

Dear Comrades: Analyzing Letters to *La Pirenaica* as Migrant Narrative

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Introduction

General Francisco Franco's military-fascist regime (1939-1977) in Spain impoverished and endangered ordinary Spaniards. Due to starvation, inability to find work, and political repression, hundreds of thousands of Spaniards left their country to seek protection and work throughout Europe but particularly in France. Throughout the 1960s, these migrants wrote letters about their experiences to a clandestine, communist-run radio station known as *La Pirenaica*. This project seeks to bring the migrant stories hidden in this little-known collection of letters to light

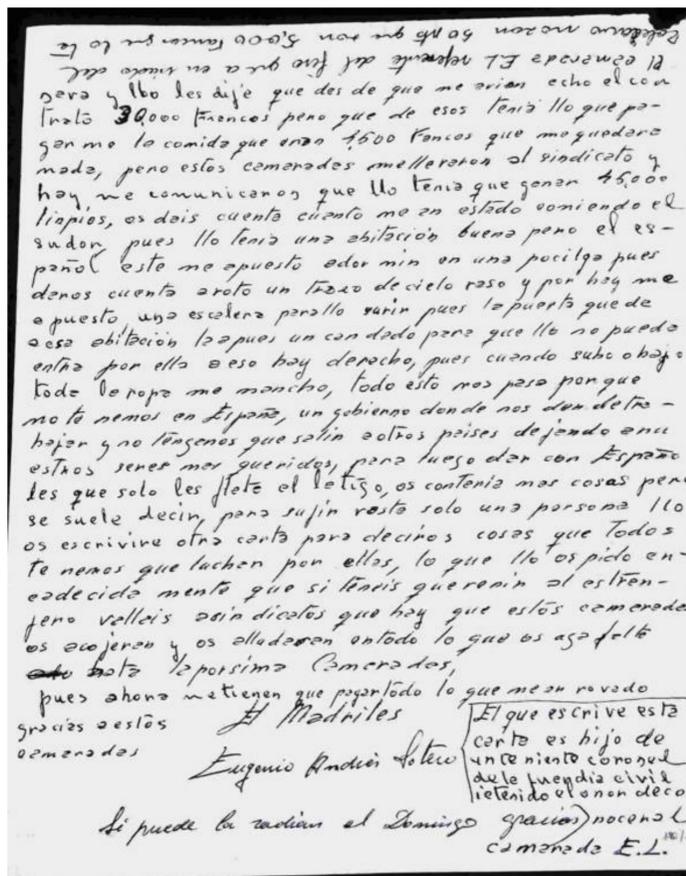


Location of Spanish colonies in France 1965

(Vincente, María José Fernández. "Entre mercados laborales y fronteras estatales: La emigración de trabajadores españoles a Francia (1955-1982)." *Migraciones y coyuntura económica del Franquismo a la democracia*, edited by Joseba de la Torre and Gloria Sanz Lafuente, Prensas Universitarias de Zaragoza, 2009, 237-254.)

Methods

My mentor, Professor Julie Weise of the History Department, scanned images of about 200 letters from the collection available at the Historical Archive of the Spanish Communist Party in Madrid. Using summaries provided by the archive, we narrowed those 200 letters down to around 50 that were most relevant to our projects. A majority of the letter-writers lacked more than an elementary education and wrote their letters by hand, so we chose not to use several more letters that were indecipherable. I read the letters via the scanned images, created English translations of all or parts of them, and categorized them based on different areas of interest within Professor Weise's and my own research. For this particular project I looked at 25 letters whose contents I organized by the broad thematic categories of "work" and "community." These themes guided my analysis as I used letter-writers personal experiences as written to draw conclusions about the migrant experience of this decade.

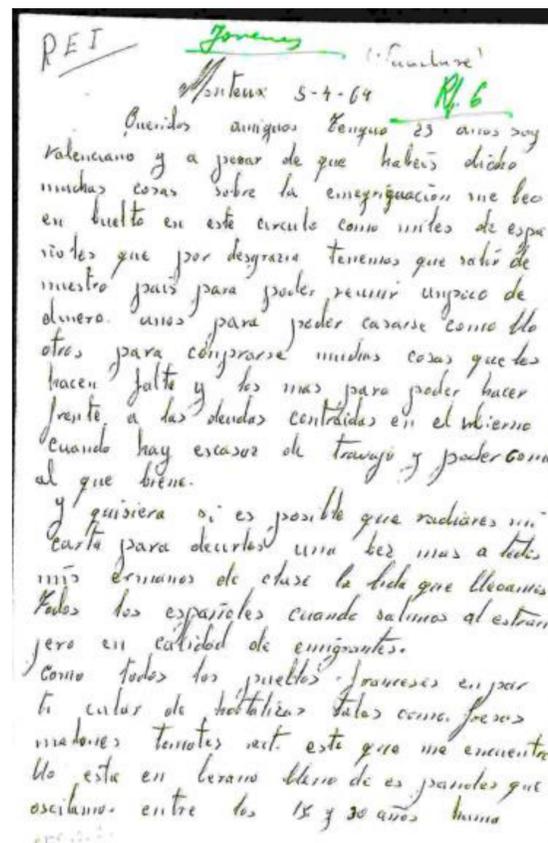


Well I had a nice room but the foreman made me sleep in a pigsty [...] when I go up or down all of my clothes get stained. All of this happens to us because in Spain the government does not give us the chance to work so we have to go abroad and leave our loved ones behind [...]"

(Letter from Eugenio Andrés Sotero (El Madriles) to REI)

Dear friends I am 25 years old and I am from Valencia. As you have spoken many times about emigration I find myself mixed up in this cycle like thousands of Spaniards who have the misfortune of having to leave our home to be able to make a little money. Some want to be able to afford to get married, like me, some want to buy many things that they need, and the rest want to be able to fulfill the debts they accumulate in winter when there is little work so that they can eat during the following winter. I would like, if possible, for you to broadcast my letter to tell all of my brothers one more time about the type of life that all Spaniards lead when we leave for a foreign country as emigrants. [...]"

(Letter from García Sánchez to REI)



Conclusions

The contents of these letters reveal that migrants experienced significant workplace exploitation due to their foreign (and often undocumented) status. They suffered unfair working conditions and miserable salaries. However, the Spaniards demonstrated their resilience by organizing with French labor unions and by joining the anti-Franco fight from abroad to free their beloved Spain. The *Pirenaica* radio station was essential for these migrants who found community and comfort listening to its secret broadcasts. Letter-writers used their correspondence with the station to offer advice for future migrants and to share political opinions that could have gotten them killed back in Spain. These letters reveal the hardworking, patriotic spirits of the authors who offer their personal experiences of this migration. Immigrant voices tend to be forgotten by history, so is vital to uncover a perspective on the migrant experience of this decade directly from the pens of some of the most deeply impacted.

There is little published academic work on this archive of letters—particularly in English. I hope that future research into the letters will analyze a much larger selection and offer a more complete picture of what these migrants experienced.

Acknowledgments

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