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Counter-Revolutionary Humanitarianism: The French General Consulate in Barcelona during the Spanish Civil War (1936–9)

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Concerned by the revolutionary violence that spread in Catalonia after the failed military coup of 17 and 18 July 1936 led to civil war, France's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Quai d'Orsay) appointed veteran 'front-line' consuls in Barcelona. These consuls had already experienced revolutionary events during the Russian civil wars; however, their prior experience shaped their interpretation of the Spanish Civil War, leading them to fear a Bolshevik contagion beyond the Pyrenees border. Their bias thus shaped the French general consulate's humanitarian action in Barcelona. Far from being strictly neutral and impartial, it adopted a resolutely counter-revolutionary stance.

Introduction

As an eyewitness to a multitude of these episodes, which were an expression of the elevation of the soul and which caused the death of devoted French civil servants and made others suffer martyrdom, with the sole aim of saving human lives, by removing them from the Marxist fury, I feel it my duty, if only for a principle of moral order, to make known, by these lines, the altruistic mission accomplished by France during the terrible red days in Catalonia... The French Embassy and the French consulates in Spain made a powerful contribution to maintaining the mark of humanitarianism in this cruel country.¹

In these words, the former French honorary consul in Tarragona, José María Merelo de Barberá, paid tribute in 1941 to the humanitarian work of the French general consulate in Barcelona during the Spanish Civil War. Its agents had helped to save 6,922 Spaniards and Catalans from death, as the failed military coup of 17 and 18 July 1936 had plunged the country into a bloody fratricidal war. The political violence caused the deaths of nearly 176,000 people.² Faced with this situation, many foreign representatives in Spain invested in the humanitarian field, offering diplomatic asylum on a

¹José María Merelo de Barberá, 'L'Espagne et la France: L'Œuvre humanitaire accomplie par le Consulat Général de France à Barcelone, pendant la Guerre Civile espagnole', 1941, Centre des Archives Diplomatique de Nantes (CADN), 72PO/2/43.

²Paul Preston counted 49,000 victims of violence in the republican territory and 127,000 victims of rebel repression. See Paul Preston, *The Spanish Holocaust: Inquisition and Extermination in Twentieth-Century Spain* (London: Harperpress, 2013), 665.

massive scale in Madrid's embassies and legations, or in evacuating threatened people by sea.³ They were soon joined by many relief organisations such as the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the Save the Children Fund; but also by partisan groups that came to the help of the republican cause, such as the Spanish Medical Aid Mission, Welcome Committee for Children from Spain (*Comité d'Accueil aux Enfants d'Espagne*; CAEE) run by the French General Confederation of Labour (*Confédération Générale du Travail*; CGT), the pro-Communist International Red Aid or the anarchist International Anti-Fascist Solidarity (*Solidaridad Internacional Antifascista*; SIA).⁴

The involvement of these partisan groups has led historians to question 'the precarious meaning of humanitarian neutrality in the resolution of the dilemmas arising in the context of a civil war'.⁵ Nevertheless, diplomatic humanitarian interventions during the Spanish Civil War was long considered to be neutral and impartial by a historiography that adopted a predominantly hagiographic prism, despite the fact that they mainly benefited rebel supporters and, in many cases, served as a front for rebel intelligence services.⁶ This reality forces us to take a fresh look at the humanitarian

³On diplomatic asylum, see Javier Rubio, *Asilos y canjes durante la guerra civil española* (Barcelona: Planeta, 1979); Antonio Manuel Moral Roncal, *El asilo diplomático en la Guerra Civil española* (Madrid: Actas, 2001); Antonio Manuel Moral Roncal, *Diplomacia, humanitarismo y espionaje en la Guerra Civil española* (Madrid: Biblioteca Nueva, 2008). On the naval evacuations, see James Cable, *The Royal Navy and the Siege of Bilbao* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979); Peter Gretton, *El factor olvidado: La marina británica y la guerra civil española* (Madrid: Editorial San Martín, 1984); Willard C. Frank Jr., 'Multinational Naval Cooperation in Spanish Civil War, 1936', *Naval War College Review* 47, no. 2 (1994): 72–101; Rubèn Doll-Petit, *Els catalans de Gènova: Història de l'èxode i l'adhesió d'una classe dirigent en temps de guerra* (Barcelona: Publicacions de l'Abadia de Montserrat, 2003); Peter Anderson, 'British Government Maritime Evacuations in the Spanish Civil War, 1936–1939', *War in History* 26, no. 1 (2019): 65–85; Arnau González i Vilalta, *Humanitarisme, consolats i negocis bruts: Evacuacions a Barcelona (1936–1938)* (Barcelona: Editorial Base, 2020).

⁴For an overview, see: Dolores Martín-Moruno, 'Feeling Humanitarianism during the Spanish Civil War and Republican Exile', *Journal of Spanish Cultural Studies* 4–1 (2020): 1–13. On the ICRC and other relief organisations, see: Pierre Marqués, *La Croix-Rouge pendant la Guerre d'Espagne (1936–1939): Les missionnaires de l'humanitaire* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2000); Gabriel Petrus, *Humanitarian Relief in the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939)* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2013); Francisco Alia Miranda, *La otra cara de la guerra. Solidaridad y humanitarismo en la España republicana durante la guerra civil (1936–1939)* (Madrid: Sílex, 2020); Sébastien Farré, *L'Affaire Henny. Le Comité international de la Croix-Rouge et les massacres de Paracuellos del Jarama (novembre–décembre 1936)* (Geneva: Georg, 2022). On the humanitarian involvement of partisan groups, see: Michael Alpert, 'Humanitarianism and Politics in the British Response to the Spanish Civil War, 1936–9', *European History Quarterly* 14, no. 4 (1984): 423–40; Célia Keren, 'When the CGT Did Humanitarian Work: Spanish Children Evacuated to France (1936–1939)', *Le Mouvement Social* 264 (2018): 15–39; Laurence Brown, "'Pour Aider Nos Frères d'Espagne": Humanitarian Aid, French Women, and Popular Mobilization during the Front Populaire', *French Politics, Culture & Society* 25, no. 1 (2007): 30–48; Valentin Cionini, 'Solidarité Internationale Antifasciste, ou l'humanitaire au service des idées anarchistes', *Diacronie* 7, no. 3 (2011), available at <https://doi.org/10.4000/diacronie.3311> (last visited Apr. 2025).

⁵Martín-Moruno, 'Feeling Humanitarianism', 3.

⁶This hagiographic prism is especially true for Rubio, *Asilos y canjes*; Moral Roncal, *El asilo diplomático*; Moral Roncal, *Diplomacia, humanitarismo y espionaje*; Javier Cervera Gil, *Madrid en Guerra. La Ciudad clandestina, 1936–1939* (Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1998); Mario Crespo Ballesteros, 'Félix Schlayer: Asilo diplomático y humanitarismo en la Guerra Civil española', *Cuadernos de la Escuela Diplomática* 53 (2014): 249–330. A benevolent prism can also be found, to a lesser extent, in British historiography; Tom Buchanan, 'Edge of the Darkness: British "Front-Line" Diplomacy in the Spanish Civil War, 1936–1937', *Contemporary European History* 3, no. 12 (2003): 279–303; Stephen Rainbird, 'Examining Front-Line Diplomatic British Attitudes to the Spanish Civil War through John Leche and His Shifting Sympathies in Spain, 1937–1938', in *New Journeys in Iberian Studies: A (Trans-)National and (Trans)Regional Exploration*, ed. Mark Gant, Paco Ruzzante and Anneliese Hatton (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018), 204–14. Peter Anderson's work on British diplomats is a notable exception: Anderson, 'British Government'; Peter Anderson, 'The Chetwode Commission and British Diplomatic Responses to Violence behind the Lines in the Spanish Civil War', *European History Quarterly* 2, no. 42 (2012): 235–60. Regarding the recent revision of historiography that has documented the connections between foreign diplomats involved in humanitarian action and rebel espionage, see Sara Núñez de Prado Clavell and Javier Rodríguez Abengózar, 'La quinta columna y el cuerpo diplomático en la Guerra Civil española', *Pasado y Memoria: Revista de Historia Contemporánea* 19 (2019): 183–203; Carlos Píriz, 'Decanos del humanitarismo y la perfidia: La colaboración de las Misiones Diplomáticas de Argentina y Chile con la causa franquista durante la guerra civil española (y después), 1936–1969', *Culture & History Digital Journal* 10, no. 1 (2021), available at <https://doi.org/10.3989/chdj.2021.010> (last visited Apr. 2025); Carlos Píriz, *En zona roja: La Quinta Columna en la guerra civil española* (Granada: Comares, 2022).

action of foreign diplomats and consuls in Spain, using the example of the French general consulate in Barcelona.

To do so, I will draw on the contribution of the New Diplomatic History, which places at its heart the individual study of diplomats, considering their practices, culture(s) and social environments.⁷ I will show that the humanitarian action of the French general consulate was mainly a response to the Spanish revolution, which preoccupied French representatives in republican Spain. To deal with the situation, the Quai d'Orsay appointed experienced 'front-line' agents⁸ who had to deal with similar events in the past, especially during the Russian revolutions and civil wars (1917–26). But, by doing so, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs appointed representatives whose interpretation of the Spanish Civil War was decisively shaped by their prior experiences. Consequently, they quickly remobilised the Bolshevik 'fantasy' they were confronted with after the First World War.⁹ The fear of revolution and its spread beyond the Pyrenees border thus contributed to an undeniably counter-revolutionary tone to the humanitarian action undertaken by French diplomats in Spain. Finally, this case also illustrates the autonomy the Quai d'Orsay and its agents demonstrated when they sought to counterbalance official government policy in favour of the Spanish Republic by investing in the humanitarian field.

From Revolution to Humanitarian Evacuations

The Spanish military coup of 17 and 18 July 1936 shook the republican state, as it lost its monopoly on coercion. José Giral's government allowed the distribution of arms to working-class organisations to stop the military rebellion. Armed workers took advantage of the situation to launch a revolutionary insurgency. Over time, republican institutions were damaged by political fragmentation as local members of leftist organisations began to change Spanish society and directly administer justice and public order.¹⁰ They pursued their political and class adversaries, including right-wing leaders, the industrial and commercial upper bourgeoisie, managers, conservative lawyers and journalists, landowners, judges, doctors and local notables. Around 50,000 people fell under the revolutionary committees' violence in the republican territory during the civil war, most of them before the end of 1936.¹¹ The Catholic clergy was especially targeted, with 6,832 members being murdered.¹²

⁷On the New Diplomatic History, see Houssine Alloul and Michael Auwers, 'What Is (New in) New Diplomatic History?', *Journal of Belgian History* 48, no. 4 (2018): 112–22; Laurence Badel and Stanislas Jeannesson, 'Introduction: Une histoire globale de la diplomatie?', *Monde(s)* 5, no. 1 (2014): 6–26. See also *Diplomatica: A Journal of Diplomacy and Society*, edited by the Network of New Diplomatic History (Leiden: Brill).

