Of the 4500 children who embarked on the transatlantic ship *Habana* at the port of Santurce in the early morning of 13 June 1937, and sailed heading towards the port of Paulillac (Burgundy), just days before the fall of Bilbao, some 3000 either stayed in France or continued their journey to England. The remaining 1495 children, mostly Basques, arrived in Leningrad on 22 June 1937 on board the ship *Sontay*.

A third official expedition was carried out in the face of the imminent Nationalist offensive against Santander and Asturias. It left aboard the French cargo ship *Deriguerina* from the port of Gijón in the early morning of 24 September 1937, a few weeks before the city was taken. It was organised by the Council for Public Instruction (*Consejo de Instrucción Pública*), of the Provincial Council of Asturias and León (*Consejo Provincial de Asturias y León*), presided over by Berlamino Tomás. The group, led by Pablo Miaja, a teacher from Oviedo, was composed of 1100 children from Asturias, Santander and the Basque country. Some of them stayed in France, although the majority arrived in Leningrad on 4 October 1937 after making two transfers: the first in Saint Nazaire to the Soviet ship *Kooperatsiia*, and the second in London where, due to a lack of space, some of the passengers were transferred aboard the *Feluks Dzerzhinsky*.

In her memoirs, Isabel Argentina Álvarez Morán, one of the members of this expedition, relates how crowded the *Deriguerina* was when it left El Musel. For that reason, she and her sister, as well as other companions from the boarding school Rosario Acuña (Somió, Asturias), were forced to install themselves in the “wheelhouse” (control post):

Food became scarce ... and that is when the Government of Asturias ... [offered us] the option of evacuation to the USSR. But my father didn't want us to go. He said no, that he did not want to be separated from us, that we were all he had left, but when the

¹⁰With regard to the evacuation of children whose destination was the Soviet Union, the following contributions may be consulted: Enrique Zafra, Rosalía Crego and Carmen Heredia, *Los niños españoles evacuados a la URSS (1937)* (Madrid: Ediciones de la Torre, 1989); Marie Jose Devillard, Álvaro Pazos, Susana Castillo and Nuria Medina, *Los niños españoles en la URSS (1937–1997): narración y memoria* (Barcelona: Ariel, 2001); Alicia Alted, Encarna Nicolás and Roger González, *Los niños de la guerra de España en la Unión Soviética. De la evacuación al retorno (1937–1999)* (Madrid: Fundación Francisco Largo Caballero, 1999); Susana Castillo Rodríguez, *Mis años en la escuela soviética. El discurso autobiográfico de los niños españoles en la URSS* (Madrid: Los libros de la Catarata, 2009); and Immaculada Colomina Limonero, *Dos patrias, tres mil destinos*. All the figures and dates quoted in this section were taken from the works here cited. Also see Andrei Elpátievsky, *La emigración española en la URSS. Historiografía y fuentes, intento de interpretación* (Madrid: Exterior XXI, 2008).

very intensive bombings began, one day he finally decided ... [At 9 o'clock at night], when our boarding school boarded the boat, there was no more room ... me, my sister and three other children had to stay in the wheelhouse ... The holds were jammed full, everything was full ... The last group to board had to stay outside on the decks of the boat.¹¹

The fourth and last official expedition left Barcelona with 300 children, from Madrid, Murcia, Aragón, Catalonia and Valencia, at the end of October 1938. The members of this group crossed the frontier at the Pyrenees in buses. Once in French territory, they were taken by train to the port of Le Havre, where they boarded the ships *Marya Uliianova* and again the *Feluks Dzerzhinsky*. The former left a few days later with the majority of the travellers, while the latter waited until the end of November to take the 117 remaining children to Leningrad.

Apart from these four official expeditions, there were other unofficial initiatives. In these, there were children who travelled alone, and were adopted by Soviet families upon arrival. However, in general, most arrived in the USSR with their parents, the fathers being either military men who were stationed there or Republican politicians. Most of these expeditions took place after the autumn of 1938, but there were also some prior to the first official evacuation, like the one which took the 20 children of Republican aviators and PCE officials from Cartagena to Odessa on 17 March 1937 on board the ship *Gran Canaria*: “[It was] a Chechen boat, a cargo boat, but there were also passengers, a group of Soviets, I don’t know if they were aviators or if they were ... We were going to be with a military family”, remembers María del Rosario Bruno García.¹²

The fear, uncertainty and sadness caused by the separation from their loved ones were mitigated as the ships came closer to their final destination. The journey, which was not without its dangers and precariousness, due to the scarcity of food as well as the unhealthy conditions, and the excessive number of passengers, as we have seen reflected in the testimony of Isabel Argentina Álvarez Morán, became a rite of passage for all the children. During the time they were on the high seas, the youngsters not only became conscious of their status as evacuated and exiled persons, but they were also forced to leave behind everything they had and had known, to be able to begin the new life which awaited them in their country of refuge.

The reception they received in the USSR is something they never forgot; one of the happiest memories, without a doubt, of this first period of their exile, which was marked by anguish, uncertainty and uprooting. The Soviet people decorated the ports of Leningrad and Yalta, as well as the different train stations through which the young evacuees passed, with flags and flowers, as well as honouring them with music and dance (Figure 1).

Upon arrival at their destination, the children received much attention and care: a good bath, a medical check-up, new clothes – uniforms for everyone – delicious meals, with caviar included on the menu, numerous excursions to nearby places, and sojourns at the country’s prestigious spas, where they could recover from the physical and emotional exhaustion of their long trip. The correspondence that the

¹¹ Isabel Argentina Álvarez Morán, *Memorias de una niña de la guerra* (Gijón: Ayuntamiento de Gijón, Fundación Municipal de Cultura, Educación y Universidad Popular, 2003), 186–87.

¹² Testimony collected by Jorge M. Reverte and Socorro Thomás, *Hijos de la guerra. Testimonios y recuerdos* (Madrid: Temas de Hoy, 2004), 114–15.