⁸Following Tom Buchanan, I borrow the expression 'front-line' diplomats or agents from Geoffrey Thompson's autobiography title, to designate and describe the experience of diplomatic and consular officials in the field. Tom Buchanan, 'Edge of Darkness: British "Front-line" Diplomacy in the Spanish Civil War, 1936–1937', *Contemporary European History* 12, no. 3 (2003): 279–303; Geoffrey Thompson, *Front-Line Diplomat* (London: Hutchinson, 1959).

⁹Robert Gerwarth and John Horne, 'Bolshevism as Fantasy: Fear of Revolution and Counter-Revolutionary Violence, 1917–1923', in *War in Peace: Paramilitary Violence in Europe after the Great War*, ed. Robert Gerwarth and John Horne (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 40–51.

¹⁰On the weakening of the Spanish republican state in the aftermath of the military coup of July 1936, see Helen Graham, *The Spanish Republic at War, 1936–1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 79–104; Julián Casanova, *The Spanish Republic and Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 179–211.

¹¹On revolutionary violence in the republican rearguard, see José Luis Ledesma, 'Total War Behind the Frontlines? An Inquiry into the Violence on the Republican Side in the Spanish Civil War', in *'If You Tolerate This ...': The Spanish Civil War in the Age of Total War*, ed. Martin Baumeister and Stefanie Schüler-Springorum (Frankfurt: Campus, 2008), 154–68; Preston, *The Spanish Holocaust*, 221–58; José Luis Ledesma, 'Una retaguardia al rojo: Las violencias en la zona republicana', in *Violencia roja y azul: España, 1936–1950*, ed. Francisco Espinosa Maestre (Barcelona: Crítica, 2010), 246.

¹²On anticlerical violence, see Julio de la Cueva, 'Religious Persecution, Anticlerical Tradition and Revolution: On Atrocities against the Clergy during the Spanish Civil War', *Journal of Contemporary History* 33, no. 3 (1998): 355–69; Mary Vincent, "'The Keys of the Kingdom": Religious Violence in the Spanish Civil War, July–August 1936', in *The Splintering of Spain: Cultural History and the Spanish Civil War, 1936–1939*, ed. Chris Ealham and Michael Richards (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 68–89; José Luis Ledesma, 'An Inquiry into the Anticlerical Violence in the Spanish Civil War (1936–39)', in *Exploring Violence in Families and Societies*, ed. Santoshi Rana, Lynn Frederick and Aysun Kiran (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 89–96;

As Julián Casanova has underlined, this ‘violence against people of order and the clergy did immense harm to the republican cause abroad.’¹³ Foreign diplomats – among them, the French representatives in Spain – were horrified and denounced the ‘atrocities’ they witnessed, which they attributed to the Iberian Anarchist Federation (*Federación Anarquista Ibérica*; FAI). They predicted the collapse of the republican government into disorder, especially in Catalonia.¹⁴ The province of Barcelona was an anarcho-syndicalist stronghold; there, the National Confederation of Labour (*Confederación Nacional del Trabajo*; CNT) and the FAI soon challenged the authority of the Generalitat, the local, autonomous government of Catalonia. They first dominated the Central Committee of Anti-Fascist Militia (*Comité Central de Milicias Antifascistas*; CCMA), which had been created to oppose the military coup and quickly acted as a parallel authority. At the end of September 1936, leaders of the CNT–FAI finally joined the Catalan government.¹⁵

Alarmed by the revolutionary violence and disorder that spread through the republican territory, foreign powers promptly instructed their navies and their representatives in Spain to evacuate their nationals. From 20 July to the end of October 1936, 58,000 out of 100,000 foreigners were extracted from the Iberian Peninsula, mainly by British, French, Italian, German and American men-of-war and steamships.¹⁶ However, these evacuations were quickly extended to Spaniards threatened by the revolutionary committees. On 17 August, the French government, induced by its consuls and naval officers, officially approved the embarkation of Spaniards whose lives were at risk.¹⁷ The French general consulate in Barcelona soon coordinated the most significant humanitarian effort, as it evacuated 6,922 religious and right-wing Spaniards out of the 15,000 that the French diplomats claimed to have saved during the civil war.¹⁸ This can be explained by the large French community registered in Catalonia, which justified frequent visits of the French navy and provided the general consulate with a substantial pool of volunteers for its operations.¹⁹ Barcelona’s proximity to Marseille provides an additional explanation.

Maria Thomas, *The Faith and the Fury: Popular Anticlerical Violence and Iconoclasm in Spain, 1931–1936* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2013).

¹³ Casanova, *Spanish Republic*, 172.

¹⁴ On French diplomats and consuls, see Nathan Rousselot, ‘Violences et répression dans l’Espagne en guerre (1936–1937): Regard diplomatique, regard orienté?’, *Guerres mondiales et conflits contemporains* 279 (2020): 121–40. On their British counterparts, see Maria Thomas, ‘The Front Line of Albion’s Perfidy: Inputs into the Making of British Policy towards Spain: The Racism and Snobbery of Norman King’, *International Journal of Iberian Studies* 20, no. 2 (2007): 105–27.

¹⁵ On anarcho-syndicalist power in Catalonia, see Julián Casanova, *Anarchism, the Republic and Civil War in Spain: 1931–1939* (London: Routledge, 2005), 99–145; François Godicheau, *La Guerre d’Espagne: République et révolution en Catalogne (1936–1939)* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2004), 96–150; Chris Ealham, *Anarchism and the City: Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Barcelona, 1898–1937* (Chico: AK Press, 2010), 167–84; Danny Evans, *Revolution and the State: Anarchism in the Spanish Civil War, 1936–1939* (London: Routledge, 2018).

¹⁶ On foreign nationals’ evacuations, see Frank, ‘Multinational Naval Cooperation’, 72–101; René Sabatier de Lachadenède, *La Marine française et la guerre civile espagnole, 1936–1939* (Vincennes: Service historique de la Marine, 1993), 3–12; Paul G. Halpern, ed., *The Mediterranean Fleet, 1930–1939* (London: Routledge, 2016), 193; González i Vilalta, *Humanitarisme*, 35–93.

¹⁷ González i Vilalta, *Humanitarisme*, 99–100; Sabatier de Lachadenède, *Marine*, 10. See also Merelo, ‘L’Espagne et la France’, CADN, 72PO/2/43.

¹⁸ This estimation is extracted from the database I compiled for my PhD thesis: Nathan Rousselot, ‘Les diplomates français et britanniques face à la guerre civile espagnole (1936–1939): De la perception des violences aux interventions humanitaires’ (PhD diss., Nantes Université and Universidad Complutense de Madrid, 2023). The database can be consulted online: Nathan Rousselot and Alette Roux, ‘HumaDiEsp: Espagnols protégés par la diplomatie française durant la guerre civile – bénéficiant de l’asile diplomatique ou évacués à bord de navires français par les consulats’, NAKALA – <https://nakala.fr> (Huma-Num – CNRS), 2024, available at <https://nakala.fr/10.34847/nkl.c2ba4weq> (last visited Jan. 2025). About the 15,000 lives the French diplomats claimed to have saved, see verbal note from the French embassy in Madrid to the Spanish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 7 Apr. 1942, CADN, 396PO/C1/112, 11–6.

¹⁹ Seven thousand French nationals were registered with the French general consulate in Barcelona. Pauline Deffois, ‘Les Consuls de France en Espagne dans la tourmente de la guerre civile (juillet 1936–mars 1939)’, (master’s diss., Université d’Angers, 2002), 17.

These activities were led by Jean Trémoulet, who had been consul general in Barcelona since 1934. He organised an evacuation committee that incorporated several pre-eminent members of the French colony, from manufacturers and business owners to civil servants from the French tourist office and the general consulate.²⁰ From July to September 1936, he supervised the embarkation of nearly 1,600 Spaniards on two liners chartered by the Quai d'Orsay, the *Corte II* and the *Anfa*, and on various French men-of-war.²¹ Personal factors seem to have been decisive in the extension of the evacuations to Spanish nationals. As a former councillor of the French embassy noted, Georges Monjou, Trémoulet's deputy, 'had made acquaintance in a society not particularly favoured by these events, and his constant efforts were devoted to saving people suspected of white sympathies.'²² However, the consul general's involvement soon attracted the attention of the revolutionary committees, which manifested their 'hostility' against him.²³ As he was watched by militants of the CNT, he told his British colleague that he had received 'warnings' threatening his life.²⁴ A few days later, Norman King informed the Foreign Office that Trémoulet was 'paying a visit to Paris, ostensibly to report to the French Government, but really because he fears for his personal safety'.²⁵ Indeed, a new acting consul general was appointed to replace him on 18 September 1936: Jacques Pingaud.²⁶

Jacques Pingaud: A Front-Line Veteran of the Post-War Revolutionary Era

Born in Saint Petersburg on 5 June 1882, Jacques Pingaud was an experienced diplomat, having entered the consular service in 1913. When the Spanish Civil War began, he was just returning to France from São Paulo, where he had been consul since 1933.²⁷ However, his appointment to the consulate in Barcelona was not coincidental. He was a close friend of Count Louis de Robien, the Quai d'Orsay's director of personnel, whom he had met at the French embassy in Petrograd during the Russian revolutions. From April 1917 to December 1918, Robien had witnessed the qualities that Pingaud demonstrated in the collection of information, the negotiation with de facto revolutionary powers and the defence of French nationals and interests. In his diary, Robien portrayed the bravery of his colleague, who was not afraid to resolutely speak out against his anarchist and Bolshevik interlocutors.²⁸ Pingaud was entrusted with the guard of the embassy building when it moved to Arkhangelsk in July 1918, for which the French ambassador, Joseph Noulens, praised his 'abnegation'.²⁹ Later, Pingaud joined the Allied forces that disembarked in Arkhangelsk and received

²⁰ González i Vilalta, *Humanitarisme*, 88–9; *Les Œuvres françaises à l'Étranger: Annuaire publié par l'Union des Français de l'Étranger, 1937* (Paris: Union des Français de l'Étranger, 1937); 'Liste des personnes ayant prêté leur concours au Consulat Général de France durant les mois de juillet-août', CADN, 72PO/2/43; Information sheets on volunteers of the French general consulate in Barcelona, CADN, 72PO/E/14.

²¹ Rousselot, 'Les diplomates', 467.

²² Letter from Jacques Fouques-Duparc to Albert Lamarle, 29 Nov. 1939, CADN, 396PO/C1/35.

²³ Telegram from René Bonjean to the Quai d'Orsay, 12 Sept. 1936, CADN, 396PO/C1/35.

²⁴ Telegram from the Quai d'Orsay to the French embassy in Madrid, 13 Sept. 1936, CADN, 396PO/C1/35; Telegram from Norman King to the Foreign Office, 14 Sept. 1936, the National Archives (TNA), FO 371/20539, W11335.

²⁵ Telegram from Norman King to the Foreign Office, 20 Sept. 1936, TNA, FO 371/20540, W11762.

²⁶ Telegram from René Massigli to the French Navy headquarters, 18 Sept. 1936, Archives du ministère des Affaires étrangères – La Courneuve (AMAE–C), 395QO/585.

²⁷ *Annuaire diplomatique et consulaire de la République Française, 1936* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1936), 332–3.

²⁸ Count Louis de Robien, 'Journal tenu en Russie, 1917–1919', Archives Nationales (AN), 427AP/5. The count's diary was later translated and published: Louis de Robien, *The Diary of a Diplomat in Russia, 1917–1918* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970).

²⁹ Joseph Noulens, *Mon Ambassade en Russie soviétique, 1917–1919*, vol. 2 (Paris: Plon, 1933), 158.

a distinction from the military government they established there.³⁰ He remained in Russia until October 1919.³¹

Pingaud's experience in Russia was not his only exposure to a revolutionary situation. From November 1919 to 1925, he was successively appointed in Berlin, Hamburg, Leipzig and Munich.³² There, he witnessed the German revolutions that shook the Weimar Republic.³³ By 1937, he could present himself as a 'veteran ... of revolutionary events'.³⁴ Eirik Labonne, who knew Pingaud since his stay in Russia and became his superior after being appointed French ambassador in Barcelona in November 1937, eloquently summed up his front-line career: 'Throughout his life, he ... has only dealt with papers and matters according to men, personal relationships, events, especially troubled events, turbulent local politics and revolutions.'³⁵ Therefore, Pingaud had the right profile to face the delicate situation in Barcelona and to defend French interests.

A few weeks after his arrival in Catalonia, Pingaud managed to achieve 'a notable relaxation in [his] relations with extremists'.³⁶ To achieve his aims, he did not hesitate to engage in some sort of negotiation with the local committees, taking 'advantage of any service requested' of him by the militias or the authorities. According to José María Merelo de Barberá, who worked closely with Pingaud, these negotiations often amounted to a form of corruption. The consul general and his collaborators usually carried packets of *Gauloises* tobacco when they had to undertake 'a difficult step'. Merelo additionally mentioned the 'discreet queue' of 'men of law, the most senior figures of the Republic and the Generalitat of Catalonia', that formed in front of the consulate 'in search of the narcotic'. He stated: 'Our Consul General knew how to take advantage of these weaknesses, and it was not without an interesting compensation ... that he acceded to the desperate requests of the recalcitrant smokers.'³⁷

However, these mutually beneficial negotiations could also accommodate a firmer stance on Pingaud's part. According to Merelo, who described him as 'energetic' and 'cunning', Pingaud was able to assert himself in front of his interlocutors who feared him.³⁸ This depiction was confirmed by the French chargé d'affaires in Valencia, Jean Payart, who praised his behaviour: 'M. Pingaud, with his qualities of firmness and flexibility, fortunately combined and well adapted to the circumstances, seems to have drawn the best practical advantage from an essentially changing situation to defend the material and moral interests entrusted to him.'³⁹ Eirik Labonne was equally satisfied by Pingaud's merits, stating that he was 'constantly putting himself on the line, working courageously and skilfully', and 'knew how to deal with the de facto authorities to defend our fellow citizens.'⁴⁰ These qualities were soon put to good use in the humanitarian activities of the French general consulate.

³⁰ *Annuaire*, 332–3. On Allied interventions in the Russian civil wars, see Peter Kenez, *Civil War in South Russia, 1919–1920: The Defeat of the Whites* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977); J. Kim Munholland, 'The French Army and Intervention in Southern Russia, 1918–1919', *Cahiers du Monde russe et soviétique* 22, no. 1 (1981): 43–66; Michael J. Carley, *Revolution and Intervention: the French Government and the Russian Civil War, 1917–1919* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1983); Jean-David Avenel, *Interventions alliées pendant la guerre civile russe, 1918–1920* (Paris: Economica, 2001); Jonathan D. Smele, 'Allied Intervention', in *Historical Dictionary of the Russian Civil Wars, 1916–1926*, ed. Jonathan D. Smele (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015); Lûdmila Gennad'evna Novikova, *An Anti-Bolshevik Alternative: The White Movement and the Civil War in the Russian North* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2018).

³¹ Jacques Pingaud's 1936 annual assessment, 30 Jan. 1937, AMAE–C, 395QO/585.

³² *Annuaire*, 332–3.

³³ On the German revolutions, see Pierre Broué, *The German Revolution, 1917–1923* (Leiden: Brill, 2005); Mark Jones, *Founding Weimar: Violence and the German Revolution of 1918–1919* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Robert Gerwarth, *The Vanquished: Why the First World War Failed to End* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016), 118–52.

³⁴ Jacques Pingaud's 1936 annual assessment, 30 Jan. 1937, AMAE–C, 395QO/585.

³⁵ Eirik Labonne had been appointed to the French consulate in Moscow from 1917 to 1919, although he frequently visited Petrograd. Letter from Eirik Labonne to Louis de Robien, 14 Dec. 1937, AMAE–C, 395QO/585.

³⁶ Letter from Jacques Pingaud to Louis de Robien, 4 Oct. 1936, AMAE–C, 395QO/585.

³⁷ Merelo, 'L'Espagne et la France', CADN, 72PO/2/43.

³⁸ Merelo, 'L'Espagne et la France', CADN, 72PO/2/43.

³⁹ Telegram from Jean Payart to the Quai d'Orsay, 16 July 1937, AMAE–C, 395QO/585.

⁴⁰ Dispatch from Eirik Labonne to the Quai d'Orsay, 13 Jan. 1938, AMAE–C, 395QO/585.

Smuggling the Refugees Out: Jacques Pingaud's 'Wheeling and Dealings'

With the formation of Josep Tarradellas's government of Catalonia on 26 September 1936, which included three CNT representatives, the evacuations of Spanish nationals became more difficult. The anarchist militias reinforced their control over port installations despite the protests of foreign consuls, who were put under increased surveillance.⁴¹ Furthermore, consuls lost the support they had found within the Generalitat since the beginning of the war when Josep Maria Espanya and Ventura Gassol, who provided passports for Spanish refugees, were forced into exile because of threats from anarchists.⁴²

This situation forced Jacques Pingaud to seek 'stratagems' and 'wheeling and dealings' to evacuate the Spaniards who requested his help or were recommended to him by French authorities or Francoist supporters.⁴³ He did not hesitate to provide his protégés with forged passports. The task was specifically entrusted to a chancellery clerk, Antonin Lecouteux, who had worked for the general consulate since 1926.⁴⁴ As Merelo later related, he 'converted into French, by safe-conducts and passports signed by him, more Spaniards than are born every day in Spain'.⁴⁵ The French officials in Barcelona made use of certain advantages to conceal this clandestine activity. According to Norman King, it was 'comparatively easy to pass off a Catalan as a Frenchman from the south', as the 'language spoken in Provence and Catalonia is almost identical'. Additionally, the officials could rely on a large French local colony that allowed 'many more contacts between people in Catalonia and in France, both for business and family matters'. It provided 'the French Consul with more grounds for requesting passports for people wishing to go to France'.⁴⁶ On other occasions, French representatives used uniforms from the French navy to deceive the port guards' vigilance. The uniforms were provided by Captain Pierre Quiriconi, the commanding officer of the *Iméréthie II*, the liner chartered by the Quai d'Orsay for humanitarian evacuations since November 1936 (replacing the *Anfa* and the *Corte II*). The Spanish refugees dressed as French sailors were then concealed by *Iméréthie II* crewmembers when they passed the control checkpoint in the harbour.⁴⁷ However, these methods were not infallible. In November 1936, the consulate had to organise the release of one of its collaborators, Paul Cachet, who was detained with a Spanish refugee whom he had tried to get on board a ship using a French passport.⁴⁸

Again, these operations were facilitated by corruption. Pingaud and Quiriconi took advantage of the supplies shortage in Barcelona. Quiriconi handed out 'a quantity of bread, cod, tobacco, etc.' to the control patrols, who turned 'a blind eye to some suspicious people passing by'.⁴⁹ The consul general also negotiated favours with the local authorities to ensure that the evacuations were carried out successfully. For instance, to secure the release and the evacuation of Father Arago, a cleric held by the FAI, Pingaud sought the help of the president of the Barcelona Court of Appeal. In exchange for his collaboration, Pingaud provided him and his family with valid passports so that they could

⁴¹ Dispatch from Jacques Pingaud to the Quai d'Orsay, 2 Nov. 1936, CADN, 72PO/2/101; Dispatch from Norman King to the Foreign Office, 3 Nov. 1936, TNA, FO 371/20546, W15415.

⁴² González i Vilalta, *Humanitarisme*, 101–3.

⁴³ Dispatch from Jacques Pingaud to the Quai d'Orsay, 21 Mar. 1937, CADN, 72PO/2/101; Letter from Norman King to Walter Roberts, 27 May 1937, TNA, FO 371/21302, W10570.

⁴⁴ Antonin Lecouteux's personal career file, AMAE–C, 395QO/428.

⁴⁵ Merelo, 'L'Espagne et la France', CADN, 72PO/2/43.

⁴⁶ Letter from Norman King to Walter Roberts, 27 May 1937, TNA, FO 371/21302, W10570.

⁴⁷ Merelo, 'L'Espagne et la France', CADN, 72PO/2/43; Dispatch from the French Navy headquarters to the Quai d'Orsay, 10 June 1937, CADN, 72PO/2/101. This stratagem was also used by Argentinian and, to a lesser extent, British representatives. See Tomás Merino, 'El asilo diplomático y naval argentino durante la guerra civil española: Los marinos argentinos del torpedero Tucumán y del crucero 25 de Mayo en 1936/1937', *Boletín del Centro Naval* 844 (2016): 276–95, 286; Anderson, 'British Government', 72.

⁴⁸ Dispatch from the French director general of national security to the Quai d'Orsay, 20 Apr. 1937, CADN, 72PO/2/101.

⁴⁹ Merelo, 'L'Espagne et la France', CADN, 72PO/2/43.

also take refuge in France.⁵⁰ The general consulate agents even paid members of the FAI to facilitate the release and evacuation of some pre-eminent Spaniards. The escape of Josep Cirera i Voltà, a leader of the Spanish Confederation of Autonomous Rights (*Confederación Española de Derechas Autónomas*; CEDA) in Catalonia, was achieved through bribery. The money was provided by the Catalan financier Francesc Cambó, who had taken refuge in Paris and worked in close collaboration with the Quai d'Orsay.⁵¹ French representatives in Barcelona also had to pay 75,000 francs to the anarchists to evacuate the family of Joaquin Bau, the president of the Francoist Committee on Industry and Trade (*Comisión de Industria y Comercio*) at Burgos.⁵² The agreement was secured by Merelo's son, Juan Merelo-Barberá y Beltrán, who was in contact with the rebel official.⁵³ Thanks to these schemes, the French general consulate in Barcelona was able to smuggle 6,922 Spaniards out of Catalonia.