Figure 1. Reception of the Spanish children by the Moscow pioneers, 1938. CDMH, PS Photographs, 36/2.928-1.

children sent to their families once they landed on Soviet soil, to inform of their arrival, provides evidence of this:

A huge Russian battleship came out to meet us and in the afternoon a dozen submarines entertained us as we watched them come in and out of the water. About two kilometres before reaching Leningrad, you could see numerous houses in the water ... We counted up to 18 submarines together in the port along with quite a few warships. It seemed like the boat was on a highway, as on both sides of it there were strips of land with very pretty flowers, and we arrived at the end of our voyage through that path of sorts. Many Russian people, men and women, were awaiting us and they sang songs really well, and even if we didn't understand them, we liked the tone of them. Ahead of us was a house with so many flags that they came down from the top of it to the boat.¹³

When we got to the infirmary, they gave us a shower and some bread pastries with butter and cheese, bread with jam, and a cake and chocolate to eat. They have given us some socks, a pair of long pants, a thin undershirt, purple underwear that looks like a loin cloth, a green shirt, like the yellow ones but thinner and with long sleeves to be able to wear a tie.¹⁴

Having recovered from the voyage and acclimated to their new homeland, the Spanish children were divided into groups and distributed among the different Homes for Children (*Dietsky Dom*) that the Soviet Government had prepared for them in different cities of the Russian Federation and the Ukraine (Figure 2). The majority of the Homes were palaces that, prior to the October Revolution, had belonged to the aristocracy. These extraordinary and beautiful buildings, situated in ideal settings (surrounded by gardens, forests, rivers and beaches), were an oasis of happiness for the youngsters in the midst of their misfortune, as is clearly reflected in testimonies like that of Bernardo Clemente del Río Salceda, who lived in Home for Children no. 7 in Moscow:

¹³Letter from Gilberto Santas to his uncles and cousins. Leningrad, 23 June 1937. CDMH, PS Bilbao, 5/14–27.

¹⁴Letter from Marcos Alcón to his parents. Leningrad, 24 June 1937. CDMH, PS Bilbao, 5/11–6.



Figure 2. Group of children and Spanish educators in the USSR. Odessa, August 1940. Eibarko Udala-City Council of Eibar, Guipúzcoa. Astarloa-Ruano Family Collection.

Our Home for Children in Moscow was on the corner of Bolshaia Pirogóvskaia and Alsufelskaia streets. It was an old building that they remodelled and fixed before we arrived, with pretty architecture, large, with two floors, parquet floors, located on a large piece of land with garden, and there was another building of one floor. This estate was surrounded by a garden wall of railings. In its time it surely had been the mansion of some grandee of Russia ...

The entrance and the closets were on the ground floor ... there was a small marble pond with coloured fish ... three dormitories for the boys, bathrooms, showers, a storage room ... a dining room and a kitchen.

There was a wide staircase of white marble leading to the upstairs. On that floor was the office of the headmistress and the *zampolit* [assistant director], the two large dormitories for the girls with their bathrooms, a large auditorium with a stage, a red velvet curtain, and a grand piano. In the morning, we used this room as a gym; we celebrated parties, meetings etc. here. There were also ... rooms for doing homework.¹⁵

3. Educating the communists of the future

Given the humble origins of the great majority of their families, the children enjoyed the kinds of privileges in their new homes that they never would have been able to have if they had stayed in Spain. The USSR opened before them a world full of possibilities that they all wanted and knew how to enjoy. Daily life in the Homes for Children was ruled by iron discipline, a strict schedule of hours and inflexible order. Hygiene, physical exercise (Figure 3), artistic formation, studies and a nutritious diet, as shown in this letter which Enrique Undiano sent to his mother at the end of June 1937, were the fundamental pillars on which the daily life of the Spanish children in the USSR was constructed:

¹⁵Bernardo Clemente del Río Salceda, *20.000 días en la URSS. Recuerdos, descubrimientos y reflexiones de un niño de la guerra* (Madrid: Fundación Largo Caballero, Entrelíneas, 2004), 46–47.



Figure 3. A gym class in Home for Children no. 9. Leningrad, 1938. Archives of the Francisco Largo Caballero Foundation, Madrid (AFFLC), Araceli Ruiz Collection, MG/057/29, 25.461.

We are living the good life here. We eat four times a day. We get out of bed, we wash ourselves and we go [to breakfast]. They usually give us 2 [pieces] of bread with butter and another with cheese and a cup or glass of chocolate. Afterwards we go out to a wood which is quite nearby and they give us a roll and an ounce of chocolate or a roll and three [apricots]. We are there until midday and afterwards we go back to the camp, have a shower and eat. They give us very good food and every day [it is] different. We eat and [we take] a nap. We get up and [we have a snack] ... bread, butter, strawberries, hot chocolate and all [the] bread that we want. After we go play and have dinner. They give us a very good dinner ... always with dessert.¹⁶

Many of the Homes for Children had their own school. If not, the children usually went to the closest one, where they either had classrooms specifically reserved for them, or else they shared benches and desks with Soviet children, as Inspector Antonio Ballesteros, chosen by the Ministry of Public Instruction to supervise these Homes, confirmed in his reports, elaborated at the end of November 1937 and the beginning of January 1938:

The great majority of children have class at their own Homes and therefore they don't need to leave the area where the buildings are located in order to perform their duties and school work. In some, like the ones in the centre of Moscow and one in Leningrad, the Spanish children are taught at a Soviet school where there are different classes exclusively for them, taught by the Spanish teachers charged by our Government with their education.¹⁷

¹⁶Letter from Enrique Undiano to his mother. Moscow, 30 June 1937. CDMH, PS Bilbao, 5/14–22.

¹⁷*Report on Homes for Spanish Children in the USSR, authored by the Inspector General Antonio Ballesteros Usano*. Barcelona, 14 February 1938. CDMH, PS Barcelona, 87/15. For more information on the visit of Antonio Ballesteros to the Homes for Spanish Children in the USSR see Verónica Sierra Blas, "Za Stalin, za Róðinn. Notes sur la visite d'un inspecteur d'éducation aux enfants espagnols évacués en URSS pendant la Guerre Civile," in *L'Écho de l'événement. Du Moyen Âge à l'époque contemporaine*, eds. Christine Rivalan Guégo and Denis Rodrigues (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2011), 207–20.