A Ruling-Class Exile: A Profile of France's Protégés

Tracing the backgrounds of these Spanish refugees can be challenging, as the lists established by the consulate generally contain no more information than their names, the dates of their embarkation, the ships they boarded and the number of children accompanying them.⁵⁴ We can only ascertain that the French representatives in Barcelona evacuated 6,922 Spaniards, of whom 4,239 were women and 1,055 were children (76 per cent). In addition, almost half of the women evacuated were nuns.⁵⁵ These figures illustrate two things: the traditional preoccupation of French diplomats with the protection of Catholics from persecution,⁵⁶ and the greater ease with which the consular agents could evacuate women and children, whose categories tended to merge with those of non-combatants as they were commonly considered innocent.⁵⁷ Unfortunately, the professions of the refugees were rarely recorded.⁵⁸

However, we can deduce their social origins from Rubèn Doll-Petit's study of the Catalan refugees evacuated from Barcelona by the Italian navy from July to November 1936. He established that three-quarters of the men belonged to the political and economic ruling class; they were members of the bourgeoisie or the clergy, or were Catalan youth seeking to desert. The population he studied was made up of 24.26 per cent clerics, 22.09 per cent merchants, 13.75 per cent professionals, 8.12 per cent industrialists, manufacturers, landowners and rentiers and 8.55 per cent students. Among women, 69 per cent were listed as housewives and 21 per cent as nuns. Therefore, Doll-Petit described these evacuations as the 'exile of a ruling class'.⁵⁹ We can assume that the refugees evacuated by the French

⁵⁰ Merelo, 'L'Espagne et la France', CADN, 72PO/2/43.

⁵¹ González i Vilalta, *Humanitarisme*, 100, 130–4.

⁵² Dispatch from Sir Henry Chilton to the Foreign Office, 17 Dec. 1936, TNA, FO 371/20556, W18618.

⁵³ Note from René Bonjean, first secretary at the French embassy in Saint-Jean-de-Luz, 24 Jan. 1937, CADN, 396PO/B/569, GC 4/C⁵.

⁵⁴ The lists are held in the general consulate archives in Nantes, CADN, 72PO/2/43; CADN, 72PO/2/50; CADN 72PO/2/100.

⁵⁵ Indeed, 1,935 nuns were evacuated by the French general consulate in Barcelona. Data extracted from Rousselot, 'Les diplomates', 868–9.

⁵⁶ On this aspect of French diplomacy, see Gilles Ferragu and Florian Michel, eds., *Diplomatie et religion: Au cœur de l'action culturelle de la France au XX^e siècle* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 2016). Additionally, these evacuations of Spanish nuns were also requested by the French religious orders established in Spain, such as the Daughters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul and the Congregation of the Sisters of St. Joseph: Letter from A. Plantou, Mother Superior General of the Congregation of the Sisters of St. Joseph, to Yvon Delbos, 3 Sept. 1936; dispatch from René Massigli to René Bonjean, 14 Sept. 1936; dispatch from Massigli to Bonjean, 16 Sept. 1936; and dispatch from Émile Charvériat to Bonjean, 9 Oct. 1936, CADN/396PO/B/580.

⁵⁷ On the categorisation of women and children as non-combatants, see Helen M. Kinsella, *The Image before the Weapon: A Critical History of Distinction between Combatant and Civilian* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015).

⁵⁸ If we exclude the 1,935 nuns, professions are mentioned for only seventy-eight of the 6,922 refugees. Rousselot, 'Les diplomates', 869.

⁵⁹ Rubèn Doll-Petit, *Els 'Catalans de Gènova': Història de l'èxode i adhesió d'una classe dirigent en temps de guerra* (Barcelona: Publicacions de l'Abadia de Montserrat, 2003), 74–5.

general consulate in Barcelona had a similar profile, especially if we take into consideration that of the Spanish refugees protected by the French embassy in Madrid at the same time. In the latter case, the upper classes and the clergy were also over-represented, with 22.4 per cent engineers and professionals, 13.6 per cent army officers, 13.3 per cent clerics, 12.2 per cent students and 6.1 per cent bankers, merchants, manufacturers, landowners and aristocrats.⁶⁰ This over-representation is not unexpected, since these social categories were among the most affected by the revolutionary violence.⁶¹

As Merelo noted, the consulate evacuated ‘thousands of clerics of both sexes, distinguished politicians, soldiers, bourgeois, etc.’ He also mentioned the ‘real fortunes in jewels and money’ that ‘were sheltered by the irreproachable French consular corps in Spain, who had them transported to France and placed in the hands of their rightful owners.’⁶² Indeed, the commercial attaché of the general consulate, Camille Robin, was accused by the Spanish government and the republican press of exporting ‘capital and jewellery’ via the *Iméréthie II*.⁶³ This safeguarding of assets and jewellery, which French diplomats had also ensured during the Russian revolutions, offers a good indication of the social origins of the refugees.⁶⁴ In general, the refugees belonged to the Spanish right, which was targeted for its support of the military coup of July 1936. According to Merelo, the general consulate came to the aid of ‘the unfortunate right-wingers and fascists.’⁶⁵ Its agents evacuated, among others, the lawyer and former deputy of the Regionalist League of Catalonia (*Lliga Regionalista de Catalunya*), Lluís Duran i Ventosa, as well as the financier and former monarchist mayor of Barcelona, Dario Rumeu y Freixas, baron of Viver.⁶⁶

A Revolutionary State on France’s Doorstep: Preventing the Spread of Anarchism and Communism

As a ‘right-wing man with deep-rooted religious feelings’ who had lost his fortune during the Russian revolutions, Jacques Pingaud had many reasons to feel empathy for these refugees.⁶⁷ However, he did not share the same empathy for those who sought to flee the Francoist advance. While evacuating Francoist supporters from Barcelona, Jacques Pingaud was simultaneously recommending that his government increase controls at the Pyrenees border in order to sort ‘undesirable’ elements from the republican refugees who might seek refuge in France. From 2 October 1936, he requested the Quai d’Orsay ‘to consider the rapid reintroduction of French visas on the passports of anyone entering [the French] territory from Spain, in anticipation of the ‘backflow likely to occur to Barcelona and towards our borders . . . of French and Spanish militiamen and anarchists.’⁶⁸

In actuality, Pingaud was alarmed by the possible instauration of ‘a Soviet or Anarchic State’ on France’s doorstep, in Catalonia.⁶⁹ His perceptions of the political situation were shaped by his

⁶⁰Data extracted from a population of 802 refugees protected by the French embassy of whom we know the professions. See Rousselot, ‘Les diplomates’, 871.

⁶¹See Julián Casanova, ‘Guerra civil y violencia política’, in *La guerra civil española* ed. Julián Casanova and Paul Preston (Madrid: Editorial Pablo Iglesias, 2008), 27–60, 46–9; Ledesma, ‘Retaguardia al rojo’, 177–8; Fernando del Rey, *Retaguardia roja: Violencia y revolución en la guerra civil española* (Barcelona: Galaxia Gutenberg, 2019), 425–9.

⁶²Merelo, ‘L’Espagne et la France’, CADN, 72PO/2/43.

⁶³Report on the ‘fascist activities’ of the French general consulate in Barcelona, 25 Mar. 1937, Archivo General de la Administración (AGA), Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores (MAE), 12/03069 RE5; Dispatch from Jacques Pingaud to the Quai d’Orsay, 8 Apr. 1937, CADN, 72PO/2/101.

⁶⁴On the protection of assets and valuables during the Russian revolutions, see Robien, ‘Journal’, AN, 427AP/5.

⁶⁵Merelo, ‘L’Espagne et la France’, CADN, 72PO/2/43.

⁶⁶*Una de las Obras de Socorro del Consulado General de Francia en Barcelona durante los trágicos acontecimientos sufridos en España, 1936–1939, 1939*, CADN, 72PO/2/50.

⁶⁷Merelo, ‘L’Espagne et la France’, CADN, 72PO/2/43; Jacques Pingaud’s 1936 annual assessment, 30 Jan. 1937, AMAE–C, 395QO/585.

⁶⁸Telegram from Jacques Pingaud to the Quai d’Orsay, 2 Oct. 1936, CADN, 396PO/B/571, GC 7/C².

⁶⁹Memorandum of a meeting between Norman King, Jacques Pingaud and the French admiral Jean Decoux, 30 Oct. 1936, TNA, FO 371/20546, W15087.

prior experiences during the Russian revolutions. As Norman King noted, ‘there is no doubt that Mr. Pingaud has made a close study of the situation here and that his knowledge of conditions in Russia, where he was employed from 1917–1919, has assisted him in understanding the situation in Catalonia.’⁷⁰ As a matter of fact, the French consul general confirmed this assumption in a letter to Louis de Robien, his former colleague in Petrograd:

As for the rest, the situation is bitterly similar to what we experienced together, at its worst . . . you have been informed. What we have to avoid is a downward spiral, because as far as I am concerned, the Russian card has already been played, there would be no point in taking it up again: the anarcho-sindicalists got the Soviet here.⁷¹

Pingaud’s alarm escalated with the Soviet Union’s growing intervention in Spain after September 1936, which included the provision of arms, military advisers and specialists to the republican government.⁷² Pingaud and his British colleague were especially wary of their Soviet counterpart, Vladimir Antonov-Ovseenko, who had just been appointed Soviet consul general in Barcelona.⁷³ Antonov-Ovseenko’s background was indeed a motive for concern, as not only had he played a decisive role in the military organisation of the Bolshevik coup against Alexander Kerensky’s government in November 1917, he had also planned the Bolshevik invasion of Ukraine in November 1918. As the plan had then consisted in ‘[approaching] the Ukrainian borders, [throwing] an army together, [forming] an effective government, and [advancing] into the chaos,’ Pingaud and King had good reasons to be alarmed about Antonov-Ovseenko’s appointment.⁷⁴ As a matter of fact, in their opinion, he was ‘undoubtedly working towards the establishment of a Soviet in Barcelona.’ They stated: ‘This man has already held important diplomatic posts and he is said to have been selected for Barcelona for this reason, and to be intended to be the first Minister accredited to the new bolshevist State of Catalonia.’⁷⁵

In this context, Pingaud feared that the Spanish revolutionary committees would make attempts ‘to induce French “comrades” on the other side of the Pyrenees to join them.’⁷⁶ He suspected that the anarchists of the CNT and the FAI wanted ‘to make Catalonia a testing ground for their libertarian ideals,’ and to create ‘in the Basque Country, in Aragon, on [the French] borders of the Pyrenees, in the regions still occupied by government troops, islands of resistance capable of holding out until the day when appeals, skilful propaganda, terrorist acts, an international incident, would overcome the non-interventionist Powers.’⁷⁷ His fear was shared by the French ambassador Jean Herbette, who had been posted in Madrid since 1931 and had taken refuge in Saint-Jean-de-Luz (France) in July 1936, along with most of the foreign diplomatic corps accredited in Spain.⁷⁸ Herbette also feared the

⁷⁰Dispatch from Norman King to the Foreign Office, 30 Oct. 1936, TNA, FO 371/20546, W15087.