All the different schools were subject to the educative policy of the Peoples Commissary for Learning (*Narkompros*), which viewed the school as the principal platform for the diffusion and consolidation of the communist regime. Heir of the educational reforms driven by Anatoli V. Lunatcharski, the “teachers of Stalinism” discovered in the “Active School” model the appropriate means for developing their educative project.¹⁸

The Soviet authorities realised immediately that the academic level that should have corresponded to the ages of the evacuees not only did not coincide with the Soviet educative plan, but had no logic whatsoever: “they separated us by ages”, remembers one of the girls who prefers to remain anonymous, “but of course, I hardly knew how to do anything, very little, because I had never gone to school, [the little I knew] my father had taught me”.¹⁹

There were children who, despite being of school age, had never gone to school, as this last testimony reveals. Others had a level of education very inferior to that which corresponded to their age, since their schooling had been intermittent and irregular. This was either because their parents needed them to eke out a living, as they would do the domestic work and other labour, especially in the case of those families who lived in and from the country; or because the war had forced them to become wanderers, or because their schools had been closed. In some cases, the children were forced to miss class because they had to take care of younger siblings or had to assume the responsibility of obtaining sustenance for the family.

For this reason, before beginning the first school year in the USSR, the Spanish children took an exam, which consisted of different exercises in writing, reading and sums. Depending on the results obtained in the test, the *Narkompros* decided which grade each student should be in, notwithstanding their ages. The Soviet educational plan covered 10 school years: the children entered school at age seven and finished at age 17. Schools were divided into two sections: from 1st through 7th and from 8th to 10th grade. When students finished 7th grade, they could choose whether to continue with the rest of the courses to 10th grade or whether to attend a vocational school. If they finished the 10 years, they went to university or to *Teknikum* (technical engineering institutes).

The subjects the Spanish youngsters took that were obligatory in the Soviet schools were similar to what they would have taken had they gone to school in Spain, excepting Russian, Russian history and the Constitution of the USSR. The classes in geography, arithmetic, drawing, Russian and Spanish are those that are most frequently mentioned in private correspondence. This allows one to deduce that these were the subjects to which greater time was dedicated and, therefore, those with greater weight in the curriculum. This is the conclusion one gathers from, among others, the letter the child Lucio Rueda sent to his brother Victoriano, a refugee in Barcelona, from his Home for Children in Odessa on 9 February 1938: “At school we have good and difficult classes, but we learn a lot here. We have

¹⁸Thomas Ewing, *The Teachers of Stalinism: Policy, Practice and Power in Soviet Schools of the 1930s* (Nueva York: Peter Lang, 2002).

¹⁹Testimony collected by Susana Castillo Rodríguez, *Memoria, educación e historia: el caso de los niños españoles evacuados a la Unión Soviética durante la Guerra Civil española* (Madrid: Universidad Complutense de Madrid, 1999), 322.

only one of Arithmetic, two of Grammar, one of Russian ... and two [of] Spanish, and one [of] Geography”.²⁰

At first, ignorance of the Russian language was resolved through the use of interpreters (*Perevodchisha/Perevodchil*) in charge of facilitating the communication between the children and the Soviet personnel responsible for their care. They were an invaluable help for the Spanish adults who had accompanied the youngsters. The language barriers were quickly surpassed, in part thanks to the ease of learning another language at an early age and the rapid linguistic immersion to which the children were subject. From day one, they received classes in the new language. They quickly acquired a basic grasp of Russian and were able to speak and even write it as well (Figure 4). The mix between this language and Spanish began to create a hybrid slang that has been named *Rusiñol*.²¹

Education in the Arts enjoyed special attention in the Homes for Children. It was channelled through the development of different workshops or “circles”, where the youngsters were introduced to various trades and where classes of music, dance, singing, theatre, sewing, drawing, crafts, photography, etc. were imparted. María Luisa and Francisco, the Nájera siblings, chose the music circle. When the orchestra was formed at their Home for Children, they excitedly informed their mother of their roles in it: “[Our] orchestra [is] made up of tambourines, castanets, and a bass drum with a cymbal, and on the other side a [different] drum. We also [have] a triangle and a guitar and [mandolin]. We play the tambourine.”²²

These complementary educational activities were part of the daily routine at the Homes for Children, as well as physical exercise, the management of supplies and doing domestic tasks. Naturally, time for recreation was included in the form of games, museum visits, outings to theatre, circus, movies or the opera, and participation in parties and celebrations, as well as in sports events and political activities. Furthermore, the children went on field trips to become familiar with the important monuments of the country. Some of the school compositions written by the 5th grade students of the School of Moscow in January 1938 speak of these excursions. This was done to coincide with the visit to this school of Inspector Antonio Ballesteros, who asked the pupils to write about their first impressions of the USSR, and especially about what they had liked most till then, as is reflected in the titles of the compositions by Amelia B. de Quirós and Luis Aranaga:

“What I Like Best about the USSR”.

What has drawn my greatest attention among the monuments of Moscow is the great construction of the subway. The subway is something I have never seen in my whole life, especially the Kievskaya station, built by communist youths in one year and it is the best.

²⁰Letter from Lucio Rueda to her brother Victoriano. Odessa, 9 February 1938. CDMH, PS Santander, 51/7–81.

²¹Immaculada Colomina Limonero, “El *Rusiñol*: adaptación cultural y lingüística de los exiliados españoles en la antigua Unión Soviética,” in *Congreso Internacional La Guerra Civil española*, dir. Santos Juliá, CD-ROM (Madrid: Sociedad Estatal de Conmemoraciones Culturales, 2007).

²²Letter from María Luisa and Francisco Nájera to her mother. Unnamed place, 30 August 1937. CDMH, PS Santander, series O, 49/3–29.

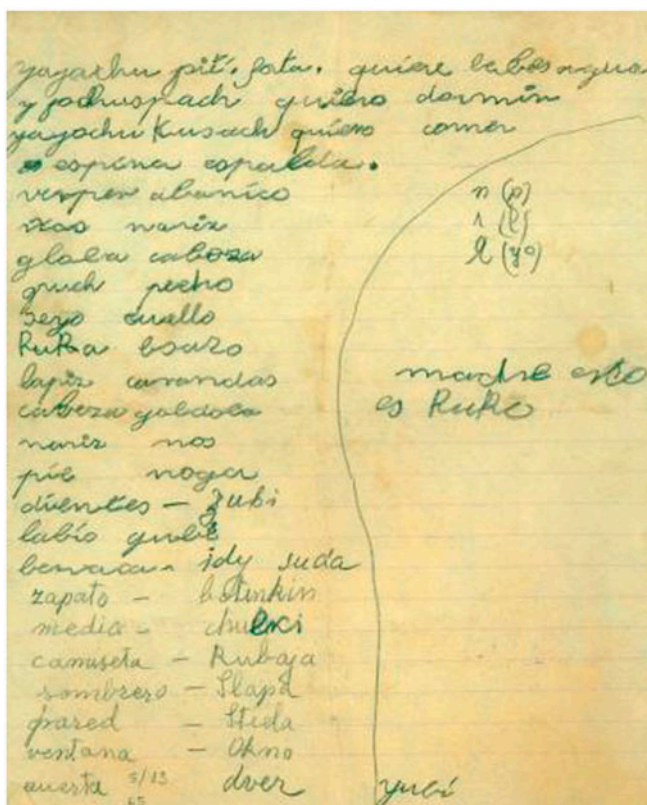


Figure 4. Letter to his mother from a child evacuated to the USSR. Odessa, 2 July 1937. CDMH, PS Bilbao, 5/13-64.

“My First Impressions of the USSR”.

The visit we made to Lenin’s mausoleum made a great impression on me. It was something we had never seen before, where we saw Comrade Lenin, lying down inside a glass box. On each side of his corpse was a soldier of the Red Army with a rifle.²³

Likewise, the Spanish children received a political education in the Homes based on the communist lifestyle. The greater majority, although not all of them, joined the children’s and youth organisations that sprang up after the October Revolution: the *octubristas* (under the age of eight years), the *pioneers* (from nine to 14 years old) and the *komsomoles* (15 years and older). In their adult life they were militants both in the PCE and the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (PCUS).

²³Compositions by Amelia B. de Quirós and Luis Aranaga. Moscow, 13 January 1938. CDMH, PS Barcelona, 87/17-1 y 4. For more on the compositions of “Children of Russia” you can consult Verónica Sierra Blas and María del Mar del Pozo Andrés, “Desde el paraíso soviético. Cultura escrita, educación y propaganda en las Casas de Niños españoles evacuados a Rusia durante la Guerra Civil española,” in *School Exercise Books. A Complex Source for a History of the Approach to Schooling and Education in the 19th and 20th Centuries*, eds. Juri Meda, Davide Montino and Roberto Sani (Florence: Polistampa, 2010), 211–236.

The Pioneer movement became part of school life. It was based on the doctrines of Lenin's wife, Nadežda Konstantinovna Krupskaja, and the psychologist and pedagogue Arón Borissovich Zalkind, among others. Hence, political education was identified with the basic general education that every Soviet should receive in order to become a "good citizen". In 1992 the Young Pioneer movement had 4000 members. This number was as high as 11 million in 1939.²⁴

The influence of the communist ideology was reflected in the marked paramilitary character of the Homes, as shown not only in the rigid norms that regulated the daily lives of the children, but also through their continuous participation in parades, the daily singing of patriotic hymns, the visits of military men stationed there who often acted as godfathers to the youngsters (as was the case with the members of the prestigious Frunze Academy) (Figure 5) or the practical classes whose purpose was to teach them how to use certain arms: "We are going to get a lot of rifles so we can learn to shoot and whoever shoots the best will get the medal of Marshall Vorochilof [Voroshilov], of the Russian Army"; "We are going to shoot rifles ... The targets are the heads of Hitler and Mussolini."²⁵

On the other hand, the Spanish children were inculcated day after day with profound admiration for communism towards the leaders responsible for guiding the "Soviet Paradise", and especially towards Stalin. Many of them considered him to be a generous father protector, since he had not only freed them from the horrors of war, saving their lives by doing so, but was also giving them the opportunity to grow healthy and strong and to grow in awareness, so that upon their return to Spain they could continue the work of their elders in the fight against fascism and rebuild the country, taking the USSR as a model to follow. In the words of Rafael Miralles, the press attaché of the Cuban Legation in Moscow between July 1944 and March 1945, the education that the boys and girls received in the Soviet Union demonstrated the interest of the Soviet and Spanish authorities to make them become "the future cadres of the Party and of the Third International".²⁶

This idyllic image that children had of the Soviet Union, as well as the conviction that the future of Republican Spain was in their hands, is made clear in their writings, as we can appreciate in the fragments of letters that follow:

Here we learn to be men so that in the future we will know how to defend our Red Spain and make a new Spain like Russia.²⁷

Here we are getting prepared with our arms which are books so that when we are older, we can rebuild our dear homeland Spain, that is being destroyed by the criminal German and Italian aviation forces.²⁸

²⁴Dorena Caroli, *Ideali, ideologie e modelli formativi. Il movimento dei Pioneri in Urss (1922–1939)* (Milan: Unicopli, 2006), 12–13.

²⁵Letter from Porfirio Sacristán to his mother. Moscow, 30 June 1937; and letter from Enrique Undiano to his mother and sister. Moscow, 30 June 1937. CDMH, PS Bilbao, 5/14–9 and 22.

²⁶Rafael Miralles, *Espanoles en Rusia* (Madrid: Ediciones y Publicaciones Españolas, 1947), 200–201.

²⁷Letter from Benito Capellán to his parents. Leningrad, 23 June 1937. CDMH, PS Bilbao, 5/11–57.

²⁸Letter from José Luis Pérez Fernández to the Delegation of Social Assistance of Euzkadi in Barcelona. Moscow, 22 February 1938. CDMH, PS Bilbao, 206/8–10.



Figure 5. Visit of a godfather to a Home for Children in the USSR. Unnamed place, no date. CDMH, PS Photographs, 36/2.933.

I am very happy in this nation that is the homeland of all workers ... the first one to rise up and conquer the cruel tyrant and the beast of fascism, [as] will be conquered by Red Spain ... Father, in the Soviet Union, everyone is equal, engineers and carpenters, as well as mechanics and railroad men. Everyone eats the same and works the same.²⁹

However, all expectations were dashed once the Republican Army was defeated and, even more so, after the outbreak of the Second World War. First of all, Stalin did not recognise the Government of Franco and, second, the difficulties that the conflict entailed for everyone at all levels made the return of the children to their country infeasible. Therefore, what had been an evacuation became an exile. Faced with the impossibility of helping their parents realise their dream of building a “Free and Red Spain”, the youngsters saw in the “Great War for the Homeland” the opportunity not only to fight for their Republican ideals, albeit abroad, but especially to show their gratitude to the Soviets for their protection and aid.