⁷¹Letter from Jacques Pingaud to Louis de Robien, 10 Nov. 1936, AMAE–C, 395QO/585.

⁷²On Soviet intervention in the Spanish Civil War, see Daniel Kowalsky, *La Unión Soviética y la Guerra Civil Española* (Barcelona: Crítica, 2004); Yuri Rybalkin, *Stalin y España: La ayuda militar soviética a la República* (Madrid: Marcial Pons, 2008); Ángel Viñas, *Oro, guerra, diplomacia: La República española en tiempos de Stalin* (Barcelona: Crítica, 2023).

⁷³Antonov-Ovseenko arrived in Catalonia on 1 October 1936. Kowalsky, *La Unión Soviética*, 31.

⁷⁴Arthur E. Adams, *Bolsheviks in the Ukraine: The Second Campaign, 1918–1919* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1963), 25–7.

⁷⁵Memorandum of a meeting between Norman King, Jacques Pingaud and the French admiral Jean Decoux, 30 Oct. 1936, TNA, FO 371/20546, W15087.

⁷⁶Memorandum of a meeting between Norman King, Jacques Pingaud and the French admiral Jean Decoux, 30 Oct. 1936, TNA, FO 371/20546, W15087.

⁷⁷Extract from Jacques Pingaud’s report sent by Norman King to the Foreign Office, 3 Nov. 1936, TNA, FO 371/20546, W15415.

⁷⁸On Jean Herbette, see Yves Denéchère, *Jean Herbette (1878–1960): Journaliste et ambassadeur* (Brussels: PIE–Peter Lang, 2003). On the refuge of the foreign diplomatic corps in the French Basque Country, see Pedro Barruso Barés, ‘Diplomáticos ante la revolución: El Frente Popular de San Sebastián y el Cuerpo diplomático al comienzo de la guerra civil (julio–septiembre

development of the anarchy he witnessed in the Iberian Peninsula, as he felt it would threaten France's 'internal tranquillity, because the example of indiscipline and violence is contagious'.⁷⁹ This is why he supported Pingaud's recommendation to strictly restrict circulation on the Pyrenees border.⁸⁰

This concern was not remote; it reflected the incorporation of the Spanish Civil War into French political debates. The massive strikes that were initiated in May and June 1936 after the electoral victory of the Popular Front government led many conservatives to draw a parallel between the two countries. Thus emerged the idea of a 'fatal mechanism', according to which popular fronts would inexorably lead to civil war and atrocities, while anti-communism would grow stronger and win over new sections of society.⁸¹ The social mobilisations in France and the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War reactivated the Bolshevik 'fantasy' that had appeared in European societies during the revolutionary wave that followed the First World War.⁸² Since the summer of 1936, several rumours had been circulating about a revolutionary uprising in the south of France, prepared by the 'Soviets of Girona and Figueras', among others. Many government departments gave it some credit, including the army, the police and prefects and the Quai d'Orsay.⁸³

These rumours gave rise to a 'collective psychosis' among French officials, who built up the image of the 'undesirable' Spaniards who had to be denied access to French territory and expelled. They were soon considered as militiamen, anarchists, communists and 'reds'.⁸⁴ In November 1936, following the recommendations of the French representatives in Spain, the Ministry of the Interior ordered the surveillance and expulsion of Spaniards deemed undesirable because of their revolutionary activities. In March 1937, the Ministry reintroduced the requirement of a consular visa for foreigners wishing to travel to France from Spain.⁸⁵ This measure enabled consuls to monitor and prevent entry into France, thanks to lists of suspects drawn up by French intelligence services, which targeted anarchists and communists as a priority.⁸⁶

However, the republican government in Spain had tried from the start of the war to curb the revolutionary momentum in its territory. These efforts, which the socialist leader Francisco Largo Caballero initiated, were increased with the formation of Juan Negrín López's government in May 1937. The new cabinet, which comprised mainly moderate republicans and socialists and had reduced communist participation, removed the trade unions from power.⁸⁷ It immediately undertook to re-establish internal order, repressing the anarchist groups and the non-Stalinist communists of the Workers' Party of Marxist Unification (*Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista*; POUM), who wanted

de 1936', in *La España del Frente Popular: Política, sociedad, conflicto y cultura en la España de 1936*, ed. Eduardo González Calleja and Rocío Navarro Comas (Granada: Comares, 2011), 241–56.

⁷⁹Telegram from Jean Herbette to the Quai d'Orsay, 2 Aug. 1936, CADN, 396PO/B/553, GC 1/A¹.

⁸⁰Dispatch from Jean Herbette to the Quai d'Orsay, 17 Aug. 1936, CADN, 396PO/B/573, GC 7/D¹.

⁸¹Pierre Laborie, *L'Opinion française sous Vichy* (Paris: Seuil, 1990), 164–81; Serge Berstein and Jean-Jacques Becker, *Histoire de l'anticommunisme en France: Tome 1: 1917–1940* (Paris: Olivier Orban, 1987), 293–309.

⁸²Gerwarth and Horne, 'Bolshevism as Fantasy', 40–51.

⁸³Laborie, *L'Opinion française*, 164–81; Berstein and Becker, *Histoire de l'anticommunisme*, 293–309. On the attitude of the army, see Peter Jackson, 'Stratégie et idéologie: Le haut-commandement français et la guerre civile espagnole', *Guerres mondiales et conflits contemporains* 199 (2001): 115–17; Georges Vidal, *L'armée française et l'ennemi intérieur, 1917–1939: Enjeux stratégiques et culture politique* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2015), 103–5.

⁸⁴Joney Pérez Rodríguez, *Los indeseables españoles: La gestión de los refugiados en Francia (1936–1945)* (Madrid: Centro de Estudios Políticos y Constitucionales, 2022), 61–8.

⁸⁵Telegram from Yvon Delbos to the French embassy in Spain, 19 Mar. 1937, CADN, 396PO/B/571, GC 7/C²; Instructions of the French Ministry of the Interior regarding the conditions of entry into France for Spanish nationals, 6 Apr. 1937, AN, F/7/15172; Pérez Rodríguez, *Los indeseables*, 57.

⁸⁶Lists of suspected Spanish anarchists communicated to the French representatives in Spain, 15 Dec. 1936 and 12 Mar. 1937, CADN, 396PO/B/574, GC 7/D^{bis}; Telegram from René Castéran to Jean Herbette, 21 Jan. 1937, CADN, 396PO/B/571, GC 7/B³; Dispatch from Jacques Dutard to François Piétri, 10 Feb. 1942, CADN, 396PO/C1/112.

⁸⁷Representatives of the CNT, the FAI and the General Union of Workers (*Unión General del Trabajadores*; UGT) were expelled from the cabinet.

to carry on the revolution. By the summer of 1937, the revolution had ceased to exist in republican Spain.⁸⁸

Nevertheless, the restoration of the republican order in Spain was not enough to reassure Pingaud, who gradually replaced the anarchist threat with the communist one. In July 1937, when the authorities publicly denounced the ‘atrocities’ perpetrated by the revolutionary committees in the early stages of the war, the French consul general accused them of giving ‘maximum publicity to police operations designed to conceal the activities of the Russian Cheka operation in Spain.’⁸⁹

For the past few weeks, moreover, the arbitrary arrests and detentions of Spanish, foreign and French nationals have been increasing at a rate reminiscent of last year’s terrorist era. The scenario is always the same, only the protagonists change, and the new play will leave the stage when the means of domination from the rear are conquered. For the moment, the order is to crush Trotskyism and the libertarian army in order to establish the Stalinist order as quickly as possible.⁹⁰

The consul general accused agents of the republican security services of infiltrating France to monitor and clandestinely arrest Spanish and French nationals, as well as engaging in agitation campaigns and ‘all sorts of provocations and attacks.’⁹¹ His denunciations coincided with a wave of terrorist bombings in France during the summer and autumn of 1937.⁹² These events caused concern among the French authorities, who initially attributed the attacks to the anarchists and communists. The idea of a revolutionary and communist plot reappeared, while in September 1937 the French intelligence services again feared a coup by Catalan anarchists that would spread to France.⁹³ As a result, the French government decided to order the expulsion of all Spanish refugees who had entered the country since the start of the civil war. At the same time, the minister of the interior, Marx Dormoy, ordered the establishment of an ‘impassable barrier’ at the Catalan border.⁹⁴

In reality, the majority of these attacks were carried out by Francoist agents, supported by Italian operatives of the Organisation for Vigilance and Repression of Anti-Fascism (*Organizzazione per la Vigilanza e la Repressione dell’Antifascismo*; OVRA) and by French far-right militants belonging to the Secret Committee of Revolutionary Action (*Comité Secret d’Action Révolutionnaire*; CSAR), also known as *La Cagoule*.⁹⁵ While Pingaud’s hostility towards the revolution may have caused him to deflect responsibility for these attacks onto the anarchists and the communists, he nevertheless had good reasons for wanting to ban republican agents from entering French territory. Their surveillance threatened the activities of the general consulate, whose volunteers collaborated with General Franco’s intelligence services under the pretext of humanising the war.

⁸⁸ Graham, *The Spanish Republic*, 261–315; Casanova, *Anarchism*, 146–57; François Godicheau, ‘La política de orden después de mayo de 1937 y la reconstrucción del Estado’, *Revista de Occidente* 302, no. 3 (2006): 60–79; Evans, *Revolution*, 89–162.

⁸⁹ Dispatch from Jacques Pingaud to the Quai d’Orsay, 19 July 1937, CADN, 72PO/2/101.

⁹⁰ Dispatch from Jacques Pingaud to the Quai d’Orsay, 19 July 1937, CADN, 72PO/2/101.

⁹¹ Dispatch from Jacques Pingaud to the Quai d’Orsay, 18 Aug. 1937; Dispatch from Jacques Pingaud to the Quai d’Orsay, 22 Aug. 1937; Dispatch from Jacques Pingaud to the Quai d’Orsay, 16 Nov. 1937, CADN, 72PO/2/101.

⁹² Frédéric Monier, *Le complot dans la République: Stratégies du secret de Boulanger à la Cagoule* (Paris: La Découverte, 1998), 297–302; Olivier Forcade, *La République secrète: Histoire des services spéciaux français de 1918 à 1939* (Paris: Nouveau Monde, 2008), 577.