²⁹Letter from Emiliano Aza to his father and siblings. Odessa, 31 January 1938. CDMH, PS Santander, series O, 51/7–6.

When Hitler invaded the Soviet Union at the end of June 1941, the majority of the Spanish children were between 10 and 15 years old. Practically all the Homes where they lived were situated in the axis of penetration of the German army, so that they had to be evacuated and leave for safer places. By enlisting in the Red Army, by collaborating in tasks in the rear, by working in factories to cover the necessities of war materials or in the numerous *kolijoses* strewn throughout Soviet geography to avoid the loss of the harvests of that year, the Spanish youngsters actively participated in the Second World War.

Between 300 and 800 “children” lost their lives on the battlefronts due to hunger, cold, lack of medicines and as a consequence of the bombings. Many others were tried as anti-patriots, interned in prison camps, captured by the Germans or deported back to Spain.³⁰ Those who survived had to confront the enormous difficulties and misery of the post-war period that brought with it the substitution of the Homes for Children by the so-called Homes for Youth. With these came the end of childhood and the beginning of adulthood, marked by the necessity for self-reliance and integration into Soviet life in all its dimensions (political, economic, academic, professional, familial, etc.) to start a new life. However, the hope of returning to Spain one day to be reunited with their loved ones after so many years of separation was never lost.

4. From Spaniards to Russians?

Most of the specialists who have studied the “Children of Russia” have pointed out that if those who cared for them had some kind of aim, besides making them ideal communists, as we have just seen, it was, without a doubt, that they should not forget their roots. That they should feel Spanish from head to toe, that they should behave as such at all times and that they should reclaim and defend the virtues, customs, traditions, values and culture of their country was one of the main objectives that the Soviet and Spanish authorities strictly fulfilled. They knew how to competently integrate this aspect into the educational programme that they designed to form the young evacuees.

Towards this end, in the Homes for Children a sort of Spanish micro-climate was created. This was something that was possible, to a large extent, thanks to the communal living of the children with Spanish teachers and aides. It has been calculated that the total number of personnel taking care of the Homes was 1555

³⁰For the origin of the figures and the role played by the Spaniards who found themselves in the USSR during the Second World War, thanks are offered to Antonio Vilanova, *Los olvidados. Los exiliados españoles en la Segunda Guerra Mundial* (Paris: Ruedo Ibérico, 1969); Eusebio Cimorra, Isidro R. Mendieta and Enrique Zafra, *El sol sale de noche. La presencia española en la Gran Guerra Patria del pueblo soviético contra el nazi-fascismo* (Moscow: Progreso, 1970); Eduardo Pons Prades, *Republicanos españoles en la Segunda Guerra Mundial* (Barcelona: Planeta, 1975); Roque Serna, *Heroísmo español en Rusia, 1941–1945* (Madrid: Gráficas Cañizares, 1981); David Wingeate Pike, *In the Service of Stalin: The Spanish Communists in Exile, 1939–1945* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993); *En memoria de los combatientes y niños españoles muertos junto al pueblo ruso con motivo de la Segunda Guerra Mundial, 1941–1950* (Madrid: Fundación Nostalgia, 2000); Daniel Arasa, *Los españoles de Stalin* (Barcelona: Belaquva, 2005); Bartolomé Benassar, *El infierno fuimos nosotros. La Guerra Civil española (1936–1942)* (Madrid: Taurus, 2005); Alicia Altet, *La voz de los vencidos. El exilio republicano de 1939* (Madrid: Aguilar, 2005); and Natalia Kharitonova, *Edificar la cultura, construir la identidad. El exilio republicano español de 1939 en la Unión Soviética* (Seville: Renacimiento, 2014).

workers, of which 111 were Spaniards (71 men and 40 women). Some were sent by the Republican Ministry of Public Instruction ahead of the arrival of the expeditions of children, starting in February 1937, to lay the groundwork. Others had accompanied the children as part of the expeditions, deciding afterwards to stay in the USSR with them.

All of them had to qualify based on merit before departure, and they also had to present various guarantees of a political nature and from the unions as well as a report from the director of the last centre where they had been working in Spain before – or during – the conflict. In addition, shortly after arrival in the Soviet Union, the teachers wrote, at the bidding of the authorities, a personal autobiography, where they recounted their teaching experience; explained the reasons why they had decided to join the evacuations of the minors to the USSR; and show proof of their militancy, as we can see in this paper by the teacher José Manuel Arregui Calle, who came to the Soviet Union escorting the children of the third official expedition:

José Manuel Arregui Calle, born in Pola de Siero, Oviedo province, 27 years of age, national teacher certified from public examination convened in 1928; wherein obtained number 43 of the first list of substitute teachers. I took possession of the National School of children in Felechés, judicial district of Siero, Oviedo province, on 14 February 1931, and I was lending my services to this school until 26 March 1937, when I joined the Popular Army. I was wounded, and rendered useless as a soldier, enlisting again in teaching on 3 September 1937 motivated by the departure of a group of Asturias children to the USSR ... Professionally, I belonged to ATEA [Association of Teaching Workers of Asturias].³¹

After the war, there was no lack of teachers arriving in the USSR, as political exiles now, and they were assigned to the Homes for Children to complete the existing teaching staff. This was the case of the historian Carmen Parga, who arrived in Moscow in February 1939 together with her husband, the military officer Manuel Tagüeña Lacorte, and was immediately assigned to give classes to the children of Home no. 7. Carmen left testimony in her memoirs of how, although the teachers were repeatedly reminded of the importance of making the children feel Spanish, the children themselves were interested in all things Spanish, so that the teachers barely had to make an effort in this sense:

I worked as a teacher in a residence for Spanish children ... My job was to give Spanish classes and familiarise them with the problems and the History of Spain. I liked the work and I felt useful helping those children not to forget their roots. In any case, there was no danger of that: they were interested in everything Spanish and they loved to narrate their memories of the lost land.³²

³¹Autobiography of José Manuel Arregui Calle. (Pravda, 6 January 1938). CDMH, PS Barcelona, 87/21–11. There are a total of 41 autobiographies preserved in this file, of teaching personnel as well as Spanish aides who were in the Soviet Union between December 1937 and January 1938. Other similar autobiographies are kept in the State Archives of the Russian Federation, Moscow, Collection A-307, catalogue 2, dossier 398. Cf. Alicia Alted, Encarna Nicolás and Roger González, *Los niños de la guerra*, 108. To refer to the biographies preserved in Spain, see Verónica Sierra Blas, “En el país del proletariado. Cultura escrita y exilio infantil en la URSS,” in “Los niños de la guerra: educación, historia, memoria y representaciones,” coord. Ángela Cenarro, *Historia Social* 76 (2013): 125–43.