⁹³ Louis Rivet, *Carnets du chef des services secrets, 1936–1944* (Paris: Nouveau Monde, 2010), 155–8; Pierre Salmon, ‘Une politisation du renseignement français: Les services de surveillance français face aux attentats franquistes (1936–1937)’, *Conceptos* 1 (2020): 207–21; Forcade, *La République secrète*, 598–9.

⁹⁴ Genevière Dreyfus-Armand, *Lexil des républicains espagnols en France, de la guerre civile à la mort de Franco* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1999), 36–9; Pérez Rodríguez, *Los indeseables*, 76–9.

⁹⁵ Monier, *Le complot*, 297–302; Salmon, ‘Une politisation’, 207–21; Pedro Barruso Barés, *Información, diplomacia y espionaje: La Guerra Civil española en el Sur de Francia (1936–1940)* (San Sebastián: Hiria, 2008), 137–9.

Under Humanitarian Cover: A Collaboration with the Francoist Intelligence Services

When the military coup of July 1936 failed, the rebels had to improvise an intelligence service on the ground. In August 1936, General Emilio Mola entrusted the task to the count of the Andes, Francisco Moreno Zuleta, and to the former Spanish ambassador in Paris, José María Quiñones de León. They founded the Information Service of the Northeast Border of Spain (*Servicio de Información de la Frontera Nordeste de España*; SIFNE), a private intelligence service funded by Catalan financiers and manufacturers, such as Francesc Cambó and Juan March. Appointed to the head of the SIFNE was José Bertrán y Musitu, co-founder of the Regionalist League of Catalonia and former lawyer to the Spanish monarch Alfonso XIII. He had previously headed the *Somatén*, the employers' militia in Barcelona.⁹⁶ The National Defence Council (*Junta de Defensa Nacional*) in Burgos also founded the Military Intelligence Service (*Servicio de Inteligencia Militar*; SIM) in September 1936 and appointed Commandant Julián Troncoso Sagredo as head of the intelligence network in southern France.⁹⁷

Both the SIFNE and the SIM soon set up spy agencies in Marseille, hidden behind humanitarian facades. In October 1936, Bertrán y Musitu and Cambó founded a Spanish refugee aid committee, led by José Utrillo Raymat; meanwhile, the SIM entrusted Juan Salvador Just with the creation of another repatriation service located in the travel agency Oceania. Officially, both services were intended to provide support to the Spanish refugees who disembarked in Marseille after fleeing the revolutionary violence in the republican territories. In reality, they not only recruited and channelled volunteers into the ranks of the rebel army but also acted as a liaison between Franco's general headquarters and his agents operating in the republican territory. With the help of foreign consuls who put their diplomatic bags at their disposal, they transmitted correspondence and military intelligence from one zone to another.⁹⁸ A humanitarian cover was used to justify this collaboration, especially for the French general consulate in Barcelona.

Indeed, several volunteers who supported Jacques Pingaud in his humanitarian activities were closely involved with Francoist espionage. Armand Hazard, a French businessman, cooperated with Cambó and the Spanish refugee aid committee established in Marseille. He organised a system of corruption in Barcelona in order to exfiltrate the leaders of the Regionalist League of Catalonia, while covertly transmitting 'money, jewellery and correspondence to the Catalans indicated by Cambó and his entourage'.⁹⁹ He could rely on the help of other volunteers from the general consulate, such as Paul Brés, director of the French company Eaux Robinat Llorach, Lucien Deville, director of the La Moravia brewery, Louis Bayard, a chemical sales representative, and Georges Valette, a merchant. They were accused by the republican counterespionage and press of receiving 'Spanish fascists and refer[ring] them to the services that have been set up to help them', but also 'to collect correspondence addressed to fascists, without it going through the censors'.¹⁰⁰ Émile Louis Martignol and Pierre Farnié, a manufacturer and a wool merchant who had to take refuge in France due to their activities in Barcelona, later joined the intelligence network set up by Julián Troncoso. Farnié acted as a liaison in Marseille between the SIM and Pierre Quiriconi.¹⁰¹ The latter also worked with the Francoist services

⁹⁶ Marina Casanova, *La diplomacia española durante la guerra civil* (Madrid: Biblioteca Diplomática Española, 1996), 102; Barruso Barés, *Información*, 50–4; Manuel Ros Agudo and Morten Heiberg, *La trama oculta de la guerra civil: Los servicios secretos de Franco, 1936–1945* (Barcelona: Crítica, 2006), 17–51; Jordi Guixé Coromines, *La República perseguida: Exilio y represión en la Francia de Franco, 1937–1951* (Valencia: Universitat de València, 2012); Píriz, *En zona roja*, 119.

⁹⁷ Ros Agudo and Heiberg, *La trama oculta*, 48; Píriz, *En zona roja*, 120–6; Pedro Barruso Barés, 'La guerra del comandante Troncoso: Terrorismo y espionaje en Francia durante la Guerra Civil Española', *Diacronie: Studi di Storia Contemporanea* 28, no. 4 (2016), available at <https://doi.org/10.4000/diacronie.4772> (last visited Apr. 2025).

⁹⁸ Guixé Coromines, *La República perseguida*, 52–8.

⁹⁹ González i Vilalta, *Humanitarisme*, 131–2.

¹⁰⁰ Report on the 'fascist activities' of the French general consulate in Barcelona, 25 Mar. 1937, AGA, MAE, 12/03069 RE5.

¹⁰¹ Report on the 'fascist activities' of the French general consulate in Barcelona, June 1937, AGA, MAE, 12/03071 RE7; Note from the republican special services of the Spanish consulate in Toulouse, 31 Aug. 1937, AGA, MAE, 12/03117 RE53; Report from the French directorate general of national security, 25 Sept. 1937, AN, F/7/16024/2; Report from the Francoist Military

established in the travel agency Oceania, meeting frequently with Salvador Just, to whom he entrusted 'mysterious packages' during his stopovers in Marseille.¹⁰² Quiriconi also delivered military plans of Madrid and Teruel as well as bags of correspondence to the count of the Andes.¹⁰³ Under Quiriconi's command, the *Iméréthie II* provided a liaison between the rebel intelligence services based in France and the fifth column groups operating in Barcelona – such as the *Osete* and *Círculo Azul* networks. In February 1937, the ship brought the Argentine phalangist Fernando Munne Arias to Marseille, after he had been in contact with fifth column elements in Catalonia.¹⁰⁴

Others who held more official positions within the consulate also collaborated with the Francoist services. The commercial agent, Camille Robin, was accused of meeting with 'factious elements' after travelling frequently to Paris.¹⁰⁵ His secretary, Germaine Verdelet, described herself as a member of the rebels' fifth column in Barcelona.¹⁰⁶ And Monique Burges, a civil servant who had been working in the consulate since 1910, was praised by Pingaud 'for making contact with the people [they were] looking for at the request of the Department and the Navy, and whom [they were] endeavouring to repatriate'.¹⁰⁷ She could depend on the help of her colleague Louise Villeneau, who had been responsible for the consulate's records since 1916 and proven herself to be 'highly discreet and trustworthy'.¹⁰⁸ These qualities turned out to be extremely useful; as Merelo recounted, both served 'with great devotion' the 'clandestine postal communication between the right-wing people of Barcelona and their families who had escaped to the Nationalist zone', using diplomatic bags.¹⁰⁹ As for the French honorary consul in Tarragona, he was detained and sentenced to death for his activities, before being expelled to France.¹¹⁰

Their main motivation for collaborating with the Francoist intelligence services seemed to have been their common hostility towards the left and the revolution. While Armand Hazard's action took place 'on the fringes of possible political implications of the French far-right', Merelo emphasised that 'all these services . . . were completely disinterested and with no other desire than to collaborate in the work of the *Caudillo* [General Franco] according to the instructions of the Cross of Fire [*Croix de Feu*]'. The French nationalist league, to which the honorary consul belonged, had been disbanded by the Popular Front government on 18 June 1936.¹¹¹ Its successor, the French Social Party (*Parti Social Français*; PSF), actively collaborated with the Francoist services.¹¹² Furthermore, Merelo's sons, Juan and Victor Merelo-Barberá y Beltrán, were strong supporters of the military rebellion. While the former joined the rebel zone, the latter was a member of the Spanish Phalanx (*Falange Española*; FE).¹¹³ Additionally, Merelo, Bayard and Quiriconi had previous operational experience in

Police and Information Service (*Servicio de Información y Policía Militar*; SIPM), 10 Oct. 1939, Archivo General Militar de Ávila (AGMAV), C.2960.2.

¹⁰²Memorandum from the republican special services of the Spanish consulate in Marseille, 13 Nov. 1937, AGA, MAE, 12/03114 RE50.

¹⁰³Report on the 'fascist activities' of the French general consulate, June 1937, AGA, MAE, 12/03071 RE7.

¹⁰⁴Píriz, *En zona roja*, 103–10.

¹⁰⁵Report on the 'fascist activities' of the French general consulate, 25 Mar. 1937, AGA, MAE, 12/03069 RE5.

¹⁰⁶Memorandum from the republican special services of the Spanish consulate in Marseille, 19 Jan. 1938, AGA, MAE, 12/03115 RE51.

¹⁰⁷Dispatch from Jacques Pingaud to the Quai d'Orsay, 12 Jan. 1937, CADN, 72PO/E/14.

¹⁰⁸Dispatch from Jacques Pingaud to the Quai d'Orsay, 12 Jan. 1937, CADN, 72PO/E/14.

¹⁰⁹Merelo, 'L'Espagne et la France', CADN, 72PO/2/43.

¹¹⁰Letter from Eirik Labonne to Juan Negrín, 3 Apr. 1938, Fundación Juan Negrín (FJN), 1MES311; Merelo, 'La France et l'Espagne', CADN, 72PO/2/43; González i Vilalta, *Humanitarisme*, 124–6.

¹¹¹González i Vilalta, *Humanitarisme*, 133–66.

¹¹²Ros Agudo and Heiberg, *La trama oculta*, 55–7; Barruso Barés, *Información*, 32–3; Guixé Coromines, *La República perseguida*, 38–43; Pierre Salmon, 'Des armes pour l'Espagne: Analyse d'une pratique transfrontalière en contexte d'illégalité (France, 1936–1939)' (PhD diss., Université de Caen-Normandie), 579–85.

¹¹³Memorandum from René Bonjean, 24 Jan. 1937, CADN, 396PO/B/569, GC 4/C⁵; Letter from Jean Herbetto to Roger Tur, 1 Sept. 1937, CADN, 396PO/B/569, GC 4/C⁵; González i Vilalta, *Humanitarisme*, 166–7.

intelligence; all three had partaken in French espionage during the First World War.¹¹⁴ Lastly, it is also possible that some of these volunteers made a profit from their activities, as the Francoist services paid handsomely for the covert evacuation of refugees and transport of correspondence. While Francisc Cambó would occasionally pay between 5,000 and 10,000 francs for the embarkation of pre-eminent Spaniards, intermediaries were also able to collect 100 to 200 francs per letter smuggled in and out.¹¹⁵

The volunteers' activities soon attracted the attention of the republican authorities, who increased their surveillance of the French consulate and its members. In April 1937, the police searched Farnié's and Martignol's homes and threatened to do the same to Robin's, Valette's and Hazard's residences.¹¹⁶ In May 1937, the Spanish consul in Marseille also recommended that the authorities 'closely monitor' the *Iméréthie II*.¹¹⁷ The surveillance enabled republican counterespionage agents to identify 'the exact way in which [the liner crew members] send correspondence from fascist elements in Barcelona.'¹¹⁸ As a result, the ship's medical officer, Marcel Benoit, was arrested on 3 December 1937 while in possession of coded letters that showed hostility towards the republic and threatened its safety.¹¹⁹ This incident hastened the definitive suspension of the ship's service between Marseille and Spain.¹²⁰

Pingaud was well aware of his collaborators' engagement in Francoist espionage, as he had covered for them. Indeed, when the republican press revealed the activities of various volunteers of the general consulate in April 1937, he disregarded the accusations despite the fact that they were well founded. He told the Quai d'Orsay that the accusations were nothing more than revenge on the part of a former consulate official, Marcel Pépin, who had been dismissed at the beginning of the civil war for his left-wing leanings.¹²¹ Conversely, he recommended that Merelo, Deville, Valette, Brés, Burges and Villeneau be rewarded by the Legion of Honour (*Légion d'Honneur*) for their action in Spain.¹²² However, accusations were soon directed at Pingaud himself. He was suspected of having passed on reports 'concerning the manufacture of asphyxiating gas in the Barcelona region' to the French honorary consul in Zaragoza, Roger Tur, to be delivered to the rebel authorities.¹²³ In December 1937, the French newspaper *Le Canard Enchaîné* revealed the 'talks' and the 'dinner' that Pingaud had had with the unofficial Francoist representative in Paris, José María Quiñones de León. Despite the consul general's denials, the revelations made it impossible for him to remain in Barcelona.¹²⁴ The Quai d'Orsay was forced to bow to the pressure from the republican government, which had been demanding Pingaud's removal for several months.¹²⁵ He was replaced by René Binet and left Barcelona on 8 February 1938.¹²⁶

¹¹⁴Eduardo González Calleja and Paul Aubert, *Nidos de espías. España, Francia y la Primera Guerra Mundial (1914-1919)* (Madrid: Alianza, 2014), 349–55.

¹¹⁵González i Vilalta, *Humanitarisme*, 132–3; Guixé Coromines, *La República perseguida*, 57.

¹¹⁶Dispatch from Jacques Pingaud to the Quai d'Orsay, 14 Apr. 1937, CADN, 72PO/2/101.

¹¹⁷Dispatch from the Spanish Ministry of State to the Spanish Ministry of the Interior, 22 May 1937, AGA, MAE, 12/03164.

¹¹⁸Restricted note from the republican special services of the Spanish consulate in Marseille, 4 Nov. 1937, AGA, MAE, 12/03114 RE50.

¹¹⁹Telegram from Eirik Labonne to the Quai d'Orsay, 3 Dec. 1937, CADN, 396PO/B/591; Report on Marcel Benoit's custody, 3 Dec. 1937, AGA, MAE, 12/03087 RE23; Report from the Special Department of State Information (*Departamento Especial de Información del Estado*; DEDIDE), 24 Dec. 1937, AGA, MAE, 12/03087 RE23.

¹²⁰Rousselot, 'Les diplomates', 788.

¹²¹Dispatch from Jacques Pingaud to the Quai d'Orsay, 8 Apr. 1937, CADN, 72PO/2/101; Memorandum about Marcel Pépin, Apr. 1937, CADN, 72PO/2/43.

¹²²Dispatch from Jacques Pingaud to the Quai d'Orsay, 12 Jan. 1937, CADN, 72PO/E/14.

¹²³Restricted note from the republican special services of the Spanish consulate in Hendaye, 11 Dec. 1937, AGA, MAE, 12/03111 RE47.

¹²⁴Dispatch from Eirik Labonne to the Quai d'Orsay, 13 Jan. 1938, AMAE–C, 395QO/585; Dispatch from the Quai d'Orsay to Eirik Labonne, 19 Jan. 1938, AMAE–C, 395QO/585.

¹²⁵Letter from Julián Zugazagoitia to Juan Negrín, 16 July 1937, FJN, 1MGO100.

¹²⁶Dispatch from René Binet to the Quai d'Orsay, 8 Feb. 1938, AMAE–C, 395QO/81.

In spite of this, Pingaud's recall from Barcelona was not a sanction. The Quai d'Orsay offered to appoint him as head of the department responsible for controlling foreign nationals. This proposal appeared to recognise his work in filtering out 'undesirables' from Barcelona. But Pingaud turned down the position for 'fear of the meticulous documentary work' it required. Declaring himself at the disposal of the Quai d'Orsay 'for any delicate or even perilous mission abroad', he had already expressed his preference for a post in 'the Indian Ocean or the Far East'.¹²⁷ He was immediately rewarded with his designation as consul general in Singapore.¹²⁸ Additionally, in December 1938, he was promoted to officer of the Legion of Honour at the suggestion of the Quai d'Orsay, in recognition of his action in Barcelona.¹²⁹

Changing Heads to Change Nothing? René Binet's Action in Barcelona

The new consul general in Barcelona, René Binet, shared many characteristics with his predecessor. Like Jacques Pingaud, he began his career in Russia, assuming the role of vice consul in Saint Petersburg and Kharkov in 1907. In 1915, he joined the French embassy in Petrograd as a secretary archivist. There, he witnessed the Russian revolutions and was responsible for the embassy archives upon its move to Arkhangelsk in 1919.¹³⁰ He worked with Jacques Pingaud and Louis de Robien, with whom he developed a good friendship.¹³¹ Alongside them, he endeavoured to protect French nationals and interests.¹³² From July 1919 to 1926, he was appointed to the French consulate in Riga, where he faced the developments of the Russian civil wars.¹³³ Just like Pingaud, this experience gave him a taste for action; since August 1937, he had been asking Robien to be appointed consul general in Barcelona.¹³⁴ As the time passed, he grew impatient:

The day will come when it will no longer be worth accepting this position, which is actively exposed to a great deal of trouble and more! So my candidacy will be opposed by those of many colleagues. What will my repeated experience of troubled situations be worth then? Will it be taken into account?¹³⁵

Pingaud's recall from Barcelona finally enabled Binet to take up the position in February 1938. There, he soon found the trouble he had asked for, as he was exposed a few weeks later to the intense rebel bombardments of the Catalan city.¹³⁶ On 17 March 1938, he was wounded in the neck by shrapnel, while one of his subordinates, Antonin Lecouteux, was killed.¹³⁷

Binet continued his predecessor's work, even its most controversial aspects. The bribery operations that Armand Hazard coordinated were not affected by Pingaud's departure, and went on until the end of 1938. In fact, Binet was also involved from December 1938. With the help of the Quai d'Orsay, Francesc Cambó paid the sums required for clandestine evacuations directly to the French consul,

¹²⁷Letter from Eirik Labonne to Louis de Robien, 14 Dec. 1937, AMAE-C, 395QO/585; Jacques Pingaud's 1937 annual assessment, 18 Dec. 1937, AMAE-C, 395QO/585.

¹²⁸*Annuaire diplomatique et consulaire de la République française, 1939* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1939), 334.

¹²⁹Jacques Pingaud's nomination file for the Legion of Honour, AMAE-C, 395QO/585.

¹³⁰*Annuaire 1939*, 232–3.

¹³¹Letter from René Binet to Louis de Robien, 22 June 1938, AMAE-C, 395QO/81.

¹³²Robien, 'Journal', AN, 427AP/5.

¹³³*Annuaire 1939*, 232–3. On the Russian civil wars' developments in the Baltics, see Jonathan D. Smele, *The 'Russian' Civil Wars, 1916–1926: Ten Years That Shook the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 151–66.

¹³⁴Letter from René Binet to Louis de Robien, 3 Aug. 1937, AMAE-C, 395QO/81.

¹³⁵Letter from René Binet to Louis de Robien, 15 Nov. 1937, AMAE-C, 395QO/81.

¹³⁶On the rebels' bombardment in Barcelona, see Josep Maria Solé i Sabaté and Joan Villarroya, *España en llamas: La guerra civil desde el aire* (Madrid: Temas de Hoy, 2003), 170–86.

¹³⁷Telegram from Eirik Labonne to the Quai d'Orsay, 18 Mar. 1938, AMAE-C, 395QO/81; Memorandum from Jacques Billecoq, 18 Mar. 1938, AMAE-C, 395QO/428.

who was then responsible for distributing them to the beneficiaries in Barcelona.¹³⁸ However, he was soon under suspicion by the republican authorities. In May 1938, the minister of the interior, Paulino Gómez Sainz, noted that Binet had been photographing various locations in Catalonia that were later targeted by rebel aerial bombings.¹³⁹ While it is difficult to confirm Gómez Sainz's suspicions, it is certain that several French officials in Barcelona continued to work for the Francoist intelligence services.

At the same time, René Binet reinforced the restrictions on the Spanish refugees who sought to flee the Francoist advance and bombardments. His arrival in Barcelona coincided with the rebel offensive in Aragon and the intense air raid campaign on the Levantine coast, which prompted the exodus of nearly 25,000 people.¹⁴⁰ While the republican government abolished all restrictions on the issue of passports to allow its civilians to seek refuge in France, the minister of the interior, Julián Zugazagoitia, accused the French consul general of systematically refusing to stamp the passports handed to him. He denounced a 'cordon sanitaire policy' that 'deliberately aimed at exhausting' the republican supporters.¹⁴¹ This restriction was endorsed by French ambassador Eirik Labonne. Binet and Labonne knew each other well; they had worked together in Russia from 1917 to 1918. Labonne had then been appointed deputy consul in Moscow, though he frequently visited Petrograd.¹⁴² He shared Binet's and Pingaud's vivid experiences of 'front-line' diplomacy, having had to negotiate with revolutionary committees.¹⁴³ He had even been arrested by the Bolsheviks, who confiscated his belongings.¹⁴⁴ Moreover, Labonne made no secret of his dislike for Barcelona's 'world-famous underworld', a 'haven for extremists of all stripes, idealistic anarchists, conscientious objectors, arsonists, convicts of common law, enemies of all order and authorities'.¹⁴⁵ Consequently, he was concerned about the 'military and civil avalanche' threatening to sweep France.¹⁴⁶ He recommended tightening border controls to prevent 'deserters, the sick, would-be unemployed, [and] convicted criminals' from crossing the Pyrenees.¹⁴⁷

Labonne's and Binet's restrictive measures contributed to reinforce the French authorities' bias against republican refugees, who were gradually excluded as undesirable. On 14 April 1938, the minister of the interior, Albert Sarraut, recommended a 'methodical, energetic and prompt action to rid [France] of the excessive numbers of undesirable elements circulating there', echoing the recommendations of the French representatives in Spain.¹⁴⁸ A few days later, on 2 May 1938, the French government introduced a new decree-law on the immigration police that increased its power, by reinforcing the border controls and facilitating the expulsion of foreigners residing illegally in France. These measures were supplemented a few months later by the decree of 12 November 1938, which drew a distinction between the 'healthy and industrious part of the foreign population' and 'undesirables' and provided for the internment of foreigners who could not be deported. These decrees served as the basis for the internment of the nearly 500,000 Spanish refugees who, in January and February 1939, fled the advance of General Franco's troops in Catalonia and crossed the border into France.¹⁴⁹ The handling of republican refugees accentuated the imbalance in French humanitarian

¹³⁸ González i Vilalta, *Humanitarisme*, 133–4.