³²Carmen Parga, *Antes que sea tarde* (Madrid: Compañía Literaria, 1996), 48. Another teacher who wrote about her experience in the Homes for Children was Alejandra Soler, *La vida es un río caudaloso con peligrosos rápidos. “Al final de todo..., sigo comunista”* (Valencia: Universitat de València, 2009).

The main problem that the teachers found for doing the job was the lack of schooling material, especially books. If the point was that students not forget their origins, then maintaining ability in their mother tongue became a priority, obviously, and towards that end books were the best allies of the young evacuees and their teachers.

It was expected that the Ministry of Public Instruction would send books in Spanish through the Spanish Embassy to the Homes for Children so that the teachers could give classes and the pupils would have access to reading in their own language. However, the shipments were delayed and there were always fewer books than were needed. Very few teachers, and even fewer children, travelled carrying books, but those who had done so immediately made them available to the collective as they realised how valuable they were due to the general scarcity of resources experienced in the Homes. Bernardo Clemente del Río states that he did the same, as, just before he embarked, his father gave him two books that he kept always: “My father put two books in my small suitcase: *Don Quixote* and *Romancero Gitano* by Federico García Lorca.”³³

On their side, the Soviet authorities sent all the manuals that were used in the schools of the USSR to be quickly translated to make it easier for the teachers to give classes in Spanish. This was something that not only was indicated in the official reports of the time where it was confirmed that by providing these translations “many millions of rubles” had been invested by the Soviet Government “in the defence of the culture of the future Spanish workers”,³⁴ but was also remembered by the children themselves, who appreciated it enormously and were eternally grateful for the spending effort that their adopted country made so that they could read in Spanish, as narrated in his memoirs by Antonio Herrero:

We received all our lessons in Spanish. The textbooks had been translated quickly for us, based on the ones that the Russian children used in their schools. This was due to a priority of the Soviet Government: that the Spanish children not forget their language or lose their identity as Spanish citizens. The textbooks translated to Spanish included Algebra, Geometry, Chemistry, Botany, Zoology, Physics, USSR History and Spanish History, Spanish Literature [with two anthologies of classic works] and the Constitution of the Soviet Union.³⁵

To support the fulfilment of this goal to make the Homes for Children little enclaves of Spain in the heart of the USSR, Inspector Antonio Ballesteros, in addition to taking into account the inestimable help received from the Soviet Government to supply materials to the different Homes, composed a list of those products which he considered should be sent urgently by the Ministry of Public Instruction to nurture the schools, provide the teachers with tools to work with and favour the creation of a purely Spanish atmosphere in the Homes:

- 16 collections of maps of Spain.
- As many manuals as possible with atlases of the geography of Spain.

³³Bernardo Clemente del Río Salceda, *20,000 días en la URSS*, 30.

³⁴*Report about the Homes for Spanish Children in the USSR made by Inspector General Antonio Ballesteros Usano.*

³⁵Testimony gathered by Enrique Zafra, Rosalía Crego and Carmen Heredia, *Los niños españoles evacuados a la URSS (1937)*, 148–49.

- Photographs of the largest size available of engravings and photographs of landscapes, monuments, emblems, costumes, customs, illustrious figures, etc. from the different regions, provinces and Spanish cities.
- Large-size reproductions of the President of the Republic, Cabinet Head, Minister of Public Instruction, General Rojo and General Miaja, Minister of Defence, Pasionaria, José Díaz, Pablo Iglesias, etc.
- 24 copies ... of textbooks of Castilian Spanish grammar, Spanish History, and Geography of Spain ...
- A library of Spanish literature where our best classic and modern authors are represented ... Literature in prose and verse about the current heroic deeds of the Spanish people.
- Teaching guides for the teachers ... of each elementary school subject and selected books of History of Literature, biographies of prominent men in Spanish life ... and books that demonstrate the characteristics of the regions and provinces of Spain.
- And, at least 16 flags of the Spanish Republic.³⁶

To what extent and when these materials, urgently requested by Inspector Antonio Ballesteros from the Republican Government during his stay in the Soviet Union, were received we do not know. However, the fact that some of them did arrive and become part of the daily lives of the youngsters is well noted in their notebooks, letters, diaries, memoirs, etc., given the importance that everything that helped them remember Spain had for them as, if only in a figurative sense, it made them feel closer to their loved ones.

In this sense, José Fernández Sánchez affirms that in his Home for Children no. 7 of Moscow a large map of Spain was hanging until the end of the war, where he and his classmates marked “with little flags the advancement of the front lines”, and at the same time, he remembers the expectation they felt every afternoon when the “cupboard with the Spanish books” was opened, where apart from some classics of Spanish literature, like Cervantes, Lope de Vega or Calderón de la Barca, they could read the principal works of writers such as Antonio Machado, Federico García Lorca, Juan Ramón Jiménez or Rafael Alberti, who at the time symbolised the “Republican ideal”:

We had a librarian who would open the cupboard with the Spanish books every afternoon. One day she stopped coming and the cupboard remained shut with a padlock ... Since then, to take out a book, we would lift the inside latch of one of the doors ... Through the crack we extracted the books with a curved wire. You never knew what book you were going to pull out and what you were going to read was unpredictable, like the lottery.³⁷

To encourage the children in the love of their homeland and make this omnipresent in their daily lives, those who were responsible for the Homes initiated numerous extracurricular activities that, like classes, were given on a daily basis. There were, for example, workshops and conferences on Spanish Language, History, Art, Folklore and Politics. Choirs and orchestras for traditional Spanish music as well as Spanish dance and theatre groups were created (Figure 6). There were programmes of Spanish cinema and the creation of book clubs, where *Don Quixote* had no

³⁶Report made by Inspector General Antonio Ballesteros Usano about Homes for Spanish Children in the USSR.