¹³⁹ Letter from Paulino Gómez Sainz to Julio Álvarez del Vayo, 15 May 1938, AGA, MAE, 12/03163 RE99.

¹⁴⁰ Antony Beevor, *The Battle for Spain: The Spanish Civil War, 1936–1939* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2006), 313–27; Solé i Sabaté and Villarroja, *España en llamas*, 139–206; Dreyfus-Armand, *Lèxil*, 35.

¹⁴¹ Letter from Julián Zugazagoitia to Marcelino Pascua, 5 Apr. 1938, Archivo Histórico Nacional (AHN), Archivo de Marcelino Pascua (Pascua), 2.2.

¹⁴² *Annuaire 1939*, 295–6; Robien, 'Journal', AN, 427AP/5.

¹⁴³ Telegram from Gabriel Bertrand to the Quai d'Orsay, 21 Nov. 1917, AMAE–C, 441QO/149.

¹⁴⁴ Letter from Eirik Labonne to the Quai d'Orsay, 3 Jan. 1918, AMAE–C, 441QO/149.

¹⁴⁵ Dispatch from Eirik Labonne to the Quai d'Orsay, 31 Mar. 1938, CADN, 396PO/B/585, GC 1/A¹.

¹⁴⁶ Telegram from Eirik Labonne to the Quai d'Orsay, 1 Apr. 1938, CADN, 396PO/B/591.

¹⁴⁷ Telegram from Eirik Labonne to the Quai d'Orsay, 4 Apr. 1938, CADN, 396PO/B/591.

¹⁴⁸ Dreyfus-Armand, *Lèxil*, 58.

¹⁴⁹ Dreyfus-Armand, *Lèxil*, 52–60.

action that Julián Zugazagoitia had been denouncing in the most vivid terms since April 1938: ‘This scum, who helped to shelter several thousand fascists in the Embassy, refuses to let through the families of anti-fascists who, in the event of defeat, could be certain candidates for the gallows.’¹⁵⁰

Counterbalancing the French Popular Front’s Official Support for the Spanish Republic

The humanitarian imbalance Zugazagoitia denounced contrasted with the benevolent policy that Léon Blum’s Popular Front government publicly assumed towards the Spanish Republic. In reality, the Quai d’Orsay and its agents were mainly hostile to attempts by the French government to help the latter. As head of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, secretary general Alexis Léger had played a key role in the adoption of the non-intervention policy by the French cabinet in July and August 1936.¹⁵¹ Many diplomats, starting with ambassador Jean Herbette, made no secret of their preference for recognising General Franco.¹⁵² Under these conditions, the humanitarian action of French diplomacy in Barcelona appeared as a means of counterbalancing an official policy that they considered too favourable to the republican side. In fact, the actions of French diplomats were a way for the Quai d’Orsay to claim a form of ‘neutrality’ by protecting supporters of the military rebellion, while many leftist political and trade union organisations, starting with the CGT, came to the aid of the Republic.¹⁵³ This move was not so different from the one made by Swiss Federal Councillor Giuseppe Motta in the early weeks of the Civil War, when he encouraged the ICRC to intervene in Spain to counterbalance the mobilisation of Swiss workers’ organisations in support of the Spanish Republic.¹⁵⁴ It can be regarded as a further illustration of the profound division that took place within humanitarian movements in the aftermath of the First World War and the Russian revolutions.¹⁵⁵

The case study presented here also reflects the autonomy of French diplomats in the 1930s. While the governments of the French Third Republic were characterised by considerable instability, the Quai d’Orsay under Alexis Léger’s direction offered remarkable continuity. Léger’s team – Paul Bargeton, Émile Charvériat, Charles Rochat and, to a lesser extent, René Massigli – held the ministry’s top senior positions without interruption from 1933 onwards.¹⁵⁶ From bourgeois Protestant backgrounds, they were attached to liberal democracy, which they wished to protect from any socialist drift.¹⁵⁷ They shared with their agents in Spain the fear of the popular masses and of disorder, and were suspicious of the Popular Fronts.¹⁵⁸ Nevertheless, this continuity enabled Léger to gain the upper hand over Léon Blum and his minister of foreign affairs, Yvon Delbos.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁰ Letter from Julián Zugazagoitia to Marcelino Pascua, 2 Apr. 1938, AHN, Pascua, 2.2.

¹⁵¹ See Claude Thiébaud, ‘Léon Blum, Alexis Léger et la décision de non-intervention en Espagne’, in *Les Français et la Guerre d’Espagne. Actes du colloque de Perpignan*, ed. Jean Sagnes and Sylvie Caucanas (Perpignan: Centre de recherche sur les problèmes de la Frontière / Université de Perpignan, 1990), 21–43; Renaud Meltz, *Alexis Léger dit Saint-John Perse* (Paris: Flammarion, 2008), 469–81; Renaud Meltz, ‘Les diplomates français et l’opinion publique dans l’entre-deux-guerres: le cas de la non-intervention dans la guerre civile espagnole’, in *Réinventer la diplomatie: sociabilités, réseaux et pratiques diplomatiques en Europe depuis 1919*, ed. Vincent Genin, Matthieu Osmont and Thomas Raineau (Brussels: PIE-Peter Lang, 2016), 53–72.

¹⁵² Denéchère, *Jean Herbette*, 291–308; Nathan Rousselot, ‘Une légitimation contre-révolutionnaire. Les diplomates français face à l’avènement du général Franco (1936–1937)’, *20^e21. Revue d’histoire* 161 (2024): 13–28.

¹⁵³ On CGT humanitarian involvement, see Keren, ‘When the CGT Did Humanitarian Work’, 15–39.

¹⁵⁴ Farré, *L’affaire Henny*, 47–54.

¹⁵⁵ This subject was recently addressed at the international conference ‘The Red Cross and the Red Star: Humanitarianism and Communism in the 20th Century’, organised by Jean-François Fayet, Marie-Luce Desgrandchamps, Marie Cugnet and Donia Hasler (University of Fribourg, 18–19 Jan. 2024). See Donia Hasler and Cyril Cordoba, ‘La Croix et l’Étoile Rouge: communisme et humanitaire au 20^e siècle’, *Infoclio.ch Tagungsberichte* (2024), available at <https://www.infoclio.ch/fr/node/186750/> (last visited Jan. 2025).

¹⁵⁶ Jean-Baptiste Duroselle, *La Décadence, 1932–1939* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1979), 272–5.

¹⁵⁷ Meltz, ‘Les diplomates français’, 58.

¹⁵⁸ Meltz, *Alexis Léger*, 467–8.

¹⁵⁹ Meltz, ‘Les diplomates français’, 60–3.

The room for manoeuvre enjoyed by the general consulate in Barcelona was further increased by the fact that the socialist leaders in the government shared with the French diplomats a common hostility towards the anarchists who had seized power in the Catalan capital. In October 1936, one of Léon Blum's closest collaborators, Eugène Montel, met with one of the rebel intelligence chiefs, José Bertrán y Musitu, to discuss possible recognition of General Franco, at a time when the capture of Madrid seemed inevitable. During the meeting, Montel didn't hesitate to tell Bertrán y Musitu that 'his political group (SFIO) [was] closer to the Spanish Carlists than to the anarchists'.¹⁶⁰ Fear of the anarchists and their violence led Montel to personally recommend certain Catalan personalities to the consul general in Barcelona, Jacques Pingaud, for evacuation to France.¹⁶¹ In addition, policies to filter republican refugees at the French border were approved by the socialist ministers of the interior, Roger Salengro and Marx Dormoy, as early as autumn 1936.¹⁶² According to the testimony of Colonel Louis Rivet, head of the French intelligence services, Dormoy was also suspicious of Republican refugees and described their arrival in France as 'a laboratory for espionage and political propaganda'.¹⁶³ The counter-revolutionary dimension of French diplomats' humanitarian intervention in Spain therefore seems to have been widely shared within the ruling elites, including the socialists. Nevertheless, there is nothing to indicate that the latter had precise knowledge of the extent of the collaboration between agents of the French general consulate in Barcelona and Franco's intelligence services.

Ultimately, French diplomatic and consular humanitarian involvement in the Spanish Civil War was mostly dictated by French representatives' concern about the revolutionary violence and disorder that they witnessed in the republican territory. Their first aim was to alleviate the suffering of the upper-class victims of the workers' committees, especially in Catalonia where the CNT-FAI dominated. To do so, the Quai d'Orsay appointed 'front-line' agents such as Jacques Pingaud, René Binet and Eirik Labonne, who knew how to deal with 'troubled situations'. They had gained decisive experience during the Russian revolutions and civil wars, and they used this to defend French nationals and interests, and to rescue the Spanish and Catalan elite who were inclined towards Francoism. Their prior experiences of facing the Bolsheviks in Russia profoundly shaped perceptions of the political situation in Catalonia – and more generally, of the republican territory. They began to fear the instauration of a Soviet state that could spread across the Pyrenees border into France and drew a parallel between the Popular Front governments in Spain and France. Their commitment to fighting against the Spanish revolution and its spread led to some of them actively collaborating with the Francoist intelligence services, contributing to the fall of the Spanish Republic. Far from being neutral, the French consulate was, on the contrary, distinctly counter-revolutionary in its affinity for Francoist rebellion sympathisers to be saved and its concern to stop 'undesirable' republican refugees.

¹⁶⁰ Information note from the SIFNE antenna in Biarritz, 12 Oct. 1936, AGMAV, C.2458,1.

¹⁶¹ Letter from Eugène Montel to Jacques Pingaud, 4 March 1937, CADN, 72PO/2/101.

¹⁶² Pérez Rodríguez, *Los indeseables españoles*, 57; telegram from Yvon Delbos to Jean-Baptiste Barbier, 19 Mar. 1937, CADN, 396PO/B/571, GC 7/C².

¹⁶³ Louis Rivet, *Carnets du chef des services secrets, 1936–1944* (Paris: Nouveau Monde, 2010), 134.

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