³⁷José Fernández Sánchez, *Memorias de un niño de Moscú*, 95–96.



Figure 6. Performance of the play *La Dama Boba*, by Lope de Vega, by a group of young Spaniards. Moscow, 5 April 1947. AFFLC, Vicente Delgado Collection, MG/087/14, 35.511.

competitors. Talks on the progress of the war took place, and the children listened to the radio, read and discussed the news in the press, shared the news they received in their private correspondence, and saw documentaries, etc. as reflected in this letter written by Julia Sedano and sent to her parents and siblings on 8 February 1938 from the Home of Jerson:

They show us Spanish movies ... We saw Dolores Ibárruri, José Díaz and there were militia men with red flags and Spanish signs, and Dolores Ibárruri spoke in Spanish and we were filled with joy.³⁸

Many of these activities were registered on the newspaper murals that the children prepared on a regular basis in their Homes. Apart from printing activities of their school day, both academic and extracurricular, and publishing jokes, games, poems, letters and stories, they gave news of the most important political and cultural events occurring in Spain and the USSR, with special attention to the progress of the war. This was described in such detail that it became for many of them, as Teresa Pàmies has pointed out, authentic “chronicles of the Republican rearguard” overseas (Figure 7).³⁹

In general, the murals were made of “large sheets a half metre long which were coloured and stuck to the wall”,⁴⁰ which were constructed by a very organised team that, once the job of production was finished, took charge of publicly spreading the news of the paper:

All, every one, all the groups [that do the newspaper mural], in each group we made our own and we wrote everything by hand, I was in charge of writing ours [in the Home for Children of Obninskoe] ... The editor was chosen democratically among all of us, one who could draw well ... because we did everything by hand.⁴¹

³⁸Letter from Julia Sedano to her parents and sibling. Jerson, 8 February 1938. CDMH, PS Santander, 51/7–107.

³⁹Teresa Pàmies, *Los niños de la guerra* (Barcelona: Bruguera, 1977), 50.

⁴⁰Bernardo Clemente del Río Salceda, *20,000 días en la URSS*, 53.

⁴¹Testimony gathered by Susana Castillo Rodríguez, *Memoria, educación e historia*, 412.



Figure 7. Spanish children drawing the newspaper mural of their Home for Children. Unspecified place, 1939. CDMH, PS Photographs, 36/2.924.

Without a doubt, these newspaper murals, fruit in part of the young hands that created them and in part of the hands of the adults who supervised the activity, are truly a window into the Homes, apart from being a door that leads us directly to the hearts of the children. The murals make obvious how much the youngsters missed their homeland and their families, as along with the different articles that speak of daily life in the Homes and the current news, there are always stories about the families, descriptions of towns or cities where the children had been born or lived, memories of their games, their houses, their animals, their friends, etc.

In addition, thanks to these newspaper murals, there is proof of another important practice taking place in the Homes, which, as in all the activities previously enumerated, accomplished the goal of them not forgetting their origins or the reason that had caused them to abandon everything they loved and how necessary it was to preserve their identity to be able to return when the moment arrived. The interscholastic correspondence was, in this sense, a bond with Spain that, like the private correspondence, created emotional ties that made the children feel involved in the conflict and made them feel proud to be Spaniards, to belong to Republican Spain. On the other hand, it acted as a conduit of transmission of ideas about the war as demonstrated by the ideological slogans and symbols that fill their missives (Figure 8).

The evacuated minors wrote to the Spanish children in the other colonies situated in the USSR, as well as those in other foreign countries and even in Spain, as reflected in the newspapers and other publications of the time that printed the children's correspondence.⁴² However, they also sent letters to the soldiers of the Republic at certain key moments, as for example, occurred at Christmas 1938, when the children of Home no. 1 of Pravda, when requested to do so by one of their teachers, wrote to the "heroic fighters of the Popular Army":

⁴²For more on the usage of the children's letters in the national and international press as a means of propaganda see Verónica Sierra Blas: "Reconstructing Silences. On the Study and Edition of the Private Letters of Spanish Children Evacuated to Russia during the Spanish Civil War," *Variants* 8 (2012): 95–109.

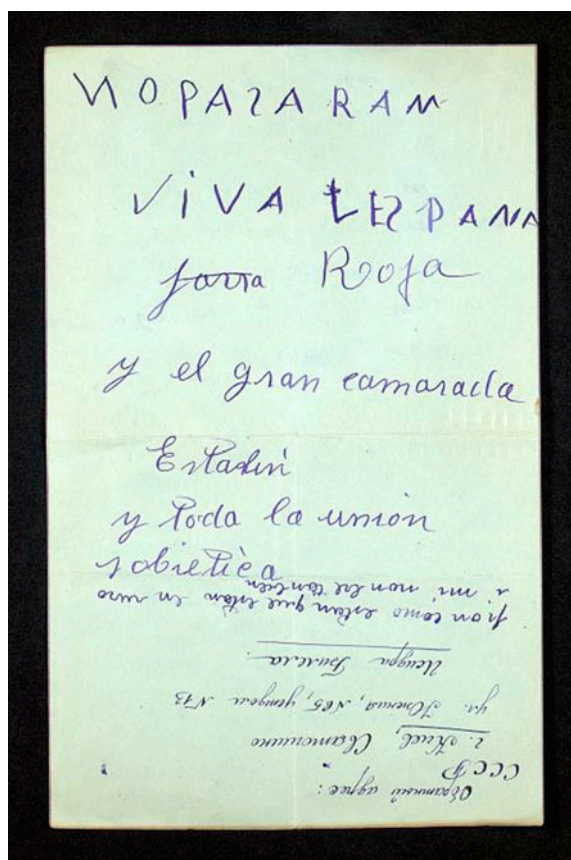


Figure 8. Letter from Isidra Pilela to her brother. (Kiev) 25 December 1937. CDMH, PS Santander, series O, 51/7–19.

Dear heroic [fighters] of Republican Spain: Comrades of Spain, we tell you that we, children of workers that are here in the USSR, we are very well, we eat very well, they give us a lot of fruit. Every winter we use skis, we bathe, we have schools for learning for when we go back to Spain to build it like the USSR and we will live happily, we will eat well, we will go to schools to learn much and for when there is a war, kill all the fascists ... LONG LIVE COMRADE STALIN! LONG LIVE REPUBLICAN SPAIN!⁴³

5. Broken promises, broken dreams

Returning to Spain was a dream that a good many of the children evacuated to the USSR during the Civil War never realised. The weak and tense diplomatic relations between Spain and the USSR reached their most critical point in July 1945, when Stalin condemned the Franco regime at the Potsdam Conference, a position that the UN seconded in 1946. From 1947 onwards until the death of Stalin, and in spite of

⁴³Letter of Antonio González Vior to the Republican combatants. Pravda, 3 December 1938. General Archive of the Administration (AGA), Alcalá de Henares (Madrid), General Ministry of the Movement, box 246.

the claims realised from 1949 on by the Francoist Government, very few Spanish “children” (now youths) could return to Spain or emigrate to other countries. France, Mexico, Chile, Argentina, the USA and Cuba were the main destinations they chose. In the 1960s around 200 young Spaniards arrived in Cuba from the Soviet Union, responding to the call by Fidel Castro for assistance to consolidate the recently achieved revolution.

It was not until the mid-1950s that the Soviet and Spanish authorities provided the young evacuees with the possibility of returning to their native country. A total of seven official return expeditions were organised and all of them were carried out on the steamship *Krym (Crimea)*. In the first expedition that left Odessa on 22 September 1956, the number of Spaniards participating was 1673, of which 667 were “Children of Russia”. Their arrival at the port of Valencia on 28 September was covered by the press at the time with detailed chronicles, where testimonies of many of the returnees of this first official expedition were published along with numerous photographs. This occurred, for example, in *El Comercio*, one of the main newspapers of Asturias, the province of origin for a good number of the returnees:

Inexpressible scenes of emotion took place. Hundreds of families of the repatriated Spaniards had come from the North and from Madrid. They were beside themselves with impatience ... Some of these relatives only remembered the faces of the children when they departed ... Yesterday they looked at photos of the children to impress them in their minds and recognise them the moment they landed, now young men, at the port of Valencia ... They shouted, they cried, they waved handkerchiefs ...⁴⁴

More than half the young Spaniards who returned in these official expeditions returned to the USSR a few years after their repatriation. Their expectations, nourished by time and distance, were frustrated in the face of the numerous difficulties to live in peace that they encountered in the Spain of Franco: de-structured families, failed re-encounters, problems in validating their academic degrees and obtaining employment, lack of recognition of marriages performed in the Soviet Union, constant interrogations by the police, persecutions, imprisonments, etc.

Homecomings that took place during the Cold War in the 1960s and '70s followed those official repatriations of the decade of the 1950s. More arrivals continued after the death of Franco, although it was now a much more individualised and dispersed phenomenon in comparison with that which occurred in earlier decades. Starting in 1991, the new political and economic panorama of the old USSR forced many “children” to forcibly and hastily emigrate, not only to escape from a country that they no longer recognised and with which for some time they had ceased to identify, but also because of the urgency to return to Spain to fulfil their last wish: to die at home.⁴⁵

The Spanish children evacuated to the Soviet Union not only shared events during their childhood and adolescence that marked their lives and shaped their characters but also, during the course of these occurrences, important networks of

⁴⁴*El Comercio* (Gijón, 29 September 1956). Asturias' Library Ramón Pérez de Ayala, Oviedo.

⁴⁵All data with regard to the homecomings has been extracted from Carmen González Martínez, “El retorno a España de los Niños de la Guerra Civil,” *Anales de Historia Contemporánea* 19 (2003): 75–100; Alicia Alted, *La voz de los vencidos*, 341–90; and Magdalena Garrido Caballero and Mónica Puente Regidor, “El retorno de Rusia: cambios políticos, económicos y sociales desde 1991,” *Revista de Historia Actual* 9 (2011): 97–112; as well as the works cited in footnote 10.

solidarity and unshakeable affection were hatched that kept them united forever.⁴⁶ Undoubtedly, the education that they received in the Homes for Children during their early years of exile played an essential role in the construction of that collective identity, whose traces it has been possible to recover thanks to the preservation of the written testimonies produced during their childhoods and the memories they have recalled regarding those years of their childhoods, as seen from the vantage point of adulthood, and written down on paper. A complete education, designed and programmed by the Soviet and Spanish authorities down to the last detail, where nothing was left to fate, based on the basic principles of communism and wrapped in the distinctive values of Spanish identity, led them to believe they had been chosen for a historic mission: to become the future leaders of the Spanish Republic once the war ended and fascism had been defeated.

All this planning served for nil. None of the promises that were made to them were ever fulfilled. No one gave back their lost childhoods or the youth they had sacrificed. All their dreams ended up broken. And only thanks to the certainty that what they lived through deserved to be told and their awareness of the necessity of preserving their memory and transmitting it from generation to generation so that no people would ever again live through the suffering they experienced, are we able today to know and reconstruct their history.

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⁴⁶In the construction of these networks, the support of their collective identity, an essential role has been played by all the places where they regularly met and meet (like Club Chkalov, 1940 and the Spanish Centre of Moscow, 1965) as well as the numerous acts and celebrations that they continue to organise (to commemorate their departure from Spain or the end of the Second World War) and the associations to which they pertain (Nostalgia Foundation, War and Exile Archive Association, Vasnigue Association, Association of the Descendants of the Spanish Exiles, Association of Children of the War of Euskadi, Association of Returnees from the USSR, “Children of the War,” among many others). See, in this respect, Antonio Gómez López-Quirón, “Identidad y memoria colectiva en Los Niños de Rusia,” *Colorado Review of Hispanic Studies* 1, no. 1 (2003): 129–57; and Jesús J. Alonso Carballés, “Las organizaciones de memoria de los Niños del Exilio: de la memoria a la historia,” *Amnis. Revue de civilisation contemporaine Europe/Ameriques* 2 (2011), <http://amnis.revues.org/1501> (accessed 26 May 2015).

